



ACCEPTING
Ambiguity



**MODERN LIFE HAS LITTLE TO DO WITH SUBTLETY AND NUANCE.
JOURNALIST OLIVIA GAGAN SPENT YEARS THINKING IN BLACK AND WHITE,
BUT SHE LEARNED THAT YOU CAN LOOK AT EVERYTHING FROM TWO
ANGLES. THE REALIZATION, SHE SAYS, HAS BEEN TRULY LIBERATING.**

Have you ever tried to explain something you don't really understand? A scientific concept to a child, perhaps, or a business idea in a meeting or the storyline of a film you only half-watched? It's hard. And you risk looking like an idiot if the person you're speaking to realizes that you have no clue what you're talking about.

Back when I was seventeen, I tried to explain an idea I didn't understand in an attempt to get in to university. The University of Cambridge in the UK is prestigious, regarded as one of the best in the world. To win a place to study English there, you have to write and submit an essay on a topic of your choice. On the day of the admissions interview, you must take a timed writing test and you're then interviewed by a panel of academics about your essay. It's a tough process, designed to find only the best and brightest students.

I didn't know what to write about in my essay. I wondered what would impress the academics the most. I did know that I loved the writer F. Scott Fitzgerald and had devoured his books, letters and essays over the preceding year. With the deadline looming, my teacher suggested I write about one of the celebrated American author's most famous quotes: 'The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function'.

I didn't tell my teacher that I couldn't wrap my mind around the quote. What did it mean? In my essay, I tried to logically explain why it's possible to think two things at once, but really, I had no idea what Fitzgerald was saying. How does living with two opposing things at once make you clever? I wrote the essay, feeling all the while deeply unsure of myself.

IN THE STYLE OF FITZGERALD

Fast-forward a few months, to the day of the interview, and my shaky essay was put to the test. I sat in a dark, wood-paneled room, waiting to be called for. It was like stepping back in time: Cambridge's centuries-old colleges are fairy-tale-like in their creaking staircases and medieval walls. I'd never seen such a beautiful place to study. Nervously awaiting my slot, I could hear the candidate before me laughing and chatting with the interviewers. She floated out and breathed "You'll love it!" to me as I walked, terrified, into the room.

I did not love it. For the next twenty minutes, two academics interrogated me on exactly what I meant by my essay. In what I now recognize as a textbook good-cop-bad-cop routine, one academic picked holes in everything I'd written, while the other offered positive feedback on it.

This was a Fitzgerald-style test of my intelligence happening right in front of me. One person was saying my work was good, another person was saying it was not. I had no idea what to do. Agree with both of them? Try and answer them one at a time? My brain felt overloaded. Cheeks burning, I mumbled incoherently, confused, wrong-footed. I had failed Fitzgerald's test of intelligence. A university-stamped letter dropped on my doormat a few weeks later. Unsurprisingly, I didn't get in to Cambridge.

BLACK-AND-WHITE THINKING

That essay was the first sign that I'm not very good at accepting more than one version of events, of what Fitzgerald called 'holding two opposed ideas in mind at

the same time'. Ambiguity—defined as the ability to be uncertain, to be open to more than one interpretation or one reason for things—is not my cup of tea.

Personally, I like things to be certain. For example, in the past, I've tended to brand people as 'goodies' or 'baddies'. Experiences—a relationship, a holiday, a meal—are remembered as either good or bad. I like feeling sure of things. I like clear, predictable patterns and rules. When something happens that threatens my certainty, I feel uncomfortable, unsafe and let down. How can you feel secure yet accept that there are gray areas in life, or that there's not one perfect answer for everything?

It's not just me; modern life, it turns out, doesn't like nuance either. Social media in particular is a place where things are increasingly black and white. On Twitter and Facebook, it seems life is either great or terrible. We see either the highlight reel of each other's lives, or their worst, angriest rants. Political views are polarized. There's no room for debate, or feelings evolving or being uncertain.

Scrolling through Twitter once, I saw this play out in real time. One tweet read, 'I hate this [expletive] country, honestly. I know we're supposed to love it, but at a certain point you have to look around and see what it actually is'. Immediately underneath this message, another person tweeted, 'The Earth is [expletive] beautiful'. It made me laugh out loud. Both views were so over-the-top, so extreme. Both people were screaming into the online abyss, convinced they were right.

OPPOSING IDEAS

The desire to label things as right or wrong isn't a new phenomenon confined to social media, however. Philosophers have grappled with accepting ambiguity for thousands of years. From Socrates to Simone de Beauvoir, women and men have spent millennia trying to figure out if—and how—two opposing things can be true at once. (It's good to know I'm not the only one without a

first-rate intelligence.) Psychologists argue that the human brain inherently struggles to juggle opposing ideas. We're hard-wired to seek certainty, to find absolute truth. This quest for certainty has no doubt helped drive our evolution—the desire to know, to understand everything, is at the very root of all human advancement. But nevertheless, it seems we can't be certain and have a perfect explanation for everything.

