

How Are Moral Conversions Possible?

The hopeful among us would like to believe in the possibility of moral conversion.¹ I discuss here what warrant there is for hope. By a “moral conversion,” I mean a significant change for the better in an adult’s moral commitments and actions, most typically a change from an unremarkable or poor moral record to an admirable one. Such conversions are often construed as triggered by an experience or series of experiences that reveals to the agent something he had not seen or felt before. I use the term ‘conversion’ with full awareness that it might suggest to some a parallel to religious conversion. I accept a parallel insofar as a moral conversion brings about a dramatic transformation in the way the agent construes the meaning of his life. I do not mean to suggest other parallels that might be drawn, based on the experience of some during religious conversion that they are taken, without any intention or deliberateness on their part, by something much greater than themselves, in a way that defies naturalistic explanation by appeal psychology or other human sciences. My approach is to ask whether moral conversions, as I have defined them, really happen, and to ask how they happen if they do. These two questions are tied together. Whether we think such conversions happen depends on whether we think we have a plausible conception of how they happen. The occurrence of moral conversions cannot be recorded as matters of objective observation, independently of what we think the agent’s motivations were and how they changed. And most cases of apparent or possible conversion are subject to multiple interpretations of the agent’s motivations and of what, if any, change occurred.

I will examine three cases of apparent moral conversion, engage in the interpretation of the agents' motives, and draw some speculative conclusions about moral conversion. The first case is from a film about a fictional drab functionary of the East German regime who ends up trying to save the people he is assigned to spy upon. The film expresses our very human hopes for the possibility of conversion, but I shall discuss questions that critics have raised about its plausibility. My discussion shall lead to the second case: the real-life story of Oskar Schindler, who is credited with saving the lives of over a thousand Jews during the Nazi occupation of Poland. Schindler's conversion highlights the effects of repeated exposure to evil and the way his independence from authority structures, together with his charming and roguish character, may have suited him for the role of deceiving, cajoling, and bribing Nazi officials in order to save lives. The third is about a leader of the Ku Klux Klan who improbably worked and became friends with a militant black activist during the desegregation of the Durham, North Carolina public schools. The Klan leader's desire for social acceptance, independence of mind and fundamental decency (and I am very surprised to be writing these words!) play a key role in his conversion. I will weave reflections taken from these works with theoretical and empirical work on the nature of emotion and its relation to cognitive and perceptual capacities. We may not know enough to draw definitive conclusions about the possibility of moral conversion and how it works, but there is enough for some speculation that bears further investigation.

1. A fictional Stasi man

The recent film *The Lives of Others* is about Gerd Wiesler, who works for the Stasi, the secret police of East Germany. Wiesler is assigned to find incriminating

material on a prominent playwright and a distinguished actress who is the playwright's lover. He listens to their conversations, telephone calls, and lovemaking. Gradually he undergoes a transformation and tries to protect the couple from exposure to his own organization. We are left to infer what could have brought about such a change. Wiesler is depicted as a tightly self-controlled, by-the-book functionary who believes in the necessity and importance of his job. However, he learns that a government official requested his assignment to the case so that the official can have the playwright's lover for himself. The result for Wiesler is disillusionment with the Stasi and with his own role as the cat's paw of a powerful man motivated by nothing more than grubby lust. He appears to be an excruciatingly lonely man with an eroding rationale for the job that gave purpose to his life. In this condition, it appears plausible that he is moved by the purpose of the people he is assigned spy upon. The imagined case of Wiesler illustrates clearly that aspect of moral conversion that parallels religious conversion: one who has lost the only thing that gave meaning to his life finds new meaning in protecting those who are living out an alternative to the ideology of the regime. He eavesdrops on the playing of a "Sonata for a Good Man," of which it is said that no one who really listens to it cannot be but a good man, and he comes to have feelings for the actress that are mixed with the instinct to comfort and protect her. In the end, his efforts to protect the couple end very badly for the actress, but the playwright discovers Wiesler's efforts to protect them when the East German regime collapses and Stasi surveillance records are made available to their victims. The film ends with Wiesler finding a book written by the playwright, dedicated to a "Good Man." When asked by the clerk whether he wants the book wrapped as a gift, Wiesler smiles and says, "It's for me."

