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MORALITY OF THE LIGHT, MORALITY OF THE DARK

Reflections on Ethics and the Holocaust

ABSTRACT

Starting from a dream where the author found himself in the middle of the Holocaust, this paper works out a distinction between two regions of morality: Morality of the Light and Morality of the Dark. The two regions complement each other, like in the Taoist symbol of yin and yang. Morality of the Light is that of moral agents, whereas Morality of the Dark is morality of non-moral agents, being non-rational, non-moral or non-agents. People victimized by the Nazi death-camps exemplify the latter region. Ethicists have hitherto largely ignored this region. Its methodology has similarities with that of art and religion rather than with scientific methodology.

Si tu es un homme appelé à échouer, n'échoue pas toutefois

n'importe comment.

Henri Michaux¹

1.

¹ "If you are one called to fail, do not on that account fail, no matter what." Henri Michaux, *Poteaux d angle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 28; my translation.

One night I dream that I am a Jew in one of the concentration camps in Nazi-Germany. My children are there, too. The dream is extremely vivid. I am terrified and at my wits' end, forced toward my own and my family's most probable death. A question torments me: How do I stand this?, and I wake up with this question ringing in my head.

As I reflect on the situation, it strikes me that traditional moral philosophy has no answer. With the help of my dream I suddenly realize that there is another area of morality apart from the traditional. That other area is brought on by confusion, fright, victimization, whereas the traditional presupposes people having their psyche, reasoning, and acting in order. The traditional I call *Morality of the Light*, and the other *Morality of the Dark*. To distinguish between these is the main objective of this essay.

This insight obviously changes nothing for the victims of the Holocaust, or for our trauma arising from it. It might not change anything for me if I were to enter a similar state. We do not see in the Dark. But I believe a philosophical moon to be possible.

2.

'How do I stand this?' Some would say it isn't a question at all, but a sigh, a verbal reaction to stress or expression of emotion. Yes, but at least sometimes – both for me in the dream and for many Jews in the real situation – it is also a structured, semantically meaningful and non-rhetorical articulation of a question invoking an answer.

To be sure, we are not asking for facts, for instance, about what we think or feel under such circumstances. Nor are we demanding a forecast, how we will probably behave. It may be, but isn't necessarily, a technical question about efficient ways, or the most efficient way, to achieve something called

‘standing’. At its core, I am convinced, the phrase formulates a *moral* question. Since this point is essential, some clarifications are needed.

A ‘moral question’ I take to be an articulation of a quest for validity regarding moral holds, and by ‘hold’ I mean thought, feeling, will, decision, or disposition thereto in the face of events or states in the inside or outside world. Holds are more or less conscious and more or less reflected and articulated. The hold normally in focus is a person’s act or, more precisely, decision to act, since the act involves the world outside the person.

We contrast actual holds with possible ones, whether they regard the past, present, or future. And we contrast actual and possible holds with valid holds. In our minds, with the help of language and other means, we present, for instance, some kind of feeling or act as ideal under the circumstances, thereby typically taking it on as a goal of actualization for our lives.

Not all holds should be called ‘moral’. I propose a preliminary definition of a ‘moral’ hold as an actual or possible hold constituting or affecting a person’s and/or other persons’ psychological (spiritual) well-being. A ‘moral answer’, then, normally articulates recognizing or taking a stand as to the validity of a moral hold, and it ranges from being simple exhortations to normative theories – articulated by specific words such as ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’, ‘duty’. Other words may also do the job, or even no words at all: gestures, facial expression, or rituals.

To a moral answer there is usually connected a hold, for example a decision, to do what is found right. The more or less elaborated questions and answers regarding the validity of holds, together with connected holds of the person, I call his/her ‘morality’. Let me leave the notion of ‘validity’ of holds unanalyzed here; I shall use it as a primitive term. Possibly it has a common kernel of meaning or function in all languages, even if different individuals, in

different societies and groups, at different times, have different criteria for it and different views as to the force and implications of their moral holds.

In order to show the special features of the opening question as belonging to a special Morality of the Dark, I must first make clear the notions of ‘Light’ and ‘Dark’.

3.

My idea, then, is that morality in the Western tradition has been uniquely conceptualized as what I call ‘Morality of the Light’. ‘Light’ I call the condition of men as *moral agents*, and ‘Morality of the Light’, a class of aggregates of moral questions, answers, and corresponding holds of moral agents. The self-image of the mainstream philosophers is that they help us to become more rational moral agents.

At one end of the tradition there is Plato in his dialogues pointing to an intimate bond between knowing and morally right acting, and Aristotle stressing that the primary object of moral philosophy is not knowledge but wise action. At the other end there is, for instance, William Frankena who points to a continuity and invokes Socrates:

As Socrates implied and recent philosophers have stressed (perhaps too much), morality fosters or even calls for the use of reason and for a kind of autonomy on the part of the individual, asking him, when mature and normal, to make his own decisions [...] Morality [...] promotes rational self-guidance or self-determination in its members.²

In this quote we find the key ideas of the tradition: ‘decision’ and ‘autonomy’ – in short, *agency* –, and ‘rational’ self-guidance – *rationality*.

² William Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 7.

The concept of a person being a ‘moral agent’ ought to include reference to a set of conditions. It should be logically possible that a person is a moral agent in regard to one set of conditions but not to another, at (broadly) the same place or the same time. A person may then pass from Morality of the Light to Morality of the Dark, and back again, or be in both at the same time, with respect to different conditions, or situations, as I prefer to say.

That a person is a *moral agent* in some situation S, I take to comprise three conditions. First, in S the person chooses his/her moral hold. Second, the person bases the choice of moral hold on a reasoning process essentially involving normative principles and judgments of facts. Third, the person can effectuate his/her hold in S.