What changed my mind about things not always being binary, yes or no, good or bad? Good old-fashioned time and experience. I haven't devoted as much study to it as the philosophers, but everyday life has shown me that things are not always black or white. This hit home when one short romantic relationship ended suddenly. I was upset that he had decided to end things. He wanted instead to focus on his work and to pursue other people. Did this make me feel great? No. I wanted to write him off as a 'baddie'. But as I processed the relationship, I also couldn't deny that he was the most mature and kind person I'd ever dated. We hadn't lasted long, we had ultimately failed as a couple, but he'd made a big positive impact on me. Ergo, a relationship that turned sour nevertheless held many positive elements. And if you asked him about his experience of us being together, I'm sure it would sound quite different to mine—and yet both experiences, both recollections, would be true. >

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DIFFERENT FROM ME

Friendships have also chipped cracks into my ability to be absolutely sure about everything and everyone. I've shared wonderful memories with some people. We have grown up together, and we've had a lot of fun. But over the years, I've realized that our values aren't the same. They make decisions I wouldn't make. Does this make someone a bad person? No. It just makes them a different one to me. How will my friendships evolve? Will we stay friends? Right now, I don't know. I have to learn to live with the uncertainty until I find out.

As a teenager, when I first tried to understand Fitzgerald's quote, I hadn't yet had the experiences I needed to get to grips with the concept of ambiguity. Both my romantic relationships and my friendships have taught me that the most well-meaning people can do unexpected or hurtful things. Even more confusingly, people that are unlikable can show occasional flashes of kindness and helpfulness. I now believe that someone can be hardworking but occasionally very lazy. A great listener, but sometimes selfish. A loyal friend, but an unfaithful romantic partner. The funniest person in the room, but also the saddest one, too.

LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY

I have become kinder by being willing to accept that not everyone (including myself) will behave perfectly or predictably all the time. Some might call it learning to live with ambiguity, but I think it can also be called growing up. I think my former need for things to be black and white was, in part, about control, something to cling to in an unpredictable, volatile world.

The irony is when you're holding on to ideas and beliefs with a tight grip, in some sort of attempt to have control, life tends to trip you up and remind you that you do not in fact have all the answers. People do unexpected, wonderful things, forcing you to rewrite your ideas about them. A secret comes to light that shows someone in a whole new light.

Sticking to my fixed ideas was also arrogant. Who am I to decide who someone is or isn't? I'm not a fixed, unchanging person. I have evolved considerably over the years. I've become better at some things, and I've left some bad habits, for the most part, behind. (No doubt picking up a few new bad habits and flaws along the way.) Why can't others be allowed to grow and change and do the same?

Examining my need for certainty has highlighted my own weaknesses. I've tended to end contact with people after they've hurt me—after I have written them off as bad news. Wouldn't it be better to talk with them, attempt to repair the rupture, and to find out why they'd behaved the way they had? Shouldn't I be questioning where I contributed to the problem, too? Isn't it just as cruel and 'bad' to discard someone for one false step? I'm not sure. And I'm okay with that.

RELINQUISHING CONTROL

Learning to tolerate ambiguity, being able to hold two opposing ideas in my mind at the same time, has made me calmer and happier. It's meant relinquishing control and admitting I don't know all the answers. It's humbling and, in a strange way, liberating.

Because by deciding that you don't need to know exactly what something or somebody is about, you create room for life and people and places to surprise you. When you're open-minded to a range of different possibilities and interpretations and outcomes, you see more, experience more, feel more. Wanting things to be certain is a bit of a fool's errand. It can hold you back from making commitments and trusting and being vulnerable with people. Accepting uncertainty is a matter of having faith.

Not necessarily the religious kind, but the kind that admits we don't have all the answers.

Simone de Beauvoir advised that when hungering for the very human desire for certainty, simply accepting that life is essentially uncertain can set us free. 'Since we do not succeed in fleeing it, let us, therefore, try to look the truth in the face', she wrote. 'Let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity. It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting'. In the face of many ideas potentially being true, I think she's advocating for us all finding our own personal reasons for living, seeking our own personal truths and creeds, which, if we're kind, can all peacefully coexist with each other's.

Do I understand that Fitzgerald quote now? I think I do. Or at least, I have my own take on it. I now believe that what I should have done in that interview with the academics was to defend my writing, my unique point of view. That's what they were interested in. I understand that now; I just didn't when I was seventeen.

So, this piece is my second attempt at that Cambridge entrance exam. I wonder if I'd have had a better chance at getting in this time around. ●

WANT TO READ MORE?

* *'The Crack-Up'*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald

* *'The Ethics of Ambiguity'*, by Simone de Beauvoir