# Inconsistency in Ethics

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**Abstract**
Consistency is usually seen as one of the hallmarks and a cardinal virtue of moral theory, as well as of any defensible real-life moral perspective. In everyday life a consistent set of moral beliefs is conductive to moral clarity, communicability, responsibility and responsiveness. But this is just one side of the story. In this paper I argue that inconsistency, properly understood, is a productive and constructive aspect of both moral philosophy and our moral lives. After an introductory glance at Ralf Waldo Emerson and Hannah Arendt, the argument proceeds in three main steps. First, I discuss the philosophical importance of paying heed to inconsistencies in our moral lives, which often are prematurely pruned from moral philosophy. Second, I discuss the positive moral roles of inconsistency in terms of responsiveness to different situations, values, needs and concerns that call upon our attention in everyday life. Third, I argue that moral inconsistencies contribute to the necessary adaptability of our moral understandings to changing conditions. Fourth, in the place of a conclusion, I revisit the issue of consistency, clarity and accountability.

## 1. Introduction and a backward glance

Consistency is usually seen as one of the hallmarks and a cardinal virtue of moral theory, as well as of any defensible real-life moral perspective. There is much that speaks in favor of this view. When rooting out inconsistencies we bring order into our everyday and more theoretical moral thinking: we go through its constituent parts to see if anything stands out, as a quirk or mistake or a leftover from some previous moral order that no longer makes sense to us, in the light of what we know and believe. As when weeding our garden or sorting out single socks from our drawer, we thus make the quotidian mess of moral beliefs workable and humanly useful.

In everyday life a consistent set of moral beliefs is conductive to moral clarity, communicability, responsibility and responsiveness. The refusal to consider one's moral precepts from the point of view of consistency is often rightly seen as a form of self-indulgence, a refusal of making oneself morally accountable. This is what makes populist demagogues difficult to handle in the public sphere: by making inconsistency a part of their brand, they wriggle out of the web of expectations normally placed on politicians and other public figures. They can be held morally responsible, but this demand

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does not quite bite, and their failure to meet it does not affect their popularity.

The everyday virtues of moral consistency are habitually carried along into moral theory, where their case is strengthened by our general notion of what a defensible theory can be like. A theory with inconsistencies is generally considered to be badly formed, deficient, or still under construction. Following this, when talking about normative moral theories, we tend to think that it is a central – if not the most central – task of a well-formed theory to bring consistent order to our normative beliefs. The debates between different brands of consequentialists, deontologists and virtue-ethicists are thus centrally about which consistent normative account to prefer, or which of these theoretical frameworks can consistently account for the most important set of moral intuitions.

This seemingly obvious and innocuous feature of our thinking about both morality and theory has far-reaching consequences for moral philosophy, because it steers the intellectual and imaginative resources of the philosopher in a distinctive direction. Where the literary author or essayist may indulge in the sprouting plurality and irreducible complexity of the world, the philosopher is well advised to sort, reduce, simplify, and unify in order to turn his raw materials into a more consistent shape and thus get his argument off the ground. But to what extent does this have to be the case? And furthermore, what is the cost, if any, of this procedure?

In this paper I argue that inconsistency, properly understood, is in fact a productive and constructive aspect of both moral philosophy and our day to day moral lives. This does not imply any critique of consistency as a regulative ideal but is rather aimed at the frequent application of an ideal of consistency where it seems to me that other considerations should be given precedence. But before arguing this case in detail I will take a brief look at some renowned defenders of inconsistency, to get a first grasp of the intellectual potentials of inconsistency.

While few thinkers in our philosophical tradition have praised inconsistency as such, there is a certain tradition of seeing insistence on consistency as a sign of mediocrity: the truly great thinkers surely do not need it? We find this in Ralf Waldo Emerson's 'Self-Reliance':

> 'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing



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> you said to-day. – "Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood." – Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood'. (Emerson, 2000, p. 138)

A similar perspective is offered in Hanna Arendt's *The Human Condition*, where she, commenting on Marx, observes that '(s)uch fundamental and flagrant contradictions rarely occur in second-rate writers; in the work of the great authors they lead into the very center of their work'. (Arendt, 1998, pp. 104–105)

The most immediate and superficial reading of these passages focuses on greatness. The great minds, being above the rest of us, need not and should not be concerned with consistency, because that would compromise the honesty and strength of their output. It is, then, for the rest of us to do the pedestrian work of bringing interpretive order to their thinking.

Emerson, however, is clearly not writing only to or about exceptional individuals, but to and about the spark of autonomous spirit and intellect in any human. He thus opens for a different reading, which goes something like this: 'look at the great thinkers, they do not care about consistency as much as they care about speaking the truth. Let us not be deterred from speaking the truth, as we see it, by concerns about how, exactly, it fits with what we said yesterday. Maybe we were mistaken then, or maybe there is some explanatory connection? No matter. It is sheer vanity to place importance on such issues'.

These readings provide an answer to why we should not pay too much heed to consistency in our sayings and judgments: it may deter us from discovering the truth, by attaching ourselves and our honor to previous mistakes and confusions. Consistency, along these lines, is a suitable virtue for those who acknowledge that they do not have original things to say in the first place.

Neither of these readings, focusing as they do on the value of daring to contradict (that is, correct) oneself, tells us much about the value of inconsistency as such. There is, however, a third possible reading, which builds on the truth tracking capacities of contradictory claims. Approaching a difficult issue from different angles may result in strikingly different, incompatible results. Faced with a conflict between two ways of seeing a phenomenon, a certain kind of thinker detracts from one of the paths and continues along the one that to him seems most promising. A different kind of thinker sends out patrols to explore both paths: an operation that in most



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cases slows down the process of inquiry, and may, at least initially, give fewer definitive results to report home about. This latter strategy may also require a capacity to bear with, not only plurality and incommensurability, but also inconsistency between one's views, at least for the time being.