The first condition concerns the working of something in the mind of the person, often called ‘free will’. It is a capacity for directing one’s will toward some achievement. The second condition has to do with an elementary rationality. The third condition concerns the relationship between the choices of the free will and what is chosen. If a person chooses to do A, then he/she does A, and the choice will be the cause of the act. The relevant circumstances of the hold, for example the decision to do a certain act, are in the person’s control.

The first and the third conditions are contained in the dictum ‘ought implies can’. Indeed, the language of ‘acts’ rather than ‘decisions’ expresses the normal fulfillment of them, since an act results from the exercise of a free will that is effective. If only one of the conditions is stated, the other condition is silently presupposed. Also, a concept of ‘moral agent’ built on only one of them is rather uninteresting. If you can choose but not effectuate your choice, or you can effectuate your choices but not choose, you are out of the game.

Since there is another condition stipulating rationality, I define a rather broad concept of ‘choosing’. By a person *choosing* or practicing free will in a situation I mean that in the situation (*i*) the person conceives alternative things,

states or events in the world, among these such that involve him/herself; (ii) the person somehow evaluates them; (iii) the person can pass from an evaluation of something to a decision about his/her hold with regard to it. This would be free will in general. If we add that the decision concerns a moral hold, we obtain what is required of a moral agent.

The capacity – *can* – of (iii) mustn't be purely theoretical. A person may for instance have a formal capacity for speech but be muted by a psychological disturbance. 'Can' means that the individual is in possession of his/her agency. Further, 'choosing' usually includes an idea that there is a set of alternative holds that is, if not unlimited, at least not very restricted. Let us say that it contains at least two alternatives, the values of which are substantially different.

Concerning the efficiency of will, it is too much to require that the person's decision in the situation results or necessarily results in the act and its intended effect. We rarely if ever have the world, our body and our mind in total control. By a person having *efficient will* in a situation, then, I shall mean that what is freely willed has a high probability of being brought about through the effort of the person in that situation, all things being equal.

The freedom and efficiency of will varies in intensity and in scope. In most situations I would say people practice free and efficient will in my sense. But under some circumstances one sees no alternatives, or lacks the power or necessary self-esteem or courage, to evaluate them. It may also be that the evaluation cannot be brought to a decision. And if a decision is reached, it may not make her or him mobilize body and mind and employ the means to the intended outcome, or such employment is definitely hindered by others. We are then in 'the Dark'. But there is also another way to be in the Dark.

The second condition on a 'moral agent' – that the person bases the choice of moral hold on a reasoning process essentially involving normative principles and judgments of facts – is a requirement of an *elementary rationality*. A way to clarify it is to look at conceptions of full moral rationality in the main tradition. In spite of all diversities, I think a set of common ideas can be pinned down.

First, morals holds are chosen on the basis of universal moral principles. Ideally, a choice of hold should follow a particular evaluative judgment deduced from a set of valid moral principles, maxims, or laws, together with relevant facts. I overlook differences over the nature or the validity of these principles, or their certainty, and whether they are axiomatic or inductive generalizations. But such principles make no mention of any particular person and contain only purely qualitative (possibly also quantitative) predicates. Thus, an act being right for you, it must also be so for everybody else under the same relevant circumstances. This makes the 'I' in the moral question "What ought I do?", in a sense eliminable, it can be replaced by 'anyone' and the question remains essentially the same. Rationality makes morality non-personal at its core. The universality claim also typically include values, unless for other reasons, because 'right' and 'good' are conceptually or logically connected.

A second central trait in rational method in morals, is that the principles have a logical coherence or systematicity. The thought is that the universal principles form a coherent whole. This is possibly what Kant formulates thus:

All maxims [...] ought to harmonize with a possible kingdom of ends as a kingdom of nature [...] the totality or completeness of its system of ends³.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964, first German edition 1785), p. 104.

This condition is a safeguard against principles or particular stands that are ad hoc, brought up just to suit the interests of the moment. The problem is that few – if any – ethical systems are such as not to make possible contradictory judgments. Utilitarianism is considered a promising candidate. But for other systems, with a plurality of deontic principles, something like Aristotle's practically wise man is required to weigh and apply the universal principles (which still have an essential role). In modern debate, the notion of an 'ideal observer' does the same job.

The second trait should therefore be given an alternative: the principles have a logical coherence or systematicity, or belong to a body of principles, or the application of such principles, that would be acceptable to a wise person/an ideal observer. It is probably easier to prove logical coherence of a body of statements than to prove that it would be acceptable to a wise person. But that someone is *not* wise is perhaps not so hard to show – and that is enough for my present purpose.

However, even for the system of principles satisfying the first part of the disjunction – the coherence of principles – some further requirement, like that in the second part, is generally thought to be needed, assuring that the principles are outcomes not merely of a formal rationality.

A third trait, then, is that the principles and/or the particular judgments on which the principles are based should be, or agree with, the outcome of a successful performance of a specific moral capacity. It may be Plato's intuition, Aristotle's practical reason, Kant's transcendental reason or Hume's sympathy. But whatever it is, it can probably be fairly well shown that someone does *not* fulfill this condition.

These traits, however, are not enough. Rational moral method must include rationality in the handling of facts and forecasts. A fourth trait could perhaps be formulated thus: Scientifically or empirically assessed facts, or at least carefully

scrutinized facts, plays a part together with principles in determining validity in holds.