An author of a book on the Stasi, Anna Funder, argues in an essay on the film that it is a beautiful fantasy that could not have happened. One of her reasons is that totalitarian systems control their own agents through internal surveillance and division of tasks. Rather than assigning surveillance to a primary agent and a subordinate, as depicted in the film, the assignment is to many agents, each of whom is charged only with a piece of the total operation; each piece of information is checked and cross-checked. No individual Stasi agent could have fooled the system in the way Wiesler did. Another of Funder's reasons for thinking the movie's events impossible is that in her experience no Stasi man ever wanted to save people from the system. Institutional coercion made them all into "true believers; it shrank their consciences and heightened their tolerance for injustice and cruelty 'for the cause'." The director of the film, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, responded to such criticisms by saying that he did not want to tell a true story but rather to express belief in humanity and explore how someone might have behaved. In his "Director's statement" that accompanied press releases for the film, Donnersmarck wrote, "More than anything else, *The Lives of Others* is a human drama about the ability of human beings to do the right thing, no matter how far they have gone down the wrong path." Funder replied: "This is an uplifting thought. But what is more likely to save us from going down the wrong path again is recognising how human beings can be trained and forced into faceless systems of oppression, in which conscience is extinguished." Von Donnersmarck cited *Schindler's List* as a justification for his own film. But Funder quotes Dr. Hubertus Knabe, director of the memorial museum about the former East German regime, as commenting, "There was a Schindler. There was no Wiesler."²

The factors that Funder cites indeed seem to reduce the possibility of a real-life Wiesler, and they are not unrelated. The coercive, diminishing effects of an institution like the Stasi is heightened by mechanisms that reduce knowledge of what one is really doing, and at the same time, exacts a high cost on indulging one's curiosity. Even the relatively optimistic movie portrays an incident about the constant vigilance for the wrong attitudes that pervaded the Stasi agency. An agent, in a relaxed, joking moment, starts to tell a joke about the government. When he hesitates upon realizing that a superior is listening, he is encouraged to finish the joke and is made to feel that it all will be taken in good humor. The viewer later finds out that the joke was really on the agent when he and a by-then disgraced Wiesler find themselves together in the basement of a Stasi building, performing the mindless task of steaming envelopes open.

Work in psychology on the influence of situations on individuals' behavior would seem to support the pessimistic side of the argument about *The Lives of Others*. Subjects of the famous Milgram experiments were led to believe that they were taking part in an investigation of the effects of escalating electric shocks administered to a "learner" (who was hired by the experimenters to play the role) every time he gave a wrong answer to a test of learning and memory. The shocks were not real, but the learner, who deliberately kept making mistakes, acted as if the shocks were real and increasingly painful, up to voltage levels marked "danger: severe shock" and "xxx." In Milgram's first set of experiments, 65 percent of experiment participants administered the maximum voltage shock, though many were extremely uncomfortable doing so; at some point, every participant paused and questioned the experiment, some said they would refund the money they were paid for participating in the experiment. Only one participant

steadfastly refused to administer shocks before the 300-volt level. Milgram gives a revealing summary of the experiment:

I set up a simple experiment at Yale University to test how much pain an ordinary citizen would inflict on another person simply because he was ordered to by an experimental scientist. Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' [participants'] strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' [participants'] ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation.

Ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patently clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.³

More recently, in Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison experiment, Stanford undergraduates played the roles of prisoners and guards in a mock prison. The students quickly internalized their roles to the extent that one-third of the "guards" were judged to have exhibited genuine sadistic tendencies and many "prisoners" suffered emotional trauma. Zimbardo ended the experiment early, but only after a graduate student (who was later to become his wife) voiced strenuous moral objections to the experiment. The similarities between the experiment and the torture and abuse that occurred in Abu

Ghraib during the Iraq War were not lost on Zimbardo, who testified in defense of one of the prosecuted prison guards.⁴

Some philosophers have used studies such as the Milgram and Stanford Prison experiments to question the viability of traditional ethical ideals of cultivating a stable good character. They argue that human character traits are liable to be extremely situation-sensitive and hence that our ethical behavior is highly dependent on having the right sort of context.⁵ But there were subjects in the Milgram experiment who disobeyed the authority figure, and student “guards” in the Stanford experiment who did not behave sadistically. Milgram himself offered an explanation of the unexpected frequency of compliance to authority in his experiments, which was the adaptive value of the capacity to fit into social hierarchy. This capacity, on Milgram’s view, is activated when a person is placed under certain circumstances; e.g., perception of a legitimate authority that seems relevant to the situation at hand (an experimenter in a white lab coat who greets participants in the experiment and explains what is to be done), the absence of a competing authority, and entry into the authority system (entry into a laboratory, a space the experimenter seems to “own”).⁶ Contrary to the radical situationist claim that there are no character traits,⁷ Milgram’s own explanation of the willingness to administer painful and apparently dangerous electric shocks suggests a kind of trait that evolutionary theory might lead us to expect in human beings. The trait of willingness to fit into a social hierarchy is activated under certain kinds of conditions, and understanding those conditions might lead us to a greater understanding of why some people disobeyed the experimenter and stopped administering shocks to the “bad” learner.