The value of following different paths simultaneously, without worrying too much about how they relate or whether they can be functional parts of a consistent whole, is that different things will be revealed to the inquirer, which may, in the end, be equally important for illuminating the discoveries made on quite different paths.

This reading goes hand in hand with Nietzsche's notion of objectivity (or a certain reading of it), as expressed in the third essay of *The Genealogy of Morals*. 'There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective "knowing"; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes; we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our "concept" of this thing, our "objectivity," be' (Nietzsche, 1989, p. 119). Reason, rationality, objectivity, knowing are the business of engaged, feeling, valuing, perceiving and variously placed creatures, whose best stab at 'objectivity' is often one of learning to use 'different eyes', to hold on to contradictory, incompatible positions simultaneously.

It should go without saying that contemporary academia and anglophone moral philosophy are easier places for those who manage to follow the one path strategy successfully. Emerson and Nietzsche, however, both think that for the sake of truth and knowledge we should rather be thinkers of the second kind, caring less about the neatness and digestibility of the imminent results and more about the truthfulness and intellectual integrity of the search. The foolishness of consistency lies most often in its indiscriminate and premature application.

## 2. The philosophical value of inconsistency

I suggested before that the insistence on consistency in ethics has substantial consequences for the way moral philosophers come to know their subject matter. The demand has, as we saw, a dual nature, requiring consistency both of the philosopher's theoretical account and of the object of that account, that is, morality itself.

The demand for consistency in philosophical discourse entails that philosophical texts, theories or theses should not contain contradicting claims or have contradicting implications. If they do, they need, on the common view, to be mended. This mending plays a substantial



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part in philosophical scholarship on historical as well as contemporary moral philosophers, and takes up a large part of the interventions in contemporary moral philosophical debates.

This idea of consistency goes together, as mentioned, with an ideal of consistency in the normative frameworks of everyday life. Lived morality is full of inconsistencies, but ideally this should not be the case. Thus, the moral philosopher's task is supposedly to make our moral 'system' coherent, to weed it and produce clarity. A moral outlook, on this view, gains force from consistency. Only a consistent moral system can be rationally defensible, and only a rationally defensible system can be normatively authoritative.

A theory can, for example, be seriously compromised if it accepts a moral intuition which seems to go against the grain of the theory but is unable to show why this is necessary and justifiable.

The insistence on consistency has produced a line of philosophical thought where the ideal of consistency takes on a moral weight of its own and seems to override all other considerations. This is particularly prominent in certain varieties of utilitarianism, where the philosophers' ability to follow wherever the utilitarian principle seems to take us, takes on a note of bravery. Peter Unger has argued that people in the affluent world are obliged to donate all the extra money at their disposal, and more, to charities operating in the third world, because every extra penny can be of greater utility there. Even Robin Hood-like stealing for redistribution is in his view to be considered obligatory (Unger, 1996). David Benatar again has infamously suggested that, considering all the suffering in the world, it would be better, from a utilitarian point of view, if no-one existed (Benatar, 2008). Though very different from each other, these works share a veneration of consistency, which most people are likely to find morally unworkable, or immoral. Something not altogether different can perhaps be found in Kant's famous passage on how we are not morally entitled to lie to a murderer at our door (Kant, 1996).

The ideal of consistency in contemporary moral philosophy does not, however, necessarily require following a singular principle to a point where other important values are disregarded. A moral philosophy insisting on consistency can very well endorse plural values of equal importance, a non-hierarchical structure, an equal place for norms, rights, virtues and utility. The important thing in such a theory is that the different considerations can be harmonized so that they can offer a non-contradictory normative account of our moral lives. Something like this is at work in much of the virtue ethically oriented philosophy of our time, where attention to virtues has



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not replaced but rather complements the vocabularies of duties, rights or utility.

Rawls's notion of reflective equilibrium is perhaps today the most prominent image or model of how to think about the balancing of different judgments and principles in a defensible ethical or moral philosophical framework. Rawls introduces it in thinking about the formulation of the 'original position' in which justified contractual arrangements could be made.

> 'By going back and forth, sometimes altering the conditions of the contractual circumstances, at others withdrawing our judgments and conforming them to principle, I assume that eventually we shall find a description of the initial situation that both expresses reasonable conditions and yields principles which match our considered judgments duly pruned and adjusted'. (Rawls, 1971, p. 20)

With Rawls and anyone who follows him in this, the philosophical demand for consistency is well compatible with a pluralism of values, principles and considerations. It is also well compatible with an openness to the future: 'this equilibrium is not necessarily stable. It is liable to be upset by further examination of the conditions which should be imposed on the contractual situation and by particular cases which may lead us to revise our judgments' (ibid. pp. 20–21).

Such a broader, more pluralistic take on ethics is more likely to be responsive to the real-life moral concerns of people in their varying situations. Annette Baier argued in the 80s that moral theories, in their single-minded pursuit of their chosen principles, are destructive of the kind of lived, more organic, practical discernment and guidance that people receive form their extra-philosophical moral and religious frameworks (Baier, 1985). With more open ended and pluralistic theories this worry is perhaps less warranted. The gap between moral theory and everyday moral outlooks of plural concerns need not be unbridgeable: the plural values embedded in moral traditions can perhaps be carried over to a consistent moral theory.