What has been presented here is a rather vague but strong (scientific) notion of reason in morals. As I have said, what is of interest here, is a person's *lack* of reason, even in its elementary form, which would be required of a moral agent. A person might not be able to decide on moral principles, but chooses on unreflective, perhaps instinctive grounds. A person might be inescapably incoherent and illogical, be unable to recognize neither the existence nor the validity of other people's interests, and have his/her human sympathy effectively fought down by other impulses. A person might not be able to judge the facts of the situation carefully or with a clear mind.

To sum up: A person P is in the Dark in regard to a situation S, if and only if P is not a moral agent in regard to S, and S is problematic for P. I do not require suffering for the state of the Dark, since it is not unique for it. Depending on which of the three conditions on being a 'moral agent' is not fulfilled, and in what respect and to what degree, we can distinguish layers or depths of the Dark.

If only the first and the third conditions are satisfied in respect to moral holds, I would say that we have a *moral person*. If a person has free and efficient will regarding other things than moral holds, he/she is just an *agent*. Someone may have a free and morally rational will, but lack efficiency. It is even possible that a person has elementary moral rationality, but not a free and efficient will in regard to moral holds. Worst off, if they exist at all, are those who aren't even agents.

5.

In the Dark...

Nothing can provide us with examples of this more clearly than the situation of the Jews in Auschwitz and the other Nazi death- and work-camps. I shall examine some cases, through testimonies of survivors.

Elie Wiesel arrived at the age of fourteen to spend a year in these camps. He entitles his account of that period *Night*,⁴ which goes well with the terminology I have chosen. It is a book about the state of victimhood. As Wiesel's interpreter, Robert McAfee Brown, writes: "Many things happen to victims, so *Night* reports. At the heart of them all is shattering, a shattering of world, faith, self and future."⁵

McAfee Brown distinguishes between four 'shatterings' of people experiencing the Holocaust. First, the person's world is shattered. He/she is forced away from home, is separated from work, family and friends, and is put into concentration camps to suffer humiliation and deprivation of all (or almost all) means necessary for living.

The second shattering is that of faith. For Wiesel this was the faith in God of a pious Hasidic child of fourteen. But 'faith' could perhaps be understood in a broader sense, so as to include the worldview of the person, particularly the structure of values and norms. Wiesel, for instance, says that "I did not deny God's existence, but I doubted his justice."⁶

The third shattering is that of the person's self. This is imposed from the outside, through the deprivation of personal belongings, clothes, and hair, and the replacement of name by a number.

⁴ See Elie Wiesel, *The Night Trilogy: Night, Dawn, The Accident* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987. *Night* was first published in French in 1958, *Dawn* was first published in French in 1960, and *The Accident* was first published in French in 1961).

⁵ Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel, Messenger to All Humanity* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, rev. ed. 1989), p. 52.

⁶ Wiesel, *Night*, p. 53.

The student of the Talmud, the child that I was, had been consumed in the flames. There remained only a shape that looked like me.⁷

McAfee Brown comments: "From now on there is no soul, no self."⁸

But McAfee Brown is not consistent, reporting that 'the self' of the number Elie Wiesel survived mentally, as is shown by his concern for his father who was in the same camp. The shattering of the self seems, rather, to be a radical transformation and reduction of personality. McAfee Brown also talks about "persons, reduced to the status of non-persons."⁹

The fourth shattering – according to McAfee Brown the culmination of the shatterings – is that of the victim's future. Wiesel talks in *Night* about being deprived of the desire to live and of having his dreams turned to dust.¹⁰ And people here are, as McAfee Brown writes, "denied a future". He adds: "That is true death, whether physical life is terminated or not."¹¹ Mental death, according to McAfee Brown's reading of Wiesel, is that the individual can no longer plan for, count on, or even desire a normal human life. But possibly these things are rather causes of something called the 'mental death' of a person.

The idea of a 'mental death' of the prisoners of the Nazi camps figures also, for instance, in the work of the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, who in 1938-39 was imprisoned in the camps of Dachau and Buchenwald. He speaks of

⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

⁸ McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel, Messenger to All Humanity*, p. 57.

⁹ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 43.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 59.

the prisoners going through a process of utter debilitation through torture, starvation, and sickness.¹²

Primo Levi, an Italian Jew who, when in his twenties, came to spend almost a year in or close to Auschwitz, also bears his witness to such reductions of human being, starting with a book which he gave the rhetorical title *If This Is a Man*¹³.

Levi talks about a systematic breaking of persons, leaving them as ‘ghosts’, as ‘dead’. People are to be reduced to ‘animals’, as the prisoner Steinlauf, former sergeant in the Austrian-Hungarian army, explains to newly arrived Levi. Levi himself, in a postscript, goes further: they were degraded to cattle, to dirt. The author Terence Des Pres describes it all as an ‘excremental assault’, aiming at complete humiliation and debasement of prisoners.¹⁴

Yet, the Nazis had a rationale for this, Levi realized, namely the destruction of people’s capacity to resist: ”he must immediately be demolished to make sure that he did not become an example or a germ of organized resistance”¹⁵. As a rule, the brutal entry ritual also brought about their ‘moral collapse’¹⁶:

¹² Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart* (London: Penguin Books, 1991, first published 1960), p. xvii.

¹³ Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce*. (London: Vintage, 1996. *If This Is a Man* was first published in Italian in 1958, *The Truce* was first published in Italian in 1963).

¹⁴ Terence Des Pres, ‘Excremental Assault’. In John K. Roth & Michael Berenbaum, eds., *Holocaust - Religious and Philosophical Implications* (New York: Pargon House, 1989). The article is a chapter in Des Pres’s book *The Survivors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹⁵ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Abacus, 1989, first published in Italian in 1986), p. 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses; he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself. He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity, in the most fortunate of cases, on the basis of a pure judgment of utility. It is in this way that one can understand the double sense of the term 'extermination camp', and it is now clear what we seek to express with the phrase: 'to lay on the bottom'.¹⁷

Levi himself, however, was not broken and not (at least not permanently) reduced to a disastrous degree. As he underlines in his book *Moments of Reprieve*, he and most survivors actually never went all the way to the bottom.

