

# Unbending Conviction

DEMI CHEN

*The toughest iron  
tempered strong in white-hot fire,  
you'll see it crack and shatter*  
—Sophocles, *Antigone* (529-31)

**A***ntigone* plays with the notion that we often want our systems of ethics to be strict and absolute; that we would often prefer there to be no flexibility in our morals, only a simple and strong dichotomy of good or bad, right or wrong. But as we grow, life's inevitable ambiguity forces us to question what we believe, to prioritize and occasionally reconcile conflicting sets of values. How, then, can we come to terms with the shades of grey when we are used to viewing the world in black and white? In *Antigone* we are told that striving for conviction is crucial if we are to navigate our ambiguous world. The name of the play's eponymous protagonist means "unbending," a fitting designation for the princess who refuses to submit to her uncle's law because it defies what she believes in. When one of her brothers, an enemy of the state, is killed in battle, her uncle, King Creon, forbids her to bury his body, instead banishing it to the field for carrion birds to feast upon. The law of the king is absolute, but so, too, are the laws of the gods, who demand reverence for the dead. Conflicted yet defiant, Antigone buries her brother, arguing that the people of the city passively dismissed the gods' edict because "their lips [were] locked in fear" of the king (565). Her reward is death, as she is necessarily punished by Creon for disobeying the law of the state. And yet, had she complied with Creon's orders, she would surely have been damned by Olympus. The tragedy enacts a perennial human problem: we will always have to make difficult decisions, we will always have to resolve conflicts between two moral "rights," and we will always have to pay a price, no matter what we choose to do.

This doesn't mean that there isn't a right choice, as Jonathan Safran Foer argues in "Against Meat." Just as Antigone must defy the king's law to follow

the laws she values most, Foer must choose between his family's eating culture and his respect for animals. To Foer's grandmother, who narrowly survived the Holocaust, food is much more than eating—"it is terror, dignity, gratitude, vengeance, joy, humiliation, religion, history and, of course, love" (74). It brings back vivid memories and preserves family history whenever she shares the comforts of food with loved ones. However, for Foer, some values, such as refraining from eating animals, need to come above others, and other vehicles, not food, should be used as "handles for the memories that they once helped [him] carry" (78). Like Antigone, Foer makes a sacrifice to align his actions with his moral beliefs.

Unlike "unbending" Antigone, Foer admits that in moments of weakness, he would find "ways to smudge, diminish and ignore" his self-imposed ethics of eating (75). "We were honest people who occasionally told lies, careful friends who sometimes acted clumsily. We were vegetarians who from time to time ate meat," Foer explains, his justification being that he "was only human" (76). Indeed, Foer's use of parentheses throughout his essay identifies a man prone to mistakes and doubt, wracked with uncertainty over his choice to abstain.

And yet, Foer sticks to his guns, aspiring to perfect vegetarianism even as he suffers occasional lapses. "If nothing matters, there is nothing to save," he says, quoting his grandmother, who during the War refused to eat food that wasn't kosher, even when facing starvation. Even if Foer's will isn't as strong as his grandmother's, he argues that what ultimately matters is having something to believe in. The conviction to do what is right will follow.

Although Antigone and Foer give us no way to know what the right choice will be between two conflicting values, their examples encourage us to choose anyway—to take a side and a stand. But David Foster Wallace flirts with the idea that there is a third route to take: avoiding the struggle by not choosing at all. In "Consider the Lobster," Wallace questions the inhumane nature of cooking lobsters and criticizes the consumers who refuse to consider the ethics of eating them. Wallace challenges the readers of *Gourmet* to contemplate the implications of their behavior. "Isn't being extra aware and attentive and thoughtful about one's food and its overall context part of what distinguishes a real gourmet?" he asks, slamming those people who, like Creon's unquestioning subjects in *Antigone*, slip passively into the background of a conflict and follow the lead of others for fear of taking sides (355). By offering a host of information about the inhumane treatment of lobsters, Wallace wants us to understand that we should be more conscious and considerate of our choices—and not just dietary ones—in the face of conflicts,

especially those we often try to dismiss because they make us uncomfortable. If we have no conviction, dismissing the conflict is a selfish convenience rather than a solution.

In considering vegetarianism, Wallace asserts that “even the most diehard carnivore will acknowledge that it’s possible to live and eat well without consuming animals” and, ambivalent, asks his readers: “What ethical convictions have you worked out that permit you to not just eat but to savor and enjoy flesh-based viands?” (354, 355). Unlike Foer, Wallace has not made a choice. His indecision manifests itself in the essay’s numerous footnotes, which see Wallace explain, clarify, and grapple with the lobster’s plight. And while the parentheses in “Against Meat” see Foer coming to terms with his decision to forego meat, Wallace’s footnotes show a man unable to commit himself. He “like[s] to eat certain kinds of animals and want[s] to be able to keep doing it,” despite the fact that he cannot defend it (354). While he pleads with readers to *consider* the lobster, he does not insist that we *spare* the lobster.