But this openness for plurality in contemporary moral philosophy does not resolve the issue with which I am concerned here. What I am concerned with is the unquestioned valuation of pruning and adjustment: the view that inconsistencies are flaws in moral life and that it is the job of normative ethical theory to correct them, by means of a consistent second order theory.

The moral philosophers' valuation of consistency in life as well as in theory easily plays a trick on their grasp of their subject matter. Looking for a systematization – an ideally consistent representation



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of morality – leads to a proportionally diminished interest in the complexities and inherent conflicts of actual, contingent moralities. Plurality is endorsed or endured only to be domesticated into a consistent normative theoretical perspective. Theoretical consistency, pinning down an ideal consistent normative account for the edification of ordinary moral agents, is pictured as the goal. Even if philosophy perhaps cannot tell people what to do, it should, in this view, give a consistent account of the principles by which people should measure their actions. The difficult task of the philosopher is portrayed as getting this 'right'. Ordinary experience and moral life are pictured as problematic, flawed, but not particularly difficult to see, grasp and conceptualize. Contingent moralities are thus approached in a mode of theoretical criticism, rather than a spirit of empirical curiosity. The relevant features of life are assumed to be open to view, and easy to grasp.

The kinds of moral complexities brought to our attention by literary authors, anthropologists and sociologists, among others, only occasionally enter the debates of philosophers, when called upon to illustrate a philosophical point, or when used as ammunition against philosophical opponents. We could call this a structural lack of interest in contingency in moral philosophy. It is not that philosophers shun complexity: it is just that they seek out complexity in theory and argument rather than looking more carefully at the complexities of contingent lived morality, valuation and human relationships. The contrast is made vivid by comparing philosophers' take on moral life with that of moral anthropologists like Veena Das (2006) or Joao Biehl (2012), whose work describes, among other things, some lived moral contradictions of post-partition India and changing structures of care and medical attention in contemporary Brazil. I am not here saying that philosophers should become anthropologists: merely that there are worlds of moral complexity that are kept beyond the proper scope of moral philosophy.

The philosophers' relatively weak interest in contingency, again, is conductive to an insufficient grasp of the complexities of what is going on in our moral lives and debates. We thus often get a mismatch between theory and the reality that theory is called upon to clarify.[1]

[1] This problem was highlighted in the work of philosophers like Annette Baier, Cora Diamond and Martha Nussbaum in the 1980s and 1990s. We can also see it at work, in different ways in the work of philosophers who in the 80s and 90s criticized the relative lack of historical sensibility in moral theory: Charles Taylor, Alastair MacIntyre and Bernard



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The ideal form fails to illuminate the contingent complexity in which we need to orient ourselves.

There are two points that I want to make concerning this, both of which have to do with the kind of knowledge that positive attention to inconsistencies can give the moral philosopher. The first one is easy to assimilate with the ethos of mainstream Anglophone moral theory: To do good normative theory, and to argue substantial moral points by philosophical means, we need to have a proper grasp of real-life morality, including the inconsistencies that mark our day-to-day moral existence. To follow this ideal for theoretical work, philosophers need to cultivate their attention to inconsistencies in the descriptive part of their work, not hurry past them. A moral philosopher cannot do with merely a rough idea of what real life, empirical moralities are like, but needs to nurture a continuous interest in ordinary moral phenomena, in order to bridge the gap between life and theory.

The second point is more difficult but also more important. I want to suggest that philosophical attention to the inconsistencies of moral life is not only a means for the preparation of a well-formed moral theory. The inconsistencies in our moral understandings, to the contrary, often contain important insights about our moral situation, which is valuable both to our moral lives and to our attempts to understand morality theoretically. Moral views and understandings take form in a continuous confrontation and negotiation with other people, changing circumstances and different areas of life. They are responses to conditions: not mechanical reactions, but complexly human interpretive, evaluative and conciliatory answers to a range of problems that we face in our lives together. William James points at this responsive nature of ethics when he notes that 'everywhere the ethical philosopher must wait on facts', and that the 'highest ethical life … consists at all times in breaking the rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case' (James, 2000, p. 259).

Moral judgments require knowledge of particulars and conditions, and the capacity to adjust. General and universalizable principles are part of what we learn when introduced to a moral form of life as children, and a central part of our moral toolkit when facing the moral challenges of adult life. But we also learn patterns of responsiveness, practices of valuation and revaluation, moral codes that apply in some conditions and some areas of life but not in others, as well as

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Williams, and, in a very different way, in in contemporary discussions on exphi. For discussion see Hämäläinen (2016, especially chapters 2–5).



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places and conditions for code-shifting. We learn the moral implications of work or home, peace or war, emergency or life as usual, seminar room or night club, friends or strangers. All this small-scale moral assessment and adjustment rests on practical intelligence and complex knowledge about the human world. But the buzz of ordinary moral life does not add up to a coherent normative framework. It is full of tensions and inconsistencies, many of which may not be resolvable, because they evolve in dialogue with different contexts of life, or with regard to different central values, or under the pressure of quite distinct kinds of social relations and concerns. Moral philosophy thus needs to cultivate a sensitivity for this intelligence *as intelligence*, even when it generates inconsistencies in our first order moral outlooks and risks to compromise the consistency of our moral theories.

The outlook I bring forth here shares its weariness of normative generalization with moral particularists, but is importantly different in other respects. Jonathan Dancy, for example, argues that general moral principles are vulnerable to situational considerations because moral reasons function in a holistic manner (Dancy, 2004). What in one situation may be a reason for an action, may in another be a reason against it, and vice versa. That an action is helping someone is e.g. usually a good-making feature: helping generally tends to have a positive valence. But if I am helping someone cheat in an exam or continuously help a child to do something she should learn to do on her own, the valence of helping may be negative in the situation. Furthermore, not only overtly 'moral' features carry this potential: wearing white shoelaces may seem neutral enough in itself, but in certain circumstances it may be a display of morally reprehensible discrimination and aggression.