If 'mental death' is taken to mean, not only a shattering but a non-reversible destruction of the person, the term is undoubtedly adequate for many in the death-camps. I think in particular of the so-called muselmans, whose very will to live was broken. But for Levi, Wiesel, and others that term is not adequate. Levi talks about the initial moral collapse as a trauma of transplantation, and for many some modus vivendi is found, "based on an invaluable activity of adaptation, partly passive and unconscious, partly active." Soon the "trauma of transplantation is over."¹⁸ When people came out of the trauma, for most their personality was changed, reduced, comprising new patterns of behavior, radically changed holds, norms and values, and a totally different worldview.

It seems to have been typical for the ordinary prisoner that instincts largely replaced reflection and that basic needs and egoism took precedence over so-called higher motives and altruistic principles. As Levi puts it, "there is no doubt that life in the Lager involved regression, leading back precisely to

¹⁷ Levi, *If This Is a Man*, p. 33.

primitive behaviour.”¹⁹ The old ‘civilian’ moral code was replaced by a new moral code, with the ”principal rule of the place, which made it mandatory that you should first of all take care of yourself”, Levi writes in *The Drowned and the Saved*.²⁰

McAfee Brown stresses an important component in the victimization of people in the camps: ”The victim has no choice: the role is imposed by another.”²¹ This has perhaps mainly to do with a blocking of the scope of the will, that it is driven from central aspects of the person’s inner or outer life toward minute details of getting food for the day, keeping the shoes, managing the selections, and so on. According to Levi:

In reality, in the enormous majority of cases, their behaviour was rigidly preordained. In the space of a few weeks or months the deprivations to which they were subjected led them to a condition of pure survival, a daily struggle against hunger, cold, fatigue and blows in which the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero; among these, very few survived the test and this thanks to the coming together of many improbable events.²²

This breaking of the capacity to make moral choices is central in Levi’s analysis. A macabre sign of its success, according to Levi, was the relatively low rate of suicide in the camps, since ”suicide is a meditated act, a non-instinctive, unnatural choice; and in the Lager there were few opportunities to choose.”²³

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁹ *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 25.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 59.

²¹ Ibid., p. 59.

²² Ibid., p. 33.

²³ Ibid., p. 57.

Bettelheim notes some consequences of hindering people from exercising their free will:

barring an individual from a part in decision making on matters that deeply concern him tends to create a feeling of impotence which we call being subject to tyranny.²⁴

This would typically make people adopt childlike behavior.²⁵ He writes:

As time went on and the process of adjustment continued [...] most of them had reached a more advanced stage of personality disintegration, and all of them had come to feel somewhat like hapless children.²⁶

Levi also observed that many entered into states resembling mental disturbances, such as detachment:

as if what happened did not really matter to oneself. It was strongly mixed with a conviction that 'This can't be true; such things just don't happen.'²⁷

But man is a flexible creature. A few prisoners managed to retain their personality and capacity for moral choices in the camp, applied in at least some situations; they were not broken. In *Moments of Reprieve* Levi tells stories of

the few, the different, the ones in whom (if only for a moment) I had recognized the will and the capacity to react, and hence a rudiment of virtue [...] The protagonists of these stories are 'men' beyond all doubt, even if the virtue that

²⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 131.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 130.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 127.

allows them to survive and makes them unique is not always one approved of by common morality.²⁸

These men kept and dared to exercise such important parts of their personality as generosity, friendship, and humor.

It is not ruled out that some even became more profound and more moral in the camp. One witness, Samuel Pissar, who spent his life from the age of twelve to sixteen in different camps, relates a surprising process contrary to the infantilization that Bettelheim describes, namely, how the camp made him surpass himself:

It forced me to develop to a maximum my modest physical and mental qualities, to use to the extreme my limbs, my lungs, my nerves, my brain; to make my own choices, take my own decisions, leave nothing to chance, to find in myself resources that I never believed I had.²⁹

The author Jean Améry, campmate of Primo Levi and the psychologist Viktor Frankl in Auschwitz, partly agrees: "nowhere else in the world did reality exert such efficient action as in the camp."³⁰ But his diagnosis is different: "At no other place did the attempt to surpass it turn out to be so ridiculous and disparaging."³¹

By 'surpass' Améry possibly means something different than Pissar. Améry seems to think of what I call choosing a valid hold facing the disaster. Since

²⁸ Primo Levi, *Moments of Reprieve* (London: Abacus, 1987; first published in Italian in 1981), p. 10.

²⁹ Samuel Pissar, *Le sang de l'espoir*, rev. ed. (Paris: Laffont, 1995; first edition 1979), p. 320; my translation.

³⁰ Jean Améry, *Par-delà le crime et le châtement* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1995; first edition in German, 1966), p. 47; my translation.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

before his imprisonment he was a highly sophisticated intellectual, who in the camp found everything he valued despised and an obstacle to his own survival, what he normally considered a valid hold in life was out of reach.