But even if some of us disagree with Foer’s justification for not eating meat, it is hard to refute Wallace’s exhortation to give vegetarianism—and eating animals—serious thought. Wallace points out that “it takes a lot of intellectual gymnastics and behaviorist hairsplitting” not to see that a lobster suffers before it finally dies, just as it takes conscious ignorance on our part to skim over his footnotes and read only his essay (351). As Foer explains, when confronted by his children: “you need to find an answer for every why . . . and often there isn’t a good one. So you say, simply, because. Or you tell a story that you know isn’t true” (79). It is more comforting to do so than to admit there is something unethical about the idea that we are “torturing” our food. Wallace wants us to be aware that our coping, our structuring, and our conscious avoidance hide a harsh reality that he urges us to face. When we do, we are able to make choices with the full knowledge of what sacrifices they entail.

Conflicts of values are inevitable; complex situations will always call for sacrificing one belief for another in our lives. Life cannot be composed of “black and white” moral systems; the complexity—the shades of gray—render us vulnerable to such difficult and conflicted choice-making. To be “only human” is to struggle with maintaining morals and finding conviction, when life’s circumstances can challenge us to choose between different sets of beliefs.

But what happens when the circumstances are far more dire than dinner? In his essay “Hiroshima,” John Berger examines pictures drawn by survivors of that bombing, and in doing so confronts one of the most harrowing moral dilemmas of our time. The anecdotes Berger includes, heart-breaking scenes

of the aftermath of the bomb, are hard to forget. Yet Berger asserts that the “monstrously vivid” reality is something “we choose to forget. . . . It has been a systematic, slow, and thorough process of suppression and elimination” (17). To Berger, Hiroshima is not a part of life’s many shades of grey. “It is not a question of opinion or interpretation, but of events,” he says, and to “loo[k] beyond [Hiroshima] (with indifference)” is to become compliant in an act that is inherently evil (19). As Wallace encouraged *Gourmet* readers to face their truths, Berger suggests that “looking beyond” a moral conflict does not change the fact that something terribly wrong is happening “before the eyes”: “Only by looking beyond or away can one come to believe that such evil is relative, and therefore under certain conditions justifiable. In reality—the reality to which the survivors and the dead bear witness—it can never be justified” (20).

Berger urges us to face the truth, and to remember (instead of choosing to “look beyond” and forget) that there *is* such a thing as true evil in the world. Instead of taking a way of thinking as a given, or a point-of-view as unequivocally correct, we have to consider the painful, polarizing truth of the issue, and realize that we must eventually take a stand. Only by seeing the devil in the details can we condemn him.

“If nothing matters, there is nothing to save.” When the consequences of our choices are elevated to the severity of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, the preservation of history matters, the act of remembering matters. The responsibility to look *at*—not beyond—evil, matters. To forget ensures a future for evil. And while dismissing may be easy, and choosing may be hard, it is Antigone’s difficult choice that inspires her city’s people to overcome their fear of the king and “murmur in the dark” about how she “deserves a glowing crown of gold” (775, 782). Only when we thoroughly examine what we believe and do, *when we choose to look*, can we recognize evil’s presence.

Simply looking might not be enough, but sometimes no other choice emerges. Sometimes, all we can really do is look; all we can do is pay attention to the parentheses, footnotes, and fine print. Foer admits that he was “only human” when he explains why he made his mistakes. Perhaps our duty, in response to human conflict and crisis, is to recognize the wrong, to acknowledge and admit to its presence before we can expect to hope for solutions and recovery. But some serious, challenging mental work is needed before we deem something good or evil. Choosing to gloss over the ugly, ambiguous details is a tempting alternative to confronting our fears, but avoiding a conflict makes us, and not the conflict, disappear. We can choose to look beyond our acts of evil by making excuses, by telling ourselves stories

we can live with, by not reflecting upon our decisions. But in the face of evil, the act of looking can grant us a certain power, if only we strive to see.

---

**WORKS CITED**

Berger, John. "Hiroshima." Morgan and Berg 15-20.

Foer, Jonathan Safran. "Against Meat." Morgan and Berg 73-80.

Morgan, William M., and Katherine Berg, eds. *Advanced College Essay*. 4th ed. New York: Pearson, 2011. Print.

Sophocles. *Antigone. The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1984. 55-128. Print.

Wallace, David Foster. "Consider the Lobster." Morgan and Berg 341-55.

186 - MERCER STREET