Given that a moral situation consists of a complex set of particular, situational features (reasons), which potentially shifting valences, we cannot capture moral rightness in terms of general principles and normative theories, in quite the way moral philosophers have tended to believe. Principles rather work as heuristics and rules of thumb. Dancy is, however, not interested in inconsistency: he believes that a proper analysis of reasons in a situation can yield a right answer with regard to what a person ought to do. This commitment to singular contextually determined normative truths tends to set particularism apart from perspectivist and relativist interventions in ethics. It also offers too limited a frame for the positive roles of inconsistency in ethics, which I am exploring.[2]

[2] For discussion of Dancy and other contemporary forms of particularism, see Hämäläinen (2015, pp. 55–78).



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A closer theoretical precursor of my attention to inconsistency is Saul Smilansky's work on moral paradoxes, that is, instances of moral reflection that yield contradictory results.[3] He particularly identifies what he calls existential paradoxes: paradoxes that do not dissolve on closer reflection, but rather lead us into a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. Not all moral paradoxes are of this kind, but it is useful to recognize those that are, and which we thus should not seek to smooth over by some theoretical trick. 'Paradoxes are not mere intellectual puzzles, but entry points that give us access to underlying philosophical structures, open up possibilities, and provide insights. They exhibit the endemic complexity of reality, the need to expect the surprising, and the prevalence of variety and depth' (Smilansky 2007, p. 132)

While I find this perspective highly useful, I have second thoughts about the way he parses out this insight. He notes that 'paradoxes are like black holes in our moral and personal universe, where odd things happen. The paradoxes exhibit the irrationality of life and confront us with it.' (Ibid.) In a description of existential paradoxes he also states that '(t)he paradox itself is not a mistake, it reveals absurdity' (Ibid., p. 123). What goes missing in these emphases on irrationality and absurdity is the distinctive *rationality* of paradox and inconsistency prone ethical thought, which is the underlying current of Smilansky's discussion and the focal issue in the present paper. In other words, what concern us here are the ways in which inconsistencies are an irreducible dimension of a rational, reflective and responsive morality and moral philosophy.[4]

## The moral value of inconsistency

Philosophers, associating rationality with fully consistent, general and universalizable ideas, tend to have a reductive understanding of the cognitive and practical resources and intelligence embedded in

[3] My thanks to an anonymous referee of a previous draft of this paper for pointing me toward Smilansky's work.

[4] More could be said about the relationship between inconsistency and paradox; I will not go into this here. It seems to me, however, that focusing on paradox rather than the broader phenomenon of inconsistency in ethics might leave us with the impression that we, in cases of puzzlingly contradictory conclusions, are dealing with anomalies of ethical thought, rather than a necessary functional aspect of it, albeit one which our moral theoretical tradition has tended to overlook.



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real life moral conceptions, practices and habits. Answering to plural and sometimes conflicting values, practical demands or conceptualizations of duties or good conduct, conflicting views on moral matters often embody important understanding of our world and our moral lives together. If a useful synthesis of different viewpoints cannot be reached, some of them may need to be overridden in practice. Life does not wait for theoretical resolutions in moral matters. However, these kinds of makeshift practical resolutions, even when they are backed up with critical reflection, often do not solve or settle the inconsistent judgments, concerns or conceptualizations at play. I will give a few examples to illustrate this:

Protective love is a perfectly comprehensible response to a small fetus, even in societies where abortion is considered the best option in certain cases and is considered a subjective right of the woman up to a certain month of pregnancy. We may want to think of this 'love' for a yet unformed creature as a merely sentimental matter, or an emotional preparation for the care that will be due to an infant when and if it is born. But there is a distinctively moral tone to it, an imperative, demanding aspect, an urge to nurture and protect. This attitude is loosely related to the moral discomfort that many people experience in relation to stem cell research: the sense that human stem cells are importantly different form other human cells, because of the way they link to human procreation, childbearing, children. It is also related to the protective impulse that characterizes our relation, not only to kittens and puppies, but also to the young offspring of wild and unwanted animals. Think of the way a bird's nest in the woodshed can offer itself as an object of special care and concern, and even remorse.

All human societies require a curbing of such impulses, a domestication of them into a distinctive form of life, with distinctive patterns of unavoidable sacrifice. We need to learn to care for new life, but to a certain extent, we also need to shape our spontaneous responses of care.

Asking whether these reactions are rational enough to count for the purposes of moral philosophy would be putting the cart before the horse. They are already part of the raw material out of which any rational account or morality is built. Such an account does not become more rational by disregarding dimensions of our moral life.

Our response to the small fetus, though perhaps deemed irrational from a secular and liberal point of view – and potentially inconsistent with the right to abortion which many of us would defend with consequentialist, rights centered, as well as socio-political arguments – does positive work in our perception of larger fetuses, small children



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and pregnant mothers. It is an aspect of a kind of awe that works to protect what is most fragile in human life. The reasons speaking for abortion and the reasons speaking for protective care can perhaps not be brought under a consistent system of moral principles, concerns or responses.

A different example is offered by contemporary marriage in a liberal secular context. Moral regret or even remorse can be a perfectly appropriate response to one's own divorce, even for a person who holds a pragmatically utilitarian view of the marriage vow, and even when no unusually great wrong has been committed. Let us imagine a man called Matt, an American schoolteacher, who married his girlfriend Lucy in his twenties when they both has just graduated from college. They settled in a small town on the east coast, where both got jobs, and soon their son Michael was born. Twenty years later, however, Michael is in college and is well provided for, with a good scholarship and an endowment from his late grandfather.

Lucy and Matt are only in their mid-forties and making plans. Lucy is dreaming of buying out her siblings from their late grandmother's beautiful old farmhouse and starting a business with mindfulness retreats and children's summer camps. Matt, who by now also holds a doctorate in education, gets an opportunity to move to New York to work in a research project with kids from poor inner-city neighborhoods. As it turns out, their dreams and ambitions point in completely different directions, causing unbearable tensions for a while, until they realize that continuing a life together isn't important for either of them. They have, as the saying goes, grown apart. In fact Lucy has known this for a while, and is able to move on quite quickly, whereas Matt is, after a fairly easy separation, overwhelmed by deep sorrow and complicated feelings of guilt that he cannot quite make sense of and that seem pointless to him, given his easy going, practical and utilitarian mindset. He discusses the issue with a friend, pointing out his own inconsistent reactions. The friend suggests something that he has not thought of: that perhaps the divorce was both wrong and right, that the undecidedness of this issue is as close as you can get to a fact of the matter.

Whether Matt accepts this account or not, he may conduct his future relations differently. The sensitivity to something wrong about his divorce may sensitize him to new aspects of human relations, and how to cherish them.

The 'love' toward a two-month fetus and the regret and remorse following a 'good' divorce' remind us of facts, values, perspectives and assessments that are important to us (or could be so), even



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when they are overridden in practice. As such reminders, they continue to do moral work for us. These are the kinds of considerations that fueled e.g. Bernard William's discussion of moral dilemmas or Michael Walzer's discussion on dirty hands: that a 'rational' solution to a moral problem should not lead us to denigrate the values that are overridden in the decision process; that amends and regrets and the reordering of future priorities may be in place (Williams, 1965; Walzer, 1973).

What interests me here is however not questions of guilt or amends, but the intelligence and knowledge about our shared human world which is embedded in quite distinct and even inconsistent reactions to and assessments of a moral issue. Inconsistent accounts of a moral matter may be just erratic, but they often embody perspectives which track different aspects of the situation at hand. I fault myself for not being more involved in my adolescent daughter's life. Yet, I truly believe that kids of a certain age should fend for themselves, and feel that they are trusted to do so in a reasonable manner. Which part of me is wrong and which is right? Maybe I do not need to decide, because these years will pass quickly, and for the purpose of everyday life, both impulses carry relevant insight about the roles of freedom and caring. Can I wriggle out of the inconsistency by talk of a proper balance? Wouldn't this be a denial of what I think is a real inconsistency in my moral attitude: that I should and should not be the kind of parent that I am and in fact choose to be?

Now, one might of course insist that closer attention to these kinds of cases does not reveal inconsistency, but rather the intersection or collision of judgments made with regard to different values. The response of care and concern for a fetus tracks a human capacity that is essential for communal human life, while the broader social and feminist reasoning that speaks for the availability of abortions is grounded in knowledge about the range of social misery caused by unwanted pregnancies. Similarly, Matt's regrets about the end of his marriage reveal a valuation of commitment and life-long partnership, although he ends up sacrificing these for a life of individual calling and self-realization. My reflections concerning my daughter reveal a valuation of freedom and self-responsibility on the one hand, and a valuation of close and caring relationships on the other. Indeed, breaking down our mixed responses into different kinds of pros and cons is a central part of the ordinary moral repertoire of anyone even minimally reflective on moral matters. This kind of reflection is to a certain extent analysis of the case at hand in terms of our prior commitments and values, things we knew but need to remind ourselves of. It also contains a substantial portion of creative



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effort to put words to and contextualize dimensions of the matter that we may not have thought about before, and that are not in any simple way already part of our available cultural repertoires.

Often the articulation of underlying values, ideas, or worldviews – both analytically and creatively – helps to arbitrate between alternatives and prepare the way for more consistent and confident forms of judgment in the future. This is a task where moral philosophy may be of use: at least we philosophers tend to think so. But articulacy and thorough analysis does not necessarily remove an inconsistency in moral judgment: a certain course of action may still look both wrong and right at the same time. We may even have difficulties describing it consistently, oscillating between positively and negatively charged descriptions, choosing one today and the other tomorrow; wavering between relief and remorse when thinking about a past divorce, seeing a way of parenting as loving today and overbearing tomorrow. Or we may simply think that we have it all figured out, the hierarchy of values sorted, and yet, unbeknownst to ourselves, go on making judgments in an inconsistent manner.

Many moral situations or issues do not, of course, evoke inconsistencies of these kinds: I am not suggesting that we should seek out inconsistency on purpose. However, when we encounter cases where we are inclined to make inconsistent judgments, we might be well advised to proceed cautiously. A single-minded pursuit of consistency or 'balancing' or 'pruning' is destructive of our capacities to respond to situations and learn from experience. It also unavoidably leads to a loss of moral intelligence in the transition from life to theory. Appreciating the practical and moral values embodied in incommensurable, conflicting and inconsistent views help us to preserve more moral intelligence and social sensibility.

Understanding our inconsistencies means understanding *where we are*, morally speaking, as collectives or individuals. If we think, like Charles Taylor, that moral thinking (everyday as well as theoretical) is thinking in transitions, from a current understanding to a better one evolving from this (Taylor, 1989, p. 72), the loss of the practical intelligence embedded in our inconsistencies is unforgivable. By simplifying rather than deepening our understanding of where we are, it deprives us of important moral and conceptual resources that we may need, both when articulating the better view and when bringing it to bear on our moral practices.