Samuel Pizar thinks that everyone has a capacity to surpass him/herself facing hostile conditions, like Viktor Frankl, who claims that people do have free will, even in Auschwitz. They can choose to attribute a meaning to their suffering, through viewing it in a certain way or putting up a life goal. It is wrong, he says, to think that the circumstances in the camp ‘caused’ people to be this or that; what the camp did to a person was ‘in the last instance’ a result of an inner decision.³²

Bettelheim is on Frankl’s side, though his affirmation partly contradicts itself:

however restrictive or oppressive an environment may be, even then the individual retains the freedom to evaluate it. On the basis of this evaluation he is also free to decide on his inner approval or resistance to what is forced upon him. True, in an extremely oppressive environment these inner decisions can lead to little or no practical consequences.³³

This freedom of will, these choices of ‘meaning’ are only a matter of *theoretical* possibility; it is clear from both Frankl’s and Bettelheim’s account that few did obtain it, and those who did, didn’t do so consistently. And even if the will was free, it was not always efficient; the meaning – for example, resistance – the individual might have chosen, did not appear in his/her psyche at will.

³² Viktor Frankl, *From Death-Camp to Existentialism*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959).

³³ Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart*, p. 69.

That people's personalities and hence their wills were thus reduced, that they 'accepted' new codes governing their survival, might be theorized as a result of inner decisions; but these were probably often unconscious, not viewed and evaluated through reasoning, and therefore not instances of moral agency in the sense I have defined, perhaps not even of moral personality.

Even if it is possible that the meanings of the terms 'free will' and 'moral' as used by the authors I have quoted are not identical with mine, they are of the same family, and these (and other) testimonies show that in the Nazi Lagers many people were treated in a way so as to reduce them to various modes and levels of the Dark.

People became 'non-persons'; they lost time-, space- and self-orientation, thereby the very capacity to act. Others retained this, but lost a sense of elementary integrity and value, forgetting their past, deprived of a future. They still possessed some intellectual capacity, enabling them to speak, think, and act, for instance, for better food portions, but this was not the acting of moral persons (in my sense of the word). Only a few exercised free and efficient will in regard to moral holds.

Also, those who managed to remain persons or moral persons were often radically reduced from what they used to be. They no longer had their former sensitive feelings and sophisticated, systematic, and logical mind. They often lacked good will toward fellow men, the capacity of empathy and impartiality. And their judgment of facts was often affected. All this precluded, at least in most situations, the elementary rationality required of moral agents.

Even if in principle people had free, efficient, and rational moral will, the room for maneuver was radically limited. In many situations demanding compassion, intervention, or revolt they were paralyzed to the degree of no longer being able to conceptualize, reason about, and decide on realizable alternative states.

Maybe they viewed different acts, but not alternative ones in the sense defined, acts of significantly different value (of outcome) for the individual. If we see only death or various atrocities coming out of anything we can do, our choices appear meaningless or grotesque, no longer deserving that name. Such choices are forced and cannot be recognized as moral – they constitute ‘choiceless choice’, as Lawrence Langer called it in an essay.³⁴

Provided a prisoner could imagine genuine alternatives, fatigue and fright could yet block the evaluation or the forming of a decision to act. The oppression changed the structure of power within the prisoner. Freely willed decisions were put out of power or else were seriously weakened, dubious even to the prisoner. Decisions to escape, for instance, had diminutive chances of being executed, because the control regime was rigorous and all planning extremely unreliable, because all prognoses were so unreliable. The prisoners were deprived of information about the surrounding world and about time; they were denied having a clock, for instance.

Adding to the difficulties was the breakdown of the normal conception of the world, with its fairly coherent system of norms and values, and the replacement of it with confusion and harsh principles for survival which were only partly accepted. People were conditioned not to be moral persons. And those who tried to be moral agents hardly succeeded in practicing it. As Améry indicates, that would even be suicidal.

6.

Forced, terrified, impotent, irrational: victims... How can there be morality, say, a moral question, for someone in the Dark? This appears absurd only if we

³⁴ Lawrence L. Langer, ‘The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps’. In John K. Roth & Michael Berenbaum, eds., *Holocaust - Religious and Philosophical Implications* (New York: Pargon House, 1989).

presuppose moral questions to have the character they have within traditional morality: inquiries for rational guidance of a free and efficient will.

Already at a moderate level of the Dark it is normally recognized by one posing the question ‘How do I stand this?’ that he/she is not a moral agent in this issue and, furthermore, cannot see how he/she could become one. Then surely the question cannot be a demand for rational guidance of his/her free and efficient will in regard to moral holds. The premise is that there is just nothing for rational guidance to operate on. The moral question must be *different*.

A moral question, I said earlier, is an articulation of a quest for validity regarding moral holds for a person. Normally this involves linguistic expression. But the language needed could be rather primitive, consisting of a few words and concepts, including signs for the individual him/herself, for bad or painful states and not bad or not painful states, and for quest or search. Such language may be available to people in states of mental injury, dysfunction, depression, and some degrees of deprivation of personality.

It would seem that to put a question is to perform a minimal act, which requires one to be an agent. If the question is moral, isn’t, then, that person a moral agent? But a question may occur – and be repeated – without being a result of a person performing free, efficient or rational will. And even if one of free will asks the moral question, this only makes one a moral person in regard to the verbal side of the situation; it does not make one a moral person or moral agent in regard to the very problem. To put the question might be the only thing a person can do under the circumstances.

The moral question in the Dark is a kind of scream of the soul. Let me try to pinpoint its main characteristics:

(1) *The question has an unusually high intensity and psychological import.* The person puts all of his/her heart and mind into it, and an ‘answer’ is considered to be decisive for the person’s life.

(2) It is *a quest for obtaining a valid hold*. The person intensely wants to have some thought, feeling, decision, or attitude that would be valid under the circumstances. The question could perhaps be rephrased as ‘Save my soul!’

