The rescued self.
Value experience and the moral conflict
A case study

Roberta De Monticelli

The truth will set you free.
John 8:32

Abstract: This paper addresses the topic of the emotional conflict by presenting a fictional case study, exemplifying the overwhelming force of social pressure on individual consciousness. This is a phenomenon we are well familiar with in the wake of the era of totalitarian states in 20th century Europe, although it seems also to be a structural feature of social life not just limited to totalitarian contexts, as Milgram's and Zimbardo's experiments show. The moral conflict endured by the hero of our narrative displays a rich phenomenology of value experience, revealing an amazing yet essential link between moral courage and intellectual insight. Drawing on some basic tenets of a phenomenological theory of emotional feeling, this paper argues for three distinctively anti-Kantian claims concerning the relations i) between autonomy and moral knowledge, ii) between moral knowledge and social conformism; iii) between morality and individual personality.

Keywords: moral conflict; value experience; social conformism; personhood; phenomenology.

Coleridge defined imagination as "The power to disimprison the soul of fact". At least since Aristotle, literary fiction has served as a laboratory for philosophical inquiry, presenting us, as Aristotle has it, with what is more plausible, or close to the truth, than historical facts, which enjoy at best a contingent, particular truth, as opposed to the necessary and universal ones that concern what is essentially possible.

That's why my study case is a literary one, taken from Vasilij Grossman's *Life and Fate,* this immense epic novel which has rightly been regarded as the 20th century's *War and Peace.*

Life and Fate contains perhaps one of the deepest intuitions about what makes a life worth living that we can find in contemporary literature. That is especially so insofar as it captures an important part of what we have learned from the history of the 20th century and the tragic age of the totalitarian states

ISSN (print) 2281-8618-ETS

in Europe. The intuition I refer to is about truth and freedom, as well as their link. Through the vicissitudes faced by the novel's characters, we learn to see the unity of moral and intellectual freedom, which grow and wane together. There is a kind of harmony, of unity, or at least a deep connection, between moral courage and intellectual vision, between morality and knowledge, what is given to the will and what is given to the intellect, or, again, we could say, between moral and intellectual values or virtues. We might even think of it as the connection between ethics and science (§1).

This is the important discovery that emerges from Grossman's life-long inquiry into the effects of totalitarianism on the individual mind. Because of this link, the lack of political freedom can have devastating effects even at a spiritual level. At the same time, an individual's resistance to the overwhelming force of social pressure on its consciousness may enable that individual to experience the unity I have just introduced – and to grasp it in a blissful experience, as we shall see, comparable to what in a more religious age would be called salvation. This "salvation" – or rather, this rescued selfhood – is what is at stake in the moral conflict we shall examine with Grossman's poetic imagination as our guide (§2).

This moral conflict makes for a deeply interesting case study, for it provides some phenomenological evidence against some of Kant's well-known claims on the subject – or so I shall argue. I shall defend three claims supporting a distinctively anti-Kantian, or anti-constructivist frame of harmony between practical and theoretical reason, between morality and knowledge (§3-§4).

1. *A study case*

My case concerns one of the characters – and in a way Grossman's alter ego – Viktor Pavlovic Shtrum, a physicist working at the top level of nuclear research in Stalin's Soviet Union during World War II. Viktor is, as many other characters of this very choral novel, almost entirely trapped in the twilight of a self-censured consciousness, which is seemingly necessary for survival and acceptance in the intellectual and academic circles of a totalitarian state. But a night comes when he, encouraged by a colleague who breaks the rule of conformity and starts a free conversation, ventures to speak the truth about the arbitrariness and the violence of Soviet ideology, endorsing whole-heartedly his colleague's claims about its cruelty, intolerance, and sectarianism.[1]

[1] "Our Russian humanism has always been cruel, intolerant, sectarian. From Avvakum to Lenin our conception of humanity and freedom has always been partisan and fanatical. It has always mercilessly sacrificed the individual to some abstract idea of humanity" (Grossman 1959: 283).

After a night spent in such risky but deeply relieving anti-Soviet conversations, on his way home, he makes a huge mathematical breakthrough, solving the issues that had hindered his experiments.

Let's start with a quote about this very event – a kind of nocturnal revelation:

> He walked on down the dark, empty street. Suddenly an idea came to him. Immediately, with his whole being, he knew it was true. He had glimpsed a new and improbable explanation for the atomic phenomena that up until now had seemed so hopelessly inexplicable; abysses had suddenly changed into bridges. What clarity and simplicity! This idea was astonishingly graceful and beautiful. It seemed to have given birth to itself – like a white water lily appearing out of the calm darkness of a lake. He gasped, revelling in its beauty…
>
> And how strange, he thought suddenly, that this idea should have come to him when his mind was far away from anything to do with science, when the discussions that so excited him were those of free men, when his words and the words of his friends had been determined only by freedom, by bitter freedom. (Grossman 1959: 290)

Let's attend first to the lyrical, *emotionally charged* tone of this passage, made clear by the central image of the white lily emerging from the depth and darkness of the water. It is a tonality of joy – or rather, of bliss.

What I want to focus on in the present study is precisely this bliss, keeping track of Grossman's prose in so doing. I propose a study of that peacefulness of mind pervading the whole passage. No psychological state is explicitly mentioned. The reader enjoys the object itself of this emotion, from the first person perspective of the main character, Viktor Shtrum, who marvels at the *clarity*, *simplicity*, *gracefulness* and *beauty* of the idea just occurring to him, which he feels to be true, and so feels "with his whole being".

This blissful feeling is surely greater than the deep personal satisfaction of making a great scientific discovery. And it is even greater than that contemplative joy one can experience in catching a glimpse of eternal truths as Aristotle describes it. He speaks of the "actuality of thought" as the highest realization of human life, which we can enjoy like a flash of divine life.

In short, this bliss is not only greater but seems to contain within it these other forms of joy as layers. We must ask, then: What more does this bliss add to such joys?

1.1. Phenomenology of the emotional feeling: first principle

Before we focus on this supplement of *intentional significance* of Shtrum's joy, as we would say in phenomenological jargon, let's summarily reflect on the two other layers just mentioned, which are, undoubtedly, part of the total bliss we are primarily concerned with understanding. These inseparable

components – these "moments", in the phenomenological sense – seem to be 1) the "personal" satisfaction with an achievement or success and 2) the profound admiration of a (supposed) truth that is highly theoretical in character, an admiration which, moreover, is endowed with the epistemic values that the term "beauty" can connote, namely, clarity, simplicity, depth, generality, and relevance.

Such an episode nicely illustrates a basic claim originally put forward by classical phenomenologists (Husserl 1900-1901, Scheler 1916, Stein 1917, Geiger 1921, Hildebrand 1921-22, Hartmann 1926 – to name but a few of them) that has garnered attention more recently among analytical philosophers as well (Mc Dowell 1985; D'Arms and Jacobson 2000; Mulligan 2009; Tappolet 2000, 2011; Goldie 2004). According to this basic principle of a phenomenological theory of emotional sensibility, feeling is essentially a perception of the value-qualities of things, whether positive or negative (De Monticelli 2016).

In order to be phenomenologically correct, the noetic analysis of the pertinent emotional *state* – that state of wonder and gratefulness which I have called bliss – should be complemented by a noematic one, concerning the *object* of the intentional relation. That is, it should contain a description of the specific value-aspects of the discovery announced in the emotional state, as they are presented through that ecstatic state of mind.

A scientific discovery is definitely a valuable thing, but this particular one is extremely important for Shtrum. It is a discovery long strived for, a success which crowns the culmination of great effort and fulfils a desire coinciding with his life's very calling, as Shtrum himself will tell his wife in subsequent pages:

> It's a strange feeling, you know. Whatever may happen to me now, I know deep down in my heart that I haven't lived in vain. Now, for the first time, I'm not afraid of dying. Now! Now that this exists! (Grossman 1959: 349-350)

It is a delight reserved to very few people to achieve the very task one lives to achieve, to actualize what one thinks to be one's life calling. Many people are at least able to devote themselves to an activity through which they can bring about more valuable things than there would have been without them, and do so in different value-spheres, i.e., that of the pleasurable, the useful, beauty, justice, or knowledge. Both aspects – the fulfilling of a personal calling and a relevant increase in the world's positive value in the sphere of knowledge – feature in Shtrum's ecstatic nocturnal revelation. Here we find a peculiar fusion of eudemonism about the good life – taking happiness to be full actualization of one's potential excellence – and the positing of an objective "ought", e.g., the duty to increase the goodness of the world in one realm of value or another, perhaps promoting the good of human knowledge of the fundamental nature of reality.

It is already, then, a deep and complex joy that we have in mind. And yet there is more to it still, as I said above. What more? What further layer of intentional significance can that moment bear?

The further, essential "lived" feature of this experience is made prominent in the second part of Grossman's initial quote, in his report about Shtrum's sudden thought "that this idea should have come to him" as a sort of gift of freedom, as the culmination of his decision to express himself freely with his friends on a quite different matter, namely, on the horrors of Stalin's political trials. It is as if that new dangerous and exciting turn in his life – his ceasing to hide dissent, at least from his own consciousness – had "liberated" his mind from a prison, and not only a "moral" prison, but an epistemic one as well.

This is the intuition about truth and freedom, and their link, which I intimated above as being the core insight of Grossman's novel. We shall try to unpack it in the rest of this paper. Grossman aptly describes the corresponding layer of emotional experience as follows:

> Immediately, with his whole being, he knew it was true.

1.2. Phenomenology of the emotional feeling: second principle

The metaphorical talk of "layers" of emotional lived experience that we have been using needs clarification.

The objective pole of feeling is value – or the value-aspects of things, by virtue of which they count as good or bad. The subjective pole of feeling, too, has its own distinctive characteristics accounting for the peculiarity of such intentional states. Feeling is always a self-revealing experience. That is, value-experience is always self-experience as well, to the extent that it "touches", involves, or concerns us. Doubtless, not all feeling experiences are on a par. There are differences in importance or weight, or, we might say, in value ranking, or in the motivating power of felt goods and evils. This corresponds to the "depth" of the feeling experience, as if values of different rank were felt at different levels of oneself (or as involving a lesser or greater part of oneself), or as if the experience of different values belonged to different layers of sensibility. That idea is aptly described by Scheler:

> There can be no doubt that the facts which are designated in such a finely differentiated language as German by "bliss," ''blissfulness" *[Glückseligkeit],* "being happy" *[Glücklichsein],* "serenity," *[Heiterkeit], "*cheerfulness" [*Fröhlichkeit*], and feelings of "comfort" [*Wohlgefühl*]," "pleasure," and "agreeableness" [*sinnliche Lust und Annehmlichkeit*] are not simply similar types of emotional facts which differ only in terms of their intensities… (Scheler 1973: 330)

Intuitively, we realize that a feeling can touch a person more or less "deeply", depending on *the degree of personal involvement*. Thus for instance, many will find the pleasure of a good massage to be a much less involving feeling than the joy of discovering Shakespeare. No doubt this joy can have *a higher degree of motivational power* than the pleasure of the massage. Indeed, it might even motivate a choice to study English Literature rather than something else, a turn of events with significant consequences for the rest of one's professional life.

Is it possible to give, if not a way to measure depth, at least a rationale for the putative ordering of layers of sensibility touched on in this example, i.e., the pleasure felt in the massage and the joy in reading Shakespeare? What basis is there for this stratification?

I appeal again to Scheler, who offers a powerful suggestion:

> It is, for example, impossible for one to be ''blissful" over happenings *of the same axiological level* that are "disagreeable" to another; the differences in these feelings also seem somehow to require *different axiological states of affairs*. (Scheler 1973: 331, emphasis added)

Let's unpack Scheler's remark. The "depth" of a feeling is proportional to the importance of the values concerned. So, feelings are modes of presence of values *at different levels of an axiological hierarchy*.

Shtrum feels the truth of his discovery *"with his whole being"*. The involvement of the whole person in this *assent* upon recognizing an apparent truth hints at something much more valuable still than the discovery of that particular truth. We can imagine that the unsuccessful experiments occupying Shtrum and his colleagues up to that moment were no less involving or important. What comes to the fore here in particular is a sense of intensified life, of life in its full breadth, life put in relief by the removal of an oppressive weight or liberation from a prison of sorts. This "whole being" is the very same being that I characterized above as undergoing a kind of awakening through the free and passionate conversation precipitating the new insight. Several passages underline this awakening, this feeling of relief and disburden:

> What a wonderful power and clarity there is in speaking one's mind… (Grossman 1959: 288)
>
> What power and clarity lies in the word! In the carefree, unfettered word! The word that is still spoken in spite of all one's fears (Grossman 1959: 289)

The Italian translation even qualifies this carefree word as "*allegra*," as light or inspiring. Indeed, the kind of revelation Shtrum experiences on his way home appears to the reader to be the culminating point of an emergence or upwelling of the consciousness and life *of a self previously buried* as though it

were dead, so to speak. The water-lily emerging out of the darkness of the lake is thus a most fitting image for depicting this kind of rebirth.

The deep significance of this image for the author is made even clearer by its repetition many pages later, this time in the account of Shtrum's revelation to his wife:

> It's a new vision of the nature of the forces within the atom. It's a new principle […] No, it's as though a lily had suddenly blossomed out of still, dark waters […] (Grossman 1969: 350)

2. *Moral versus intellectual freedom*

How is our initial intuition about the link between truth and freedom confirmed by this analysis of Shtrum's moment of ecstatic joy? What does it mean that the mathematical discovery immediately follows that breach of the totalitarian ban on critical thought that had taken place earlier in Shtrum's forthright conversation?

It is of course no merely *mechanical* link that obtains between moral and intellectual freedom, between the courage required to exert freedom of speech and the imagination necessarily involved in that new vision of nature.

There is, rather, an *essential* link between the two things. The thwarted moral freedom brought about by complying with a social ban on critical thought results in a progressive emotional desensitization concerning the sphere covered by the social ban, which is usually the public sphere. Such dulling or blunting of one's emotional sensibility is a sort of flattening of all moral and axiological salience in the environment, potentially culminating at the limit in a sort of apathetic indifference –. This progressive reduction of the emotional life cannot, however, be confined to the public sphere, as Tzvetan Todorov (1991), Czeslaw Milosz (1953) and other critics of the totalitarian mentality have exhaustively shown.

The "captive mind" is a diminished soul. A far-reaching reduction of the whole of one's inner life, and especially of moral experience, a shrinking of the self is experienced under social and political regimes that restrict freedom of speech. That must be one of the reasons why this civil right, together with freedom of religion, has been the first right fought for and secured in early modernity. And this is also the reason why the *Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, adopted during the French Revolution in 1789, contains the remark that "free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man". It seems as though modern mankind is recurrently faced with this truth. It finds expression yet again in the first two of the Four

Freedoms of Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous 1941 speech, which are freedom of speech and freedom of worship. It is as if the very being of a liberal and democratic state had its deepest foundations in the minds of those men and women who were directly exposed to the evidence of the devastating effects that the ban of these two liberties can have on the quality of the lives of individual persons. This is likely to have been the lived experience underlying the words of George Madison:

> No free government, nor the blessings of liberty, can be preserved to any people, but by […] a frequent recurrence to fundamental principles.[2]

Let's return to our study case. The depth of the liberating effect due to the exercise of his freedom explains the sudden relief Shtrum experiences in the course of those nocturnal conversations. It is in a way the restoration of a fully lived life, a restitution of the integrity of his stunted, diminished self, the revival of a long forgotten feeling of being wholly there, being there with "all his being".

This is by no means to be taken as a sufficient condition for a great intellectual breakthrough. I'm not trying to argue that it is a necessary condition either. What I am driving at, instead, is to draw attention to something shared in common by the two experiences, i.e., both by the free conversation and the sudden theoretical insight, although it is instantiated in different degrees of intensity. What I am referring to is that blissful presence of an apparent truth, a presence commanding a wholehearted assent, or even awakening this "whole being" to a new life. What is blissful is this intensified life, this enlarged, deepened mode of being. It is a feeling of being again *oneself*, as if one had suddenly regained *one's true size*, one's *dignity* even.

What is discovered in this emotional experience is one's *value*, that value, exactly, which makes life worth living, despite all the pains life may bring with it. This rejoicing self-discovery, on the other hand, is inseparable from the discovery of an apparent truth about the world – whether that truth be moral or theoretical in nature.

3. *Feeling of being – or the courage to be*

The upshot of our study of Shtrum's blissful experience is that moral and intellectual freedom do have an essential link to each other, albeit through a

[2] The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, now available at https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/USCIS/Office%20of%20Citizenship/Citizenship%20Resource%20Center%20Site/Publications/PDFs/M-654.pdf, p. 55.

third term, namely, a property common to the exercise of both. Both seem to involve a kind of cognitive discovery about the world, which is at the same time a self-discovery. In both cases there is an apparent truth, the knowledge of which is deeply valuable even if for different reasons in each case. In the case of recognizing negative moral facts there is a positive moral value arising from the dispelling of culpable ignorance and, complicity in evil therewith. In the case of cognizing a new, astonishing feature of natural reality there is what we can call an ultimate or intrinsic value, grounded in the fact that theoretical knowledge – or science – can be a life calling, determinative of its task and end as well as what counts as happiness, goodness, or, indeed, even its full perfection. The role played by knowledge here is analogous to the one played by music or poetry in other forms of life.

This powerful passage is the beating heart of the whole novel, presenting us with its core discovery of a kind of harmony between moral courage and intellectual vision, morality and knowledge, or even ethics and science, as I suggested at the start of the paper.

Curiously enough, this page recalls the best known among Immanuel Kant's sayings: "Two things awe me most, the starry sky above me and the moral law within me". These two things are so closely related in the event of Shtrum's discovery as well that it's difficult to resist the idea that Kant's remark was actually present to the mind of Grossman. And yet Kant's philosophy is a paradigm case of the modern dichotomy of ethics and science, the normative and the empirical, values and facts, and, last but not least, *homo noumenon* and *homo phaenomenon*, i.e., the intelligible or metaphysical personality (the soul) and the empirical man. There is far more contrast than harmony between science and morality in the mind of Kant than in that of Shtrum.

In truth, as soon as we bring this contrast into focus, we realize that it would be impossible to make sense of Shtrum's experience within a Kantian frame of thought. The story of Shtrum gives us a quite intuitive counterexample to the main tenets of Kantian deontology, a counterexample that holds up even against popular contemporary forms of normative constructivism. I shall sum up my anti-Kantian argument in three points.

1) The dependence relation between autonomy and moral knowledge turns out to run in the opposite direction than Kant thought it did. Autonomy is not the source, but the result of moral knowledge, contrary to Kantian deontology.
2) There is an inverse relation between moral knowledge and social conformism, exposing a possible dark side of Kantian universalism.

3) The experience of value(s) and self-discovery are inseparable, contrary to Kant's idea of personhood as the bearer of purely universal reasons, as opposed to individual personality.

These claims receive support from the phenomenology of value experience, which we could further develop on the intuitive basis of our case study. The argument is a purely phenomenological one. It is what any deep moral conflict between the forces of social conformism within us and value experience teaches us.

3.1. Autonomy and value experience

Consider the episode of Shtrum exerting moral courage to dissent and how he comes to recognize his own capacity for critical thought and how morally fraught it is to comply with the totalitarian ban on free speech. One might think that this heightened moral consciousness is the virtuous consequence of an act of autonomy, the exercise of moral freedom, in breaching the interdiction against free and open discourse. Shtrum may seem to act autonomously, in the Kantian sense, or for purely moral reasons, independently of any desire for survival and security and against his fear and his interest. If he had, Kant would be right: Nothing but the free initiative to express dissent, according to the moral law, independently of the consequence on the dissenter and of his natural fear, would have brought Shtrum to have moral knowledge. In short, autonomy would be the source of moral knowledge, as Kant's deontology claims, and not *vice versa*.

But this reading of the episode proves utterly inadequate, for it neglects a crucial detail: Shtrum is not the initiator of his free and open conversation. His engagement in it is at first driven by a pleasure he feels in opposing Sokolov, the defender of orthodoxy, whose wife, Mar'ja Ivanovna, admires his courage. Finding himself to be the object of such admiration, and further spurred by the feeling of deep agreement he has concerning the critical remarks of the other colleagues who had started the conversation, he is suddenly revitalized and filled with a new courage. This development brings to light a recurrent theme of Grossman's, namely, the theme of inter-subjectivity and elective affinities.

> There were people in whose presence Viktor found it hard to say even one word; his voice would go wooden and the conversation would become grey and colourless – as though they were both deaf-mute. There were people in whose presence even one sincere word sounded false. And there were old friends in whose presence he felt peculiarly alone.
>
> What was the reason for all this? Why is it that you occasionally meet someone – a travelling companion, a man sleeping next to you in a camp, someone who joins in a

chance argument – in whose presence your inner world suddenly ceases to be mute and isolated? (Grossman 1959: 272)

Here we have another paradoxical discovery of Grossman's. Despite the need to be accepted and integrated into a collective "we", it is precisely inner muteness and even a feeling of isolation that typically go along with the social conformism of "the captive mind". Grossman's novel deepens the classic analyses of the self-censuring attitude we know so well from the writing of Czeslaw Milosz, TzvetanTodorov, Primo Levi and others. Inner muteness and moral blindness or obtuseness go together, and they are fostered by a diminished self-esteem – a point that Hannah Arendt also happens to underline. "Who am I to judge?" is the familiar excuse for the moral subject's acts of self-destitution. Here Grossman's words are again quite helpful, with the illuminating distinction he makes between physical fear and fear of social blame, or social anxiety. In a conversation reported by his daughter, Grossman seems to have said:

> As there are two sorts of courage, so …I think we must distinguish two sorts of fear: a physical one, which is a fear of death, and a moral one, which is a fear to behave blamefully in the eyes of the others. (Grossman 2015: 397)

This remark explains why moral courage cannot be promoted by just anything that happens to increase self-esteem and diminish social anxiety, but only by those interpersonal encounters that work to revive your "inner world", as Grossman would say, that is, your *value experience*, dispelling inner muteness and self-blame therewith. Hence the language used by Grossman to depict the new life of Shtrum, the verbiage used to qualify free speech as experienced by Shtrum with attributes of both epistemic and moral value and, in particular, words such as "clarity" and "force" (see above, §1).

We may then conclude concerning our first claim that this experience, one that is both cognitive and moral, is a *value experience* and indeed the very source of a renewed moral freedom or autonomy, reversing the order of these phenomena as they are represented in Kant's deontology.

3.2. Moral knowledge and social conformism

The argument we introduced about social anxiety, though, needs further development. This brings us to our second anti-Kantian point, concerning the inverse relation between moral knowledge and social conformism.

There is a fact about social life that the tragic experience of twentieth century totalitarianisms has brought to our awareness. It concerns the astonishing fragility of the individual moral consciousness under the force of social pressure, a fact studied both by philosophers and the already-quoted writers

(Milosz 1953, Arendt, Todorov, Levi), as well as by experimental researchers (Milgram 1974, Zimbardo 2007).[3]

And this is certainly a major theme in Grossman's novels as well, adverting us to an experience lived from within, as another text from *Life and Fate* – expressed once more in the words of Grossman's alter ego, Viktor Shtrum – makes clear:

> But an invisible force was crushing him. He could feel its weight, its hypnotic power; it was forcing him to think as it wanted, to write as it dictated. This force was inside him: it could dissolve his will and cause his heart to stop beating […] Only people who have never felt such a force themselves can be surprised that others submit to it. Those who have felt it, on the other hand, feel astonished that a man can rebel against it even for a moment – with one sudden word of anger, one timid gesture of protest. (Grossman 1959: 656).

Let's formulate our general claim concerning the inverse relation between moral knowledge and social conformism:

> 2) Moral knowledge and its epistemic ground, axiological sensibility, are impaired by social conformism, a state of affairs that is part of the structure of social life and that is not limited only to totalitarian contexts – as Milgram's and Zimbardo's experiments show.

Now, a phenomenology of value experience spurs real progress in our knowledge of this fact. The astonishing power of social pressure on the individual consciousness is by no means a peculiarity of totalitarian or authoritarian societies. Only the means of realizing this social pressure vary depending on the peculiar social and political organization of a community, and these means differ as well depending on the character of particular social situations, i.e., those marked by terror, faith, ideology, loyalty, confidence in authority, or even simple material advantage of some sort for those who

[3] In Milgram's famous experiments the subjects are told that the experiment is about correlating learning performance and punishment. The subjects are asked to push buttons which are supposed to activate electric shocks of various degrees from a minimum one to one of intense pain, where the shocks always correspond to a failure in performance. The supposed "learning" subjects are of course actors collaborating with the team, and express pain to various degrees, up to apparent agony. The real subjects, believing themselves to be cooperating in scientific research, comply with the directions they are given – "go ahead, the learning subjects are under medical control" – faithfully, to a quite extreme point. Zimbardo's experiments involve games where the tested subjects play the police in a setting that gives them power over the life and death of other (apparent) subjects who play criminals in the experiment, and the statistical percentage of subjects complying with extreme cruelty in the experiment are about the same as in Milgram's experiment.

submit. The reason for the relative independence of the core phenomenon, the power of social pressure, lies in the fact that all these different means operate by undermining the individual person's moral authority. Whatever enervates and diminishes individual moral personality in a subject increases the "invisible power" of social pressure on that subject.

Totalitarian regimes are deliberately organized to weaken individual personalities. But other social arrangements can produce the same result, even with democratic means. A typical one, well known to Italians, is the mechanism of public corruption, whereby material advantages and prestige are disproportionately distributed to the family - or enlarged family – of the corrupted public officials, and where certain groups are allowed private use of public resources. Yet another force undermining the moral personality of the individual is the mechanism of "mimetic desire", encouraged by market societies. And we could go on enumerating such means.[4]

On the other hand, the whole phenomenological analysis we have gone through indicates that there is an essential correlation between moral courage, or independence of moral judgement, and degree of individuation. Whatever enhances individuation increases moral courage and diminishes the "invisible power" of social pressure. This point needs further clarification.

3.3. Personhood and individual personality

How is moral universalism related to the flourishing of an individual personality? Isn't the enhancement of individual moral personality a form of particularism? How is it compatible with moral universalism?

Answering this question amounts to arguing in favour of our third claim:

> 3) The experience of value(s) and self-discovery, or assessment of one's individual personality, are inseparable, contrary to Kant's view of personhood as the faculty of (practical) reason, which remains unaffected by its individual embodiment.

Personhood, according to Kant, is what makes the human individual a moral subject, a bearer of autonomy. What is autonomy for Kant? A capacity for self-obligation, that is, an ability to endorse reasons just because they

[4] As Max Scheler aptly noticed a century ago, the rational, profit-maximizing individual of economic liberalism operates within a sphere of values – the ones constituting consumer goods – relative to which any differences in the preferences of individual persons tend to be minimized and their behaviours thereby made more uniform. This should not be surprising, since, after all, different moral personalities more or less share their biological and social needs (Scheler 1974: 510).

are ones that anybody would approve as reasons for action, even when such reasons run contrary to one's own particular reasons. Therefore, personhood has nothing to do with individual personality, which is, on the contrary, the bearer of particularism, self-interest and, hence, Kant thinks, heteronomy.

But consider: what is the difference between really universal reasons – reasons that everybody ought to approve – and reasons which just happen to be factually endorsed by everybody in a given community? In principle, the difference is an abyss, the abyss separating moral obligation from social conformism. But how can the individual person tell the difference? Of course, she is supposed to possess this capacity, for possessing this capacity is exactly what being a moral subject consists in. And yet, it's not at all clear how Immanuel Kant could answer the standard question put forward in moments of resignation or moral abdication by the moral subject, "Who am I to judge?".

He has no access to the obvious reply: *Verify with your eyes*, or, rather, with your heart. For whenever "material" values, that is, axiological *contents,* strike the affective sensibility of the embodied person, contingency, self-interest, and heteronomy compromise their value judgment, or so Kant would claim.

On the other hand, consider, why should you accept the idea that the individual personality is just an accidental mix of natural and social forces, which the moral subject ought to slough off insofar as these affect its will? Can a peculiar feature of Shtrum's individual identity, such as his passion for theoretical physics or his love for Chekhov (Shtrum's favorite author), necessarily only prompt acting out of self-interest or particularism? Is the free and open conversation that breaches his conformism less morally courageous, just because it brings Shtrum's deeper individual self to life?

By way of conclusion, it now appears doubtful that acting for moral reasons necessarily means giving up one's individual personality, and it seems evident that in most cases of genuine moral courage, so acting may even rescue it from ruin or oblivion. An individual nature – an individual calling, we might also say – is not necessarily in conflict with moral universalism.

4. *Moral conflict and the rescue of the self*

The third and final of our anti-Kantian claims opens up for us an ultimate insight concerning authentic moral conflict, and this will be the end of our brief phenomenology of value experience, allowing us to close the circle and return to the blissful joy with which we began.

Shtrum was in fact able to complete his work, corroborating his new theory empirically. A new vision of nature entailed by the novel theory exists at

last, a new piece of fundamental knowledge has been brought into the world. In Moscow, however, the higher-ups begin to criticize his discoveries as being anti-Leninist and attack his Jewish identity. Viktor is required to publicly "repent", the alternative being his forced resignation or worse. He enters a period of deep internal struggle and ultimately refuses submission and self-humiliation.

It is a real moral conflict, because Viktor is unsure whether he is *not* at fault after all, or whether that "invisible force" of the drive to "repent" *ought* to be resisted. It is not for him to judge, as it were. During the entire struggle he is in that state of inner muteness we described earlier.

Let's just heed the final outcome of his self-agonising oscillation:

> Everything had been resolved. All that remained was to get to the Institute as quickly as possible, leave his coat in the cloakroom, enter the hall, hear the excited whispering of dozens of people, look 'round the familiar faces and say: "A word if you please. Comrades, I wish to share with you my thoughts and feelings of the last few days…".
>
> But at the same moment, Viktor took off his jacket and hung it on the back of a chair. He took off his tie, folded it and placed it on the edge of the table. He then sat down and began unlacing his shoes.
>
> He felt a sense of lightness and purity. He felt calm and thoughtful. He didn't believe in God, but somehow it was as though God was looking at him. Never in his life had he felt such happiness, such humility. Nothing on earth could take away his sense of rightness now. (Grossman 1959: 697).

The final move is an act of surrender. A surrender not to the invisible force, though, but to himself – to his self in its entirety, including its deepest depths. Viktor's dignity, autonomy, and morality are rescued in this act of self-surrender to his deepest reasons for living, represented concretely in his working desk, his own home. That which resists all social conventions, jacket and tie included, turns out to be at the same time the only force capable of resisting individual de-personalization. Universalism, or pseudo-universalism, has turned into a living nightmare, the devastation of the individual person.

In the final lyrical moment in the resolution of Shtrum's internal conflict, the tonal theme, the melodic key announced at the beginning, can be plainly heard– the blissful, ecstatic peace in face of a liberating truth strikes a resounding chord. We see the white water-lily emerging from the dark water. And the words Viktor used to describe his discovery come to mind again:

> It's a new vision of the nature of the forces within the atom. It's a new principle… (Grossman 1959: 350).

Within the atom? Or within ourselves? Maybe the lily suddenly blossoming out of the dark water is the image of the "new vision" Grossman, the alter ego of Viktor Shtrum, had to give us.

Roberta De Monticelli
San Raffaele University, Milan
demonticelli.roberta@unisr.it

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