We need to ask: What is the intellectual and moral price of this or that particular case of forcing a consistent solution to a question? When is consistency relevant and what is it relevant for? Is this a case where consistency is a necessary or reasonable goal?



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## 3. Inconsistency and moral change

Real life moralities are not just imperfect and full of contradictions. They also provide people with a broad range of necessities for communal life; ways of being understandable to each other and means for meaningful cooperation. Mostly, moral systems 'work' in the sense that they keep people from doing random and immediate damage to the bodies, feelings and belongings of others. They systematize principles of feeling and conduct and make the social world predictable and livable. To do this, our normative systems or frameworks do not need to be fully consistent.

My argument thus far only amounts to saying 1) that in moral philosophy we need, methodologically, to cultivate an interest in the inconsistencies of ordinary moral life in in order to get a fuller picture of morality, and 2) that a functioning morality does not require perfect consistency, that there is ample room for persistent or more transient inconsistencies in our moral outlooks and practices, and that they may fill positive functions. Yet, we might here be tempted to insist that it would do no harm if moral systems were more coherent than most of the lived moralities we know of. Certainly, a consistent morality is epistemically and morally preferable? Common conceptions of rationality, objectivity and the nature of a well-formed theory seem to speak strongly for coherence and consistency. Having and acting on a consistent set of values also seems to be a defining trait of the responsible moral agent. Moreover, what would truth in ethics be (for those who believe in such a thing) if it could be attributed to an inconsistent set of precepts?

Without denying the force of such considerations, I will now take my argument a step further, and argue that inconsistencies are in fact an irreducible trait of any functioning morality. They are, namely, part of what makes moral frameworks capable of constructive adjustment to new conditions.[5]

[5] See also Smilansky's postscript 'The Future and Moral Paradox' (2007, pp. 134–37) where he presents the idea that a positive grasp of moral paradoxes will increasingly be an asset in a future of large-scale upheavals, due to technology, in our moralities and forms of life. His argument points much in the same direction as mine, with one significant difference: he points to an imagined future of large upheavals which requires a different kind of ethical thought. As I see it, change and adaptation to change is a permanent feature of moral life, and access to different, incompatible, conflicting, even paradoxical insights has always been an asset in the renegotiation of ethical terms in human societies.



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Moral beliefs, attitudes, conceptions, prohibitions etc. are, as we know, culturally variable and complexly responsive to circumstances. There is no one-to-one relationship between conditions and forms of morality: as active, interpreting and imaginary creatures, human beings can do quite different things with very similar materials. Changing conditions, however, are accompanied by new interpretive needs and new requirements of adjustment.

As Michele Moody-Adams puts it: 'In periods of environmental change, social upheaval, or economic instability, the survival of a culture may demand extraordinary inventiveness and spontaneity. Such periods require, even of everyday agents, the ability to modify existing cultural patterns in their own practice (if only incrementally)' (Moody-Adams, 1997, p. 70)

Among the things renegotiated are our everyday duties, forms of interaction and reciprocity: things moral, even on a narrow interpretation of the concept.

In this process, previous conceptions of damage change, power relations alter and repressed or previously inarticulate interests take form. Change opens up opportunities to renegotiate old discontents and discover new ones. As James notes: 'The pinch is always here. Pent under every system of moral rules are innumerable persons whom it weighs upon, and goods which it represses; and these are always rumbling and grumbling in the background, and ready for any issue by which they may get free' (James, 2000, p. 257).

The displacement of dominant, hegemonic or habitual moral perspectives often causes temporary commotion in social relations and may leave individuals at loss in their attempts to navigate their social and moral world. But this is only one side of the story. The lack of ready consistency between the precepts and perspectives of one's community also give individuals and communities access to alternative possibilities for negotiating the terms of their continued life together.

In areas where moral and social conditions and sensibilities are changing, the inconsistencies of our moral outlook and way of life can thus be a central resource rather than an impediment. We find an interesting exploration of this idea in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, where Emerson is quoted on the topic of consistency. This occurs in a passage where the Australian writer Costello has given her invited lectures at an American college and is having dinner with the local academics. The conversation, recounted through the perspective of Costello's son, has awkwardly turned to concern her vegetarianism. The university president, Garrard, says,



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on a conciliatory note, that he has much respect for her 'way of life.' But she is not willing to be reconciled.

> '"I'm wearing leather shoes" says his mother. "I'm carrying a leather purse. I wouldn't have overmuch respect if I were you."
>
> "Consistency," murmurs Garrard. "Consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds. Surely one can draw a distinction between eating meat and wearing leather."
>
> "Degrees of obscenity," she replies.' (Coetzee, 2004, p. 89)

The novel has been read in terms of a rift between Costello's way of seeing what humans do to animals and the way most other people see it. Cora Diamond describes her as wounded by her perception of what is done to animals (Diamond, 2008). But she is, in a sense, equally wounded by her own capacity to see both sides. She is indeed wearing leather shoes. The framework of current normality has not been entirely replaced, in her mind, by a moral order where the suffering and death of animals is given equal consideration. She can see both the duck of current normality and the rabbit of a more equal order between humans and animals. She can also see how her horror at what humans continuously do to animals disconnects her form other people. Her predicament is both deeply unhappy, and one of perhaps superior sensibility. In this sense she, or the ideas she embodies, offers a resource for us, who may feel the pull of very different ways of relating to animals. The novel works as a laboratory of our moral and cultural possibilities.

What then is the deeper meaning here of Emerson's punchline (if we do not merely regard it as a detail that adds authentic intellectual flavor to the conversation)? The small minds are at peace with the moral standards of their surrounding society or subgroup. If there is a spark of critical intellect in them, they might use it to check the constancy of their or their fellows' standards, which amount to a kind of polishing of a cherished object. The great minds are struck by complexity and capable of holding incompatible perspectives and standards before their mind's eye.

But the question of eating animals is in our time not any old question. It is one where people's moral sensibilities, at least in the western world, are currently in transit. Perhaps this was less clear when the book was first published, than it is today. In any case, the growing problematization of eating animals was hardly news for Coetzee. The question is: what can little minds, nurturing their consistency, do when conditions change and require a recalibration and reorganization of our moral beliefs and instincts. Perhaps they need



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someone like Costello to suffer before them: so that they can enter the world redeemed, to put the theological details in place.

Yet of course, most moral changes are not of the dramatic kind suggested by Costello's persona, but rather piecemeal and continuous. Moral frameworks are not unitary final courts of appeal – but rather complex and often contradictory assemblages of values, norms, habits, practices, responsibilities, ideas of personhood and interpersonal relations. They undergo change, under the pressure of changing conditions, but also following the collective reasoning and negotiation that is constantly going on, overtly and covertly, in human societies.

The material and social conditions of human societies change, new values and new orderings of values make claims on our attention. Conditions and evaluative frameworks go hand in hand. Modern individualism, for example, is seen as one of the great ideas of the enlightenment, and a key to the liberation of individuals from a morally deplorable collectivism. But its large-scale implementation on women, children and servants was much dependent on the decline of the family as a productive unit. In a society where both productive work and training is done outside the home, the previously powerful role of the *pater familias* makes less and less sense. Paternal use of power comes to be seen as a hindrance rather than a necessary means to the flourishing of the family members, the family as a whole, or the economy, and becomes contested, an object of feminist and generational struggles, eventually giving way to a moral order where the domineering father is an embarrassment, a relic or pathological figure. The radically changed social role of the child in the 20$^{th}$ century is another story of economic change and moral revaluation (see e.g. Zelizer, 1985).

The areas of life where we are most wildly inconsistent are perhaps the areas where different concerns, standards, and practices meet. In relation to eating animals, the traditional (European, Christian) view would suggest that domestic animals are for the use of humans, and that there is nothing beastly in this usage. Yet insights from a number of different domains accumulate to question this view: the very nature of factory farming, the overuse of antibiotics on cattle, the ecological consequences of meat production, population growth, health consequences of a meat-based diet, the expansion of moral concern to animals (as described by Singer (1981)), etc. The change of perspective on meat-eating may be less a matter of the strength of individual arguments, and more a matter of momentum. More and more middle-class families find reason enough to change the minced meat in their bolognese to a product made of soy, oats



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or mushroom protein. Successively more people are alienated form daily meat eating. But perhaps an ecological steak on Sunday? A deer tenderloin? A chicken from one's own yard?

We do not know what the general judgment on such issues will be, a few decades from now. Will meat-eating, at least in some of its current forms, increasingly be a foreign practice? In that case, its terrible aspects will appear more clearly to a growing number of us, perhaps as they do to Costello. The terrors of our own socially accepted practices, the violence inherent in them, is usually domesticated so that we do not see it, or if we do, we do not wince. If we are alienated from a practice – if it no longer seems ordinary to us – we may get closer to the reaction of the child who, learning where the meat comes from at an unduly late age, leaves the dinner table in outrage.

If we take seriously the idea that moral inconsistencies are a productive part of our moral frameworks, then the implications are somewhat more radical than what was described before. In this view, moral inconsistencies are not only an *unavoidable* part of the moral world, which the philosopher should know well, but also play a central role in the important adaptability of moral forms of life. Many inconsistencies (in moral life or theory) are just bad thinking, but some inconsistencies are affordances. They offer us alternative ways of conceptualizing our common good, ideal forms of personhood and conduct, when previously dominant ways lose ground. The capacity to conceptualize a moral issue in different ways, bearing with inconsistency and indeed making use of it, enables people to reason together over their terms of moral exchange.

But do I mean that inconsistencies are a necessary part of any resilient, functional moral system? It may be more helpful to say that inconsistencies are a central part of any lived morality we know, an aspect of how lived moralities work, and a consequence of the practical and contextual nature of moral understanding and judgment. Asking for a perfectly consistent morality is like asking for a natural language where all words are properly defined. There is a long philosophical tradition seeking such a well-defined language, but there is little reason to think that such language would *work* in the range of day to day contexts where we use our vernaculars. Similarly, a fully consistent morality would not do the work that our complex and often conflicted moralities do for us. Defining words and checking our moral views for consistency are two practices with many uses, but they have their place in linguistic and moral forms of life which continuously overflow them.



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The very same inconsistencies that in a synchronic perspective may look like threats to the tenability or rationality of a moral framework, are from a diachronic perspective the very things that make the framework resilient and adaptable, allowing people to reason their way to new rules and standards. They allow for the new to come to us as something already habitual: something we did not know we knew, something that falls into place and makes perfect sense.

This is also what often makes comprehensive dogmatic systems of moral rules – such as we find in some religious communities – problematic from a moral point of view. Clinging e.g. to a conception of marriage as a life-long bond between a man and a woman, such a community may fail to see how our shared understandings of love, sexuality, personhood, family, economy, and a meaningful life have changed so as to render this notion of marriage oppressive in ways which it perhaps was not before, when marriage was primarily perceived as a reproductive and productive unit.

