

## Examples of Ambiguity

### Two Sides of the Coin

Below are three ever-present examples of ambiguity in everyday life. Many people experience extreme discomfort in any situation where these issues are discussed or even mentioned. Most of us feel this to varying degrees. For some, the discomfort is so high that they cannot tolerate it and will develop coping mechanisms, reacting to the ambiguity in somewhat predictable ways.

I want to emphasize that *their intolerance is for the discomfort*, not for the people involved, although in some reactions it may seem that way.

Two common types of intolerant reactions are:

- **Rigidity**, a “clamping down” in which the person believes their preferred solution to be absolutely right and all other possibilities to be wrong. These reactions are often marked by righteousness.
- **Abdication**, a refusal to form a personal opinion in an effort to avoid involvement in the ambiguity altogether. Some who are overly involved in New Age spiritual paradigms also abdicate to avoid ambiguity, explaining things away as God’s will. These reactions are often marked by apathy.

### Example 1: Politics

Most political issues lack a clear solution that works for everyone every time. One’s personal and moral values, as well as one’s position in society (including age, gender, socioeconomic status, occupation, marital and parental status), will heavily influence how they view the issues. Here are a few specific examples:

- *Immigration*. Should the nation’s borders be sealed, or should we try to maintain this country as a land of asylum and opportunity? What information, such as wars, genocides or human rights violations in other countries should factor in at any given time?
- *Abortion*. Should people have the choice of whether or not to continue a pregnancy? What factors should be considered? Why should such factors make a difference?
- *Suicide and Euthanasia*. Should people have the choice of whether or not to continue their own lives? What factors should be considered? Why should such factors make a difference?

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| Rigid Reaction:      | The right answer is A, here’s the evidence and that’s the way it is. Anyone who disagrees is just wrong. If you aren’t with us, you’re against us.                                  |
| Abdicating Reaction: | I can see how some think A is best and how others think B is best. Maybe they’re all right, I don’t know. I don’t really have an opinion.   |
| Tolerant Response:   | I think A is the best solution, though I admit it isn’t ideal. It won’t be resolved anytime soon. In the meantime, it’s interesting to hear other points-of-view and to share mine. |

### Example 2: Religion

Among religions (and among sects or even individual churches of the same religions), beliefs, sacred texts, practices, and prayer vary widely. Groups have widely different takes on marriage, money, sex, drugs/alcohol, even dancing. People with low ambiguity tolerance can feel threatened by a lack of external validation for their religious orientation. Authentic faith, born of a strong and complex personal relationship with the divine (whatever that is conceived to be), is a powerful foundation for building one’s ambiguity tolerance.

- Rigid Reaction: Ours is the only true religion/spiritual practice. Many others think their religion is the one, and that's sad because it's not the case. We do what we can to help them, but some people just aren't open to new and better ideas.
- Abdicating Reaction: Religion is just a way to fulfill a need for belonging. I've tried lots of them and they're really all the same. It doesn't matter which one you're in. I mean, who cares?
- Tolerant Response: I'm a proud member of my religion/spiritual practice. It feels nourishing and uplifting to me, but I know it doesn't feel that way to everyone.

### Example 3. Personal Choice

Making choices is one of our most fundamental rights as empowered, individual, learning beings. We can all remember as teens hearing adults advise us against some potentially poor choice, but we knew instinctively that we needed to choose it and live out the consequences ourselves. This still applies. The people around us make choices all the time that seem poor to us, and vice versa. Here are just a few examples:

- A high school senior is offered a prestigious but unpaid internship for the summer in New York, but he chooses to work for minimum wage with his friends at an auto body shop.
- A woman decides to stay with the boyfriend who crashed her car and refuses to admit he was buzzed or to pay for the damage.
- A 56-year-old man marries a 25-year-old woman.

- Rigid Reaction: What is he thinking? I told him not to do it. It will give me no pleasure to say "I told you so," but I will because I did! What an idiot.
- Abdicating Reaction: People have their own reasons for doing things. It isn't my place to judge or to say anything. If something bad happens, I'll do my best to be supportive but y'know, I'm so busy.
- Tolerant Response: I wish he wouldn't do this. I told him my opinion, but it is his choice and I let him know I'll support him whatever he decides. We'll see what happens and then go from there. If he needs help, I'll probably help him.

### Films that Are Rich with Ambiguity

For this list, I'm using the word *ambiguity* to specifically refer to the absence of a clear, "right" answer or resolution. The following films contain characters and/or situations in which there is irresolvable conflict. Watching such films is an opportunity to practice tolerance by witnessing the conflict, resisting the urge to simplify the issue, and forming a personal opinion without deciding it's therefore resolved.

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| 25 <sup>th</sup> Hour (2002) | Magnolia (1999)                |
| 3:10 to Yuma (2007)          | Sideways (2004)                |
| Blade Runner (1982)          | Solaris (2002)                 |
| Capote (2005)                | The Talented Mr. Ripley (1999) |
| Crash (2005)                 | The Village (2004)             |
| Gone Baby Gone (2007)        | Traffic (2000)                 |
| I Am Sam (2001)              | Unforgiven (1992)              |
| Lone Star (1996)             |                                |