(3) However, *the quest has no clear receiver*. It is not viewed as a starting point for the individual to present a theoretical answer followed by a practical solution, since the individual is not a moral agent in the situation. So it is not directed toward oneself. It is directed ‘out there’ – to someone, ‘other people’, ‘humanity’. The other may of course be concrete and known (‘Mum’, ‘David’...), or something/someone postulated but unknown such as the Universal Spirit, the Transcendental Self, the Unconscious.

(4) *What constitutes a valid hold is unclear*. The extremity of the situation changes the scene; ordinarily valid holds lose their relevance or validity. New feelings and thoughts appear. Even pious Jews, accepting a norm of absolute obedience to God, suddenly become open to curse or even judge Him, as Elie Wiesel tells. And is survival really preferable to living with dignity? Is nonviolence better than aggression under these circumstances? Is mental distance better than a beautiful example of protest? And even if a person is rather clear about what hold would be valid, dignity, let’s say, it may be unclear exactly what that requires of her or him under the extreme circumstances.

(5) *The way to obtain a valid hold is obscure*. It is logically possible to know how to arrive at a valid hold, even though one is unclear as to its nature. But most likely the route is also unclear, when the individual isn’t a moral agent in the situation and the nature of the valid hold is unclear. The same obscurity we of course have when one has an idea as to what one’s valid hold would be, but it is not within the reach of one’s free and/or efficient will.

(6) *What would make a hold valid is unclear*. This concerns the method of validation, or the recognition of the validity of the hold, since customary or philosophical morality and rational method appear to be inaccessible, false, or

irrelevant. The rationale of the solution or its application is out of the questioner's hand, since the person is not an agent of it. But the person may be able to validate the hold retrospectively. Before completing this list, allow me to draw some conclusions from what has so far been said as to the specificity of the typical moral question of the Dark.

Since the ground for validity and/or the nature of and route to some moral hold is unclear, the questioner cannot in the situation give good reasons for the adoption of a particular hold. But it is fair to suppose that the idea of recommendation involves being able to give good reasons for what is recommended. Therefore, the moral question does not express the search for something to recommend, in the manner of questions in Morality of the Light.

That the receiver is another and/or unclear also indicates that the question is not a quest for an ordinary prescription of some hold, for instance, a decision to act. It is surely a quest for something the questioner should be or do, but he/she is not the subject of it, and prescriptions are for agents. If it is not a quest for a prescription for oneself, then it can hardly be a quest for prescription for others. Of course, once an answer has appeared, that may give ground for one's prescribing an application of it – but then one has entered the state of the Light.

If the moral question in the Dark is not a quest for prescription or recommendation of some particular hold, then an eventual answer is not necessarily recommending or prescribing, partially or universally. Further, a person articulating the answer cannot be said to be committing him/herself to it in every situation that is the same in all relevant aspects, because principles specifying the relevant conditions are not there. Moreover, it would be odd for the moral question to be a quest for something one is to commit oneself to, since one isn't a moral agent in regard to its content or actualization.

(7) *The valid hold is thought to be personal.* If I ask, 'How do I stand this?' I am asking a personal question. I am not (directly) interested in how someone

else is to stand something. And if my question would get its answer, this is compatible with other answers being valid for other persons in substantially the same situation. It might be that for many people the same hold is valid, but that would be an empirical coincidence. A moral answer in the Dark does not require or imply universalizability, which is expected of a moral answer in the Light. An aspect of this is that the 'I' of the question, or the answer, cannot be replaced by 'anyone'. The personal character of the moral question and answer renders its morality a uniqueness that is missing in traditional morality. Here is an Existentialist streak, which also comes forth in the import of the question and the anguish with which we pose it.

To sum up, a moral question in the Dark is a more or less articulate but desperate and obscure quest that somehow, through someone or through something, a hold that is valid is to appear. You could say that *the question itself* is the locus of Morality of the Dark (which is not the same as the focus of the question), whereas the answer, with its implied ground in a system of principles and a set of beliefs, together with the enactment of the answer, is the locus of Morality of the Light.

In Morality of the Dark the answer – the valid hold – is something emergent, while in Morality of the Light it is something that the subject produces. Its production, however, appears mainly as an application – of principles, facts, and logic – whereas in Morality of the Dark we hope and appeal for something like a miracle or the creation of a displaced subject.

This difference in locus is reflected in the shift of the character of the moral question. In Morality of the Dark it is just a call – craving, pleading, praying – for the valid hold to appear: 'Yield, please – whatever is valid!' Also, the terms of the moral language are changed, for instance, the agent-oriented distinctions dating from antiquity between 'means' and 'ends' and between 'right' and 'good' are not relevant here.

If I am right about this for the deep level of the Dark, then it can also be assumed that the moral question and answer on a more shallow level of the Dark share, to a considerable degree, many of these deep level traits.

7.

Isn't it absurd to talk about a morality when the locus is in the question, not the answer? when there is no methodology for validating answers? when the person isn't even the subject of the answer?

In order to see better, one has to put aside the glasses of 'science' (or rather, 'normal science', as the philosopher Thomas Kuhn would put it), the rationality of which has set the paradigm for traditional morality. We need to consult other areas, areas which operate in opacity: art and religion.

First, religion. Elie Wiesel tells us in the preface to his play *The Trial of God*³⁵ of three rabbis he saw one winter evening in a camp, holding a trial of God, ending in condemnation – and thereafter rushing off to the evening prayer. This seems illogical, but an explanation could be that they condemned from the point of view of what they understood, but at the same time recognized that God was beyond their understanding. The God they prayed to was this Unknown, impossible to understand.

The thought that 'God' denotes an x , is a common phenomenon in religion. It may be that not only the nature of God is hidden from us, but also that the way to reach union with or life in compliance to God is viewed as unknowable. To find this may require walking in darkness, as many mystics think. We then ignore whether we are waking the right way, or even whether we are in the right

³⁵ Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God*. (New York: Random House, 1979, first published in French, 1978).

confusion: we are in a state of loss and despair in regard to the positive values of religion.

In many religions, as testified by both Judaism and Christianity, being in darkness is even considered part of a fundamental process constitutive of the revelation of religious truths, of salvation. It is further believed that revelation and salvation are not products of Man, results of the exercise of his/her will; rather, they are something bestowed on the person who in him/herself is impotent in this respect. However, a persistent *search* for God and salvation is thought necessary for salvation.

Passing on to art, it is a commonplace that an artist ignores the exact nature and whereabouts of his/her sources of creation. The artist learns to regularly gather from them, but has no conscious access to or control over them. Sometimes the flow disappears, putting her or him in crisis, driving the artist out to a search in darkness. The artist may still do things, for example, paint, but the painting loses the property of being a valid work of art. The artist's 'question' articulates the desire he/she has for artistic achievement, and the 'answer' is (the statement of) the very creation, interpreted as something of unique value. The question, then, is not only an expression of a psychological difficulty but a genuine value-quest in the realm of artistic value. Maybe he/she has had the experience that a valid creation can come at the end of a search in the dark. But there is no technique for success, and the artist knows only afterward, the work done, what the 'answer' is, i.e., what constituted a valid artistic creation in just that situation. A genuine creative achievement then appears to the artist also as something surpassing her or him, a miracle or gift. 'He/she' could not 'choose' or 'produce' the valid artistic creation; strictly of him/herself, he/she is impotent.

An example might be the Russian sixteenth-century painter Andrei Rublyov, as depicted in a film by Andrei Tarkovsky ('Andrei Rublyov', 1969).

Andrei Rublyov gives up painting icons after coming to doubt his art, the world, and God. For many years he wanders around, lives like anybody else, but all the time attentively observing, searching deep down for an answer, the character and consequences of which he ignores. The turning point for him comes after observing a young boy, the son of a builder of church bells, who takes on, directs, and succeeds in building a huge church bell without actually having been taught the art of it. His father died without passing it on to his son. Seeing something in the combination of ignorance, striving, and miracle strikes a chord in Andrei, which makes him 'find' and brings him back to his art. The phenomenon is not restricted to religion and art, it is known from other areas of creation, even science, in the particular phase of crisis and invention.³⁶

Turning back to the Nazi camps, I shall end by relating some instances of Morality of the Dark taken from that area. Bettelheim recounts in his book how "vital self-interest induced me to study my own behavior and the behavior of others I noticed around me."³⁷ It was after about a month in the camp that the idea struck him; the initial phases of the initial shock and the first adaptation to the situation ("in a process that changed both the prisoner's personality and his outlook on life") had passed:

I was deep in the middle of what was the favorite free time activity: exchanging tales of woe and swapping rumors about changes in the camp conditions or possible liberation. There were only minutes, but that did not rule out intense absorption in these conversations. As before on such occasions, I went through many severe mood swings from fervent hope to deepest despair, with the result that I was emotionally drained before the day even began, a day of seventeen

³⁶ See, e.g., A. Alvarez, *Night - An Exploration of Night life, Night Language, Sleep and Dreams* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), and Robert J. Sternberg & Janet E. Davidson, eds., *The Nature of Insight* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

³⁷ Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart*, p. 111.

long hours that would take all my energy to survive it. While swapping tales that morning, it suddenly flashed through my mind, ‘this is driving me crazy,’ and I felt that if I were to go on that way, I would in fact end up ‘crazy’. That was when I decided that rather than be taken in by such rumors I would try to understand what was psychologically behind them.³⁸

Bettelheim says that studying ”was a device that spontaneously suggested itself” to him.³⁹ There are indications in the text that it gave him something he opaquely had asked for, and the realization that here is a valid hold came *after* and not before its occurrence:

Soon I realized that I had found a solution to my main problem: [...] I was able to feel I was doing something constructive and on my own.⁴⁰

This is how Bettelheim describes his answer:

To observe and try to make sense of what I saw was [...] a way of convincing myself that my own life was still of some value, that I had not yet lost all the interests that had once given me self-respect.⁴¹

The finding is not a result of but a partial restoring of moral personality or even moral agency. Bettelheim describes in his book the experiences of other people who in a similar way ‘found’, but where other things seemed to yield the valid hold. It could be almost anything, for instance, discussing stamp collecting. Primo Levi makes the same observation. ”The paths to salvation are

³⁸ Ibid., p. 111f.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 111.

⁴⁰ Ibid., s. 115.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 111.

many, difficult, and improbable”, he says.⁴² (Note Levi’s use of the term ‘salvation’.)

Frankl, who like Bettelheim stresses the presence of free will in all prisoners, gives another example of Morality of the Dark. In a passage he states that persons endowed with a rich spiritual life have a better possibility of enduring life in the camp, and he recounts when one early morning, on the march out from the camp to the daily hardships, someone suddenly mumbles to him: ‘If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don’t know what is happening to us.’⁴³ Triggered by this, the image of Frankl’s wife comes to him, and as he stumbles on, he manages to keep it, with a lively and intense power of imagination such as he has never before experienced. He talks with her, hears her answer, sees her smile:

Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise. A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man through love and in love* [...] I did not know whether my wife was alive [...] but at that moment it ceased to matter.⁴⁴

This appearance of meaning and value Frankl describes not as an outcome of a calculated action of his, but as something *coming* to him. In another situation he relates, the quest for a valid hold preceding the ‘answer’ is more

⁴²Levi, *If This Is a Man*, p. 96.

⁴³ Frankl, *From Death-Camp to Existentialism*, p. 36.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 36 f; original italics.

evident, and here, too, the latter – interpreted as such only after its occurrence – comes as a gift, almost as a religious grace:

The dawn was grey around us[...] I was again conversing with my wife, or perhaps I was struggling to find the reason for my sufferings, my slow dying. In a last violent protest against the hopelessness of imminent death, I sensed my spirit piercing through the enveloping gloom. I felt it transcend that hopeless, meaningless world, and from somewhere I heard a victorious ‘Yes’ in answer to my question of the existence of an ultimate purpose.⁴⁵

Jean Améry remarks rather cynically that similar ‘intoxicated’ experiences were not exceptional among the prisoners. He considers them to be ”profoundly inauthentic, the value of the soul hardly finds support in such states.”⁴⁶ He is wrong in this, as the example of Frankl shows. But Améry’s remark is important for two reasons, first, because it acknowledges the common reality of a quest for ‘the value of the soul’; second, because it shows clearly that it is not the experience itself, but how it is interpreted that counts. Similar feelings, thoughts, or experiences may be regarded as the desired valid hold by some, but not by others. The recognition of something as a valid hold is necessary, and that presupposes a previous quest for a valid hold.

Améry describes having had a permanent high activity of his soul in this situation of terror and imminent death. Through this activity his soul opposed death ”and sought – but in vain, let me say that at once – to establish its dignity.”⁴⁷ Améry’s preconceived answer to his moral quest in the Dark was ‘dignity’, something he admits to be very vague. He did not know how to realize it, and thinks he failed achieving it. However, he found something he did

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

⁴⁶ Améry, *Par-delà le crime et le châtement*, p. 33; my translation.

not seek and would not have predicted: a radical demystification of reality, a stripping from it of esthetic, metaphysical, or ‘philosophical’ inventions.⁴⁸ This he recognized as a minimal value. A minimal but valid hold was thus found in the camp. Maybe this helped him, the ever intellectually curious, to survive. Once freed, he became a distinguished and profound writer.

8.

The idea, then, is that the moral question in the Dark, such as ‘How do I stand this?’ is an opaque but intense quest for value creation, against or beyond reason, directed toward something unknown. Examples from religion and art, as well as some experiences in the Nazi camps, show that we are dealing here with something meaningful and fruitful. How can this be? And what are the consequences for moral philosophy? I want to end with some speculation.

The Dark is not restricted to the situation of the Jews in the Nazi death-camps; it also turns up when we are otherwise impotent or forced, or just at our wits’ end in relation to some problem, for instance an excruciating grief, or our imminent death. It is an ingredient in a normal human life full of shortcoming. I would say that we are in a perpetual sway between the spheres of Light and Dark, depending on the degree of freedom, efficiency, and rationality we have in relation to varying states and events.

Reason is a fairly well known, accessible part of the soul, but not more than a part of it, and a limited one. When our reason fails, we still seek and appeal with all we have, but we seek beyond ourselves. The moral question in the Dark, like the prayer or ritual in religion and the bewildered striving of an artist, can be interpreted as an appeal to, or attempt to enter a certain

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 43; my translation.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p 48.

relationship with, the very depths of the human body and soul – of life itself. This has been theorized in different ways, as the Unconscious, Nature, God, It. Perhaps it is better rendered by an account of the complex working of the vast human brain. However, it is undeniable that the unknown may respond to our quest, and that things are somehow created within us, things we recognize as valid.

We are not in a position to consciously (or rationally) produce or effectuate our moral hold in a state of the Dark. Nevertheless there may be better or worse preparations on our part, giving possibly necessary but not sufficient conditions for a creation of valid hold. It might be favorable, for instance, that our mind is open in a certain way, in order to give place for a creativity of something ‘other’, creativity that possibly yields a hold of value for the seeker. Success in the Dark is possibly also connected with the desperation, wholeheartedness, and energy put into the posing of the moral question.

Since a favorable mentality in situations of the Dark are out of our control once we are there, it ought to be prepared, in normal life, as part of the values to be realized in Morality of the Light. The latter would thereby be radically changed. I think it should also be realized that the premises of Morality of the Light, the rational method and ultimate value judgments, are something created. When we work there, we – like God in Genesis – work in the Dark. That is why moral philosophers have failed to give a rational derivation of ‘ought’ or ‘good’.

Morality of the Dark has been a *missing link* in a tradition of moral philosophy blinded by rationality. Its role has instead been played by simply non-articulate living, or by other ideological currents, in particular religions. Christianity, with its symbol of the crucified Christ, stresses that the individual cannot by his or her own efforts enact salvation, and prepares people’s minds for victimhood and suffering through humility and prayer. Buddhism, with its ever calm, cross-legged guide, can be seen as a way to strengthen mind in the

face of losing, starving, dying – states that are never allowed to be put out of sight.

In philosophy, there are above all the Stoics that have a focus on preparations for suffering and dying, imbuing the mind with indifference to events and states out of our control. This seemed exaggerated for the fit and optimistic, and Stoicism ceased to be interesting to philosophers. But from a perspective of the Dark, it is one of few relevant philosophies.

An advantage of my conceptualization is that it explains, gives place and credit to opponents of the main tradition of Ethics, theoreticians and practitioners of religion and art, as well as existentialists. However, Morality of the Light and Morality of the Dark are not rivals, they are complements and form a whole, like in the Taoist symbol of yin and yang. But in contrast to the latter, there is hardly any sharp dividing line between the halves. Various modes and degrees inside the two kinds of morality seem inevitable.

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Humanities/Prometheus Books, 2000)