Of course, the single-minded adherence to a consistent set of moral values can sometimes also be an asset in changing circumstances. We find examples of such heroic adherence in narratives of resistance to an oppressive regime, or in times of civil war or augmenting conflict between social groups. In such cases, it is not the capacity to see from different angles, and to yield, that attracts our praise, but rather the capacity to carry a central value over the vicissitudes of change. This capacity, however, does not require that the agent so placed is capable of molding all of his or her own, partly inconsistent moral points of view into a balanced whole. Insofar as we have moral heroes, they might be something like Elizabeth Costello: deeply conflicted individuals.

Inconsistency is a natural part of a well-functioning morality, because morality is premised on our responsiveness to a complex, changing human world: not a deliverance of divine revelation and not the product of supposedly disengaged reason. We form our moral views, principles and commitments in a variety of contexts, through a variety of experiences, and by a variety of paths of reflection. Thus, while containing much intelligence about our situation, they do not add up to a neat system. In ordinary life, we have ways of negotiating and ordering conflicting and incompatible principles, intuitions and values, Yet, it is also a commonplace that they may lead us to inconsistency. Such inconsistencies cause practical, ethical and existential challenges, and may occasion upheavals in our moral lives, but they are not a sign of some fundamental flaw in our moral or moral philosophical thinking that would need to be fixed by means of a systematic theory.



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## 4. Consistency, clarity and accountability

I have argued that understanding real life moral inconsistencies should be a central concern for moral philosophers because they are important to lived morality, and that real-life moral inconsistencies are a central part of the plasticity of moral frameworks: their capacity to be renegotiated to match new situations, and more generally to be open to change.

But could we not accept both of these points, and still hold that it is the task of the philosopher to present a consistent theoretical whole, which attempts, as far as it can, to accommodate the unruly aspects of reality in a consistent, clarifying, normative account. This seems to me a perfectly reasonable goal for a certain kind of theoretical writing, but it is important to be aware of the potential costs of consistency, both in moral life (as discussed before) and at the level of textual communication.

As most philosophers would agree, it is not always most useful to read a text by a student or a close colleague when it is finalized: when its initial gaps are filled, its roughness smoothed out, its internal conflicts appeased. Quite often, especially with difficult and complex topics, the ultimate completion of a text is to a certain part a cosmetic operation, which aims to hide away the unavoidable gaps and tensions in the thinking that is presented. Arendt suggested in the quotation above that inconsistencies in the work of great thinkers take us to the very center of their thought. Perhaps there isn't this kind of exciting center in most peoples' intellectual output. But the roughness and potential inconsistency of an unpolished thought is sometimes a better source of philosophical insight than the smoothed-out version. It may bring us closer to underlying unresolved tensions in the writer's thought, which may well be tensions we share with her. At least it is a better starting point for discussion. The polished theoretical text can bring a premature end to a thought process, which should rather be allowed to go on.

Another way of saying this is R.G. Collingwood's notion that in philosophy one should always confess one's difficulties (Collingwood, 2005, p. 210). Sometimes difficulties are more conductive to understanding than ready answers. A seriously felt difficulty, which one cannot resolve in a satisfactory manner, should not be smoothed out for reasons of form, but should be left to resonate, with fitting modesty, in one's report of what one has come up with.

As said before, nothing that I have said here should be understood as an assault on consistency as an ideal in moral thinking and moral



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philosophy. It is the perhaps most important regulative ideal in both vernacular moral thinking and in philosophical discourse. We point out each other's inconsistencies and hold each other and ourselves answerable to a standard of coherence. This is a central part of what critical thinking and moral agency are like.

Accountability, understandability and clarity in reasoning and sharing of views does not, however, require complete consistency. Confessing one's difficulties, sharing one's thoughts in their unfinished complexity, are precisely ways of being accountable, honest and clear.

In everyday life we rely on a certain degree of constancy and consistency in other people. In our family and among friends and colleagues we know roughly who can be trusted, who can be held accountable, and how specific circumstances might affect people in this regard. Nevertheless, moral accountability rarely means absolute consistency. I want my friend to keep his promises, absolutely. But if the promise concerns a minor issue, we are perfectly fine with seeing it overridden by issues of greater weight. If my colleague fails to return a book that I need today, because he is taking his neighbor to hospital due to an emergency, I will not blame him for it, because beyond common principles we share a way of life and a moral space where certain things usually take precedence over others. We might of course disagree concerning priorities in many cases, but each of us having a more consistent view of things moral does not solve such disagreements. In terms of accountability it may often be better to reflect over one's conflicted intuitions or one's inconsistencies, than to force one's views into a coherent, consistent account.

Margaret Urban Walker articulates this kind of take on accountability when describing ethics as a 'socially embodied medium of mutual understanding and adjustment between persons.' This medium has multiple resources: 'shared moral vocabularies, common exemplars, familiar institutions, and those deliberative styles recognized in some community' (Walker, 2003, p. 94) Accountability does not here primarily require consistency, but rather a reflective capacity of sharing outlooks and achieving mutual understanding and joint action. 'On this view moral problems are not cases to be closed by authoritative verdicts but conspicuous nodal points in histories of attempted mutual adjustment and understanding, both of each other and of the terms of our accountability to each other' (Ibid.)

My aim here is however not to defend Walker's conception of ethics in particular, but merely to open up a revaluation of inconsistency in both moral life and moral philosophy. In the reflective moral spaces



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where we share our reasons and perspectives, and seek ways forward, the formal demand for consistency may stand in the way of open-ended conversations – with others as well as with ourselves – over what we have before us, and how we should handle it. Seeing the productive functions of moral inconsistencies, we may also as philosophers and theorists be less inclined to shrink back from them, sweep them under the carpet or relegate them to places safely outside moral philosophy.[6]

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