The one person who disobeyed and stopped before administering 300 volts is vividly portrayed as an extremely fastidious, crusty instructor of the “Old Testament” at a major divinity school. He is one of the few to question the experimenter’s claim that it is “absolutely essential” to go on administering the shocks and that there would be “no permanent tissue damage” to the “learner.” Moreover, he does not so much question the necessity of obedience to some authority, but at one point declares that he will “take orders” from the “learner” to stop, and when he later is told the point of the experiment and is asked how most effectively to strengthen resistance to inhumane authority, he answers that taking God as the ultimate authority will trivialize human authority.⁸ Indeed, in reading Milgram’s various portraits of particular people who disobeyed and stopped and those who obeyed to the end, I am struck both by what they have in common, which is a tendency to comply with authority under the right conditions, and by the individuality that allows those who obey to the end to obey in different ways and with different attitudes to what they have done, and by the individuality that allows others to resist and to stop administering shocks at various points in the learning trials. The individual enters into the explanation as soon as we inquire into why obedience or why disobedience. It cannot all be the situation, for the situation is a relatively crude factor that is filtered through the perceptions of the individual and that interacts with the individual’s temperament and traits. The situationists may be right in holding that there are very few “global” character traits that hold over the widest variety of situations, but the individual does carry into this variety tendencies that are more likely to be activated given this or that kind of situation. There are at the very least such “local” character traits

that crucially go into the explanation of what an individual thinks, feels, and decides to do.

The debate over the plausibility of *The Lives of Others*, however, draws attention to the importance of how situations *interact* with character traits and how they might constrain action that might otherwise follow from certain traits. Recall Funder's point that institutional coercion "shrank" the consciences of Stasi agents to the extent that she never encountered one who ever wanted to save people from the system. That institutional coercion was especially potent in its effect on agents in whom the motivation to fit into social hierarchy was already strong. And for those agents in whom the motivation was weaker, the internal surveillance of the Stasi agency provided the incentive of self-preservation.

The urge to fit into social hierarchy can result in a lot of good. In a study of those who rescued Jews in Holland and France during the Second World War, Michael Gross emphasizes the factors of organization, material support, and supporting social networks as necessary for sustaining rescue attempts, which in Western Europe were generally collective rather than purely individual efforts.⁹ The historical record of such attempts reveals the key role of strong clerical and secular leaders who relied on their perceived legitimate authority to persuade and cajole prospective participants in Jewish rescue. Gross found that rescue leaders in Holland attributed their success to the generate climate of trust in villages that eliminated the presence of traitors and the material resources available to reimburse villagers for their expenses. Both factors reduced the cost of action.

Situational factors, then, condition and constrain individual choice, motivation, and action, for good and evil. But the Milgram experiment, while suggesting the power of authority structures over many people, also reveals that not everyone is equally susceptible. As Hubertus Knabe observed, there was a Schindler, even if there was no Wiesler. It is a pity that the real is so often ambiguous and hard to read.

2. A real Schindler who must nevertheless be interpreted

The difficulty of overcoming oppressive structures that shrink the consciences of people who might otherwise experience a moral conversion increases one's interest in the actual story of Schindler, which became widely known through the novel *Schindler's Ark* (later republished as *Schindler's List*) by Thomas Keneally and then later made into a Hollywood movie. Keneally draws heavily from the remembrances of the people who were saved by or knew Schindler as well as from Schindler's own accounts of the period, but even light fictionalization raises the question of much the novel reveals the inner life and motivation of Schindler. A massive study by the historian David M. Crowe provides additional information.¹⁰ In what follows, I want to engage in some (what I hope is) informed speculation as to what happened to Schindler to prompt what he did in saving one thousand Jews.

Schindler was the son of a heavy-drinking, abusive father who eventually left his wife and family for another woman. Schindler detested his father, but became himself a heavy-drinking womanizer who deceived his wife Emilie and had one and possibly two children with another woman.¹¹ Significantly, Emilie always admired his kindness and willingness to help others. Schindler's family was Sudeten (Southern) German, and lived near Czechoslovakia. Keneally reports that Schindler grew up in a multiethnic

neighborhood, next door to the family of Reform or liberal rabbi, and was a playmate to the rabbi's two sons.¹²

Sudeten Germans who lived in Czechoslovakia constituted a significant cultural and political presence, many of them supporting pro-Nazi parties in that country. Schindler became an agent for Abwehr, the counterespionage and counterintelligence branch of the Wehrmacht (the German armed forces in Nazi Germany from 1935 to 1945). Abwehr made contact with Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia and established a network of agents in the country. However, the German stance toward and activities in Czechoslovakia before the Second World War were far from unified. Tensions and antagonisms among certain groups in the German military such as Abwehr, on the one hand, and the German SD or Security Service, and the Gestapo or Secret State Police, on the other hand, played out in their actions toward a pro-Nazi Czech political party, the SdP. Abwehr backed the “traditionalists” in that party who initially professed the intention to work within the Czech political system to protect the interests of Sudeten Germans. The SD and Gestapo supported the radicals in the SdP who favored union of the Sudeten German areas in Czechoslovakia with Germany. Schindler seems not to have had any strong political convictions about these matters. He became involved with Abwehr initially through a liaison with a woman, and then later for the money. As an Abwehr agent he grew to distrust the SD and the Gestapo and yet learned to work with them because of their intelligence capabilities in the country. He acquired ties with anti-Hitler Abwehr officers, including the deputy of the head of Abwehr, who was very much like Schindler: elegant, dapper, daring, without fear, agile, and lacking caution.

Schindler moved to Kraków in Poland to make his fortune at the start of World War II, soon acquired an Enamelware factory and landed contracts to produce mess kits for the war effort. He also aimed to make massive amounts of money in the black market economy of occupied Poland. At the beginning of the war Schindler was a hard-drinking womanizer with an impressive set of skills for knowing the right people and the right way to wheel and deal. He took lovers, and though he lied to and deceived his wife about his affairs, he did not bother to make that much of an effort at concealing them. At the end of war, he was still the same Schindler but had taken great personal risks and had used his talents and connections, his "friendships" with various and sundry SS officers, and his ability to know whom to bribe to remove Jews from the concentration camp Plaszow for work and protection at his factory.

The contrast with Wiesler the fictional Staasi agent is provocative. Whereas Wiesler is an exemplar of the gray organization man, Schindler was a rule-bender. He was a man equipped to deal with the structures of German occupation of Poland, but he was not a creature of that structure. He had the skills to manipulate actors within these structures, and this may have exempted him from many of the coercive, diminishing effects to which Staasi agents were subject, even, or perhaps especially, those with the potential to question what they were doing. Very likely, his ambiguous relationship with the SD and Gestapo in Czechoslovakia before the war had equipped him not only with contacts but also cultivated or strengthened his disposition to distrust and at the same time work within structures of power. In Milgram's terms, while Schindler "entered" the German authority structures in Poland, he had never slipped fully into its grip but rather maneuvered around inside it and made deals. Schindler's talent for bending rules also

came in handy when it came to bribing SS officials to remove Jews from the concentration camp Plaszow for work and protection at his factory. Perhaps no one but a charming rogue could have done what Schindler did, in the way he did it.

Yet how did he come to save a thousand Jews? Initially, he hired Jewish workers because they were cheaper than non-Jewish Polish workers. Then he hired still more because they proved to be reliable and efficient. Later, Crowe describes how Schindler's motives appeared to shift.

He convinced the monstrous Amon Göth, the commandant of the Plaszów forced labor camp, to allow him to build a sub-camp with barracks and other facilities for his Jewish workers. Schindler even provided housing for 450 Jewish workers from nearby German factories. He became the protector of his Jewish workers, keeping them healthy and well fed. When other factory owners began to shut down their factories and return to the Reich with their profits in the face of the westward march of Stalin's Red Army, Schindler arranged to open a new sub-camp and factory, Brünnlitz, near his home town of Svitay, where he employed over 1,000 Jewish workers, most of whom survived the war.¹³

By the time Schindler began to plan this transfer to Brünnlitz, Crowe writes, he was fully committed to saving not only the workers from his own factory but also those from other factories. Crowe states that it is difficult to pinpoint a moment when Schindler's sole or primary motivation was to protect his Jewish workers.¹⁴

Keneally constructs a dramatic moment to portray Schindler's conversion. He views the liquidation of the Kraków ghetto from atop an adjacent hill. A toddler dressed

in red compels Schindler's attention. A guard gently corrects her wandering path and nudges her back into line, but other soldiers are shooting women and children on the sidewalk. Schindler watches a mother and a young boy retreat from the slaughter under a windowsill, and with intolerable fear for them and "terror in his blood" watches soldiers execute them.

At last Schindler slithered from his horse, tripped, and found himself on his knees hugging the trunk of a pine tree. The urge to throw up his excellent breakfast was, he sensed, to be suppressed, for he suspected it meant that all his cunning body was doing was making room to digest the horrors of Krakusa Street.

Later in the day, after he had absorbed a ration of brandy, Oscar understood ... they permitted witnesses, such witnesses as the red toddler, because they believed all the witnesses would perish too ... "¹⁵

Though Keneally's description of this dramatic moment is fictional, it shows a good novelist's sense for how human beings are deeply affected by traumatic events. Consider recent work in psychology and neuroscience suggesting a two-track model of the way human beings process and react to information about their environments. Both tracks can appear in the complex process of having an emotion. One track enables human beings to process information very quickly and beneath the level of consciousness.¹⁶ Emotions very often involve this fast processing, which takes the form of an assessment or appraisal of something or someone in terms of what matters to the agent (consider fear of an animal or anger at another person), along with changes in

physiological state such as motor activity (facial expression), autonomic nervous system changes (quickenning of pulse, changes in blood pressure) that serve as signals to others (“I am not a threat” or “back off!”) and/or as preparation for appropriate action (flight or fight).

However, a slower, deliberate, and conscious mode of processing can occur in the process of having an emotion. It can take place subsequent to the initial fast response to something or someone, and can result in a reappraisal of the object of emotion, in the form of specific discriminations of the way or the degree to which the object is something to be feared, for example. It may involve complex forms of reflection involving the self (“Why am I feeling this way?” or “What’s out there that’s causing me to react like this?”). This slower track can result in conscious choice of a mode of action or a modification of the mode of action that is tightly connected to the fast response (an involuntary startle response to a loud bang may lead to an auditory and visual scanning of the environment for possible sources of threat and to a decision to take cover).

Keneally’s description of Schinder’s watching the slaughter with “terror in his blood” and then slithering down from his horse to hug a tree, ready to throw up his breakfast is a vivid way to convey the bodily response to an event with such horrifying emotional impact. His reluctance to yield to the urge to throw up is a reluctance to absorb more of the horror into his body. And the description of Schindler’s subsequent, more reflective assessment of what he saw illustrates Jenefer Robinson’s point that an emotion is typically a process extended over time¹⁷ and that the initial affective bodily response may serve to focus attention on the apparent cause and to reassess its significance—in this case that the slaughter will be ongoing and unrelenting.

Consider in this regard Antonio Damasio's well-known proposal that efficacious rational decision-making with personal and social import (i.e., judging what to do in matters that affect one's welfare and that of others, and then acting on one's judgment, as opposed, say, to simply making a judgment as to what is to be done in a hypothetical situation with no practical decision in the offing) requires an emotional component.¹⁸ This component is based on the feeling of bodily changes, a "somatic marker," that gets associated with representations of scenarios that pose possible courses of action. For example, Damasio asks you to imagine being a business owner who must decide to meet with a possible client. The possible client can bring valuable business but also is the archenemy of your best friend. In considering whether to meet or not, multiple imaginary scenes flash in and out of your imagination: being seen in the client's company by your best friend and placing your friendship in jeopardy; not meeting and preserving the friendship, and so forth. Damasio's view is that you resolve the impasse not by performing a cost/benefit calculation on the available action options, but by responding to the gut feelings you experience, say, when you imagine your friend's face as he sees you with his archenemy.¹⁹ The association of these gut feelings with imagined scenarios is a product of your individual learning, say, from the consequences of past acts of violation of trust. Somatic markers eliminate some options from consideration altogether, disadvantage some in relation to others, and highlight others in a positive manner. According to Damasio, the gut feelings themselves do not come from deliberation. Indeed, if they did, they could not serve one of their primary functions of reducing the array of options we have to consciously consider and evaluate. Relative to all that the world throws at us, the amount of information and options that our working memories

can hold in conscious awareness at any given time is pitifully small. Somatic markers help us to evaluate information and options beneath the level of conscious awareness.

In the light of Damasio's theory of somatic markers, Keneally's dramatization seems apt. In particular, the option of not doing anything about the slaughter became marked by violently sickening bodily changes. It made not doing anything an option that was "silenced," one that could not be considered. John McDowell has written perceptively on the way that a virtue in a person might manifest itself in certain reasons "silencing" other considerations, rather than outweighing or overriding them. Considerations that would otherwise provide an agent with reasons for action thus lack practical significance when set against the considerations to which virtue requires that one attend.²⁰ Being a good friend, then, might involve negative affective valence getting attached to the thought of betraying one's friend and *silencing* the thought of financial gain, rather than merely outweighing or overriding it in a conscious cost-benefit calculation. To be a good friend, in other words, certain actions toward one's friend become unthinkable—it makes one sick to one's stomach to think of doing them. Damasio's somatic maker theory might help to explain why the negative valence attached to betrayal might silence an otherwise significant consideration of financial gain.

McDowell's example combines two powerful primal motivations that can be turned toward moral ends in human beings. The first motivation is attachment. Studies of the physiological mechanisms that might underlie an emotional concern for others have identified a role for the neurohormone oxytocin. In animals, oxytocin facilitates attachment to offspring, and between monogamous mammals and cohabiting sexual partners. Neuroscientists have speculated that the neural mechanisms underlying the

motivating emotions of sexual pairing and childrearing also get recruited for other social bonding such as friendship.²¹ Human studies have shown that oxytocin facilitates a temporary attachment between strangers, increasing trust, reciprocity, and generosity.²² Anonymous charitable giving based on moral beliefs corresponds to activation of reward systems in fronto-limbic brain networks that are also activated by food, sex, drugs, and money. Such giving is also linked to networks that control the release of oxytocin and another neurohormone, vasopressin, also implicated in attachment between monogamous mammals and cohabiting sexual partners. One speculation emerging from this particular study is that the capacity to feel attachment to social causes such as donating to charity emerged from a co-evolution of genes and culture that allowed primitive reward and social attachment systems to operate beyond the immediate spheres of kinship, thus enabling human beings to form friendships, to trust and cooperate with strangers, and to directly link motivational value to abstract collective causes, principles, and ideologies.²³

The other primal motivation suggested by McDowell's example is moral disgust. As well as feeling badly for a friend one has betrayed, one might very well feel disgust at oneself for betraying him. Humans share proto-disgust reactions with nonhuman animals, all showing distaste and nausea from exposure to potentially toxic foods and odors, and these reactions clearly have adaptive functions.²⁴ In humans, nonsocial disgust gets extended to the social realm, resulting in social disapproval, moralistic aggression, and willingness to punish moral norm violators even at significant cost to oneself.²⁵ While such moralized disgust can have a positive and even essential function in sustaining social cooperation, it quite possibly plays a role in primitive dislike of groups that are different from one's own, in physical appearance or in cultural norms.

Consider now an act that provokes both empathy for another to whom one is attached and disgust at the perpetrator of the act. The effect of these two combined primal motivations will be powerful. It may be no accident that human beings are often most effective in overcoming differences between each other when united against a common enemy. Consider Keneally's depiction of the terror Schindler felt for the victims of the Kraków liquidation combined with his nauseous reaction at the brutality with which the liquidation was carried out.

Related to this point is something that the real Schindler did say about his realization that he had to do something. In 1964 he was filmed by German television and was asked why he had intervened on behalf of the Kraków Jews. Schindler said: "The persecution of the Jews in the General Government in Poland meant that we could see horror emerging gradually in many ways. In 1939 they were forced to wear the Jewish Stars and people were herded and shut up in ghettos. Then in the years 1941 and 1942 there was plenty of public evidence of pure sadism, with people behaving *like pigs* (my emphasis), I felt the Jews were being destroyed. I had to help them. There was no choice."²⁶ There was of course a choice that others made not to do anything or to do worse. But perhaps Schindler was saying that those options had been eliminated for him, given the effect of what he had seen. The real Schindler seems to have witnessed or heard of many acts of gradually increasing horror and then of pure sadism, and this seems the more plausible, if less dramatic, scenario of his conversion to a person committed to sheltering and then saving Jews in his factory. The option of not doing anything faded from his view, rather than disappearing suddenly, perhaps as it became increasingly

marked with brutality and compassion for the victims with whom Schindler was increasingly becoming identified.

In an interview with the Canadian journalist Herbert Steinhouse, Schindler recounted two of the accumulated events that played this role. They took place in Schindler's Emalia enamelware factory, and involved SS officers who would go to inspect the factory.

On one occasion, three SS men walked onto the factory floor without warning, arguing among themselves. "I tell you, the Jew is even lower than an animal," one was saying. Then, taking out his pistol, he ordered the nearest Jewish worker to leave his machine and pick up some sweepings from the floor. "Eat it," he barked, waving his gun. The shivering man choked down the mess. "You see what I mean," the SS man explained to his friends as they walked away. "They eat anything at all. Even an animal would never do that."

Another time, during an inspection by an official SS commission, the attention of the visitors was caught by the sight of the old Jew, Lamus, who was dragging himself across the factory courtyard in an utterly depressed state. The head of the commission asked why the man was so sad, and it was explained to him that Lamus had lost his wife and only child a few weeks earlier during the evacuation of the ghetto. Deeply touched, the commander reacted by ordering his adjutant to shoot the Jew "so that he might be reunited with his family in heaven," then he guffawed and the commission moved on. Schindler was left standing with Lamus and the adjutant.

"Slip your pants down to your ankles and start walking," the adjutant ordered Lamus. Dazed, the man did as he was told.

"You are interfering with all my discipline here," Schindler said desperately. The SS officer sneered.

"The morale of my workers will suffer. Production for der Vaterland will be affected." Schindler blurted out the words. The officer took out his gun.

"A bottle of schnapps if you don't shoot him", Schindler almost screamed, no longer thinking rationally.

"Stimmt!" To his astonishment, the man complied. Grinning, the officer put the gun away and strolled arm in arm with the shaken Schindler to the office to collect his bottle. And Lamus, trailing his pants along the ground, continued shuffling across the yard, waiting sickeningly for the bullet in his back that never came.²⁷

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that a series of emotionally compelling experiences contributed to Schindler's conversion. These experiences helped to produce both a change in Schindler's motivation to save people from the Nazis and a change in his beliefs about what he morally had to do. Sometimes people acquire new motivation to do what they previously believed they morally have to do. It might be thought that Schindler's case fits this description because of his history of kindness and willingness to help others.²⁸ Schindler's history of kindness and willingness to help indicates a capacity for compassion that helped him to be receptive to the horrors he witnessed and enabled him to conclude that he had no choice but to try to help people who would be otherwise

murdered. But a willingness to help others on a daily basis in “normal” life does not amount to a willingness to risk one’s life and fortune to save innocent lives. Nothing Schindler did before the war or after the war supports the attribution of anything like such a standing moral project to him. What he did during the war seems to have been a more particular response to what was happening around him, and though he believed in the rightness and necessity of what he did, that belief seemed to be as much of a product of his emotional experiences as was his motivation to act according to it.

Any plausible explanation of Schindler’s conversion must include the mixture and ambiguity of his motives, and their evolution over time. In the beginning of his bringing Jews into his Emalia factory, evidence of Schindler’s self-interested calculation is quite apparent. Even when he later becomes clearly committed to saving lives at great risk and cost to himself, his regular reference to “his”²⁹ Jews reveals how his actions might have fed into a kind of self-serving image he held of himself. One might take this as evidence that his motives did not at all contain concern for the people whose lives he saved, but this is to deny the complexity of human beings. Mixed motives can support one another and the actions they give rise to. They can support one another so that neither the self-concerned nor the other-concerned motives need bear the weight of supporting those greatly risky actions (see Ruth Grant’s contribution to this volume on the issue of mixed motives). Still, the evolution of Schindler’s motives is important for conceiving of his conversion as genuine. The risks he took and the length of time he stayed in the game of saving lives staves off the cynical conclusion that he was *merely* serving himself in doing what he did.

Schindler's "free-lance" relationship to power structures also seems relevant to an explanation of his conversion. Rather than entering into and being enveloped by Nazi power structures as Stasi agents were later to enter into and be enveloped in the East German power structure, Schindler's history with Abwehr demonstrates a relative independence from authority structures that perhaps left him better able to absorb and to act upon the full import of what he witnessed in Poland. Schindler's independence furthermore involved a capacity to deal with authority and to use it to accomplish his own ends. His "entrepreneurial" qualities, his love of risk, his charm and ability to connect with powerful Nazi officials in an "old-boy" fashion made it possible for him to envision a way to help that very few others could have envisioned. Our abilities, or the lack of them, form our vision of what is practically possible for us, and that vision deeply affects what we see as right or wrong for us to try to do.

Nechama Tec attempts to identify characteristics generally shared by Christian rescuers of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland (she mentions Schindler only once in passing).³⁰ She distinguishes between "normative" altruism, which is helping behavior that is demanded, supported and reinforced by one's society, and "autonomous" altruism, which is helping behavior that is not socially demanded, supported, and reinforced. Her conclusion is that most Christian rescuers in Poland had autonomous motivation, and moreover that they displayed a sense of being socially marginal (a sense of not being fully integrated with one's environment but of standing apart from it) and a desire to help others based on values learned in the family.³¹ Schindler certainly displayed a sense of marginality with respect to the Nazi authority structure, but his hard-drinking,

womanizing, and abusive father hardly laid the groundwork for the “family values” that Tec characterize as typical of rescuers’ background.³²

It would be quite premature, however, to conclude that moral conversion depends on a sense of being apart from one’s social environment. In their well-known study of rescuers in Western and Eastern Europe, Samuel and Pearl Oliner found in Western Europe many who would fit into Tec’s classification as normative altruists—ones who rescued in compliance with the social norms of individuals or groups close to them.³³ Michael Gross’s study of rescuers in Holland and France also points to the presence of a more diverse array of motivations. Employing Lawrence Kohlberg’s framework of stages of moral development, Gross found that a considerable number of rescuers had “conventional” motivations such as the desire to comply with social norms—e.g., awareness of one’s friends and neighbors helping and fearing that they would disapprove if one did not also help, or thinking it important to listen to local authorities in the church or the resistance—and the desire to comply with religious norms—fear of God’s punishment or thinking that Christians have a special obligation to protect Jews. Even those rescuers who cited motivations that would be labeled as more advanced or “postconventional” under Kohlbergian theory, such as the duty of democratic citizens to defend civil right and social justice, tested as cognitively “immature” in the sense that they tended to view justifications in terms of civic responsibility, rights and justice as having greater legitimacy than other sorts of justifications only when they agreed with the positions being justified. Gross suggests that reference to such justifications by some rescuers might reflect their socialization into democratic norms but not necessarily greater cognitive development in moral judgment.³⁴

Reflection on the varied results reported by Tec, Gross, and the Oliners supports the conclusion that circumstances strongly influenced the character profile of who became rescuers. In Poland, anti-Semitism was relatively intense and well entrenched; Jewish rescue was not in general socially reinforced, and moreover Nazi control of that country was stronger than in Western Europe (and even here the strength and nature of Nazi control varied nationally and even locally). In that context, it makes sense that there would be both fewer rescuers and that they would tend to display the sense of social marginality that Tec attributes to them. The situation in Poland contrasted with parts of Western Europe in which social and religious norms favored Jewish rescue, and in which weaker Nazi control made it more possible and somewhat less dangerous (though of course still risky in varying degrees) to engage in rescue. The studies I have cited do not focus on rescuers who underwent the kind of conversion Schindler did, but it is reasonable to infer that if situational factors influence the type of person who becomes a rescuer, they can influence who undergoes conversion.

Moreover, Schindler's relative independence from authority does not refute the more general point that individual character interacts with situational factors. Gross' point that Jewish rescue efforts typically depended on organization, infrastructure, and material resources is relevant here. Ironically, many of these external necessities came from the German military because Schindler's factories were thought to be necessary for the war effort, and because Schindler had the type of character that enabled him to manipulate the system. Situational factors that interact with an individual's character also include other people. We cannot leave out ways in which others were partners with Schindler in the project of saving lives. Focusing on Schindler springs from a desire to

find “heroes” who demonstrate and model the hopeful belief in humanity that the director of *The Lives of Others* wanted to honor. Focusing on Schindler *alone* corresponds to a romantic conception of heroes as alone and all the more courageous because they act alone. This is false to Schindler’s story. To fully explain why Schindler acted as he did, moreover, the role of those Jews who conspired with him in saving lives is crucial. For example, Schindler viewed with admiration and respect Itzhak Stern, the accountant who worked with him in the factory, for Stern’s ethical values and a fearless willingness to help.³⁵

There is Emilie, who demonstrated tremendous courage and a much less ambiguous commitment than Oskar to save lives. In a memoir she wrote with the aid of Erika Rosenberg, Emilie Schindler tells of an event that took place during the last weeks of the war when Oskar was away in Kraków. Emilie encountered Nazis transporting two hundred and fifty Jews, crowded into four wagons, to a death camp. She succeeded in persuading the Gestapo to send these Jews to the factory camp “with regard to the continuing war industry production.” She recalled that they found the railroad car bolts frozen solid, the men and women inside looking like emaciated skeletons and having to be carried out like so many carcasses of frozen beef. Throughout that night and many following, Emilie worked without halt on nursing them back from the brink, and most survived.³⁶ After the war, and after her separation from Oskar, Emilie lived in Buenos Aires, alone and in poverty until a German Argentinean newspaper reporter wrote that while Oskar, “Father Courage,” had not been forgotten, Emilie, “Mother Courage,” had been.³⁷

It should be noted here that the *type* of conversion Schindler underwent, i.e., the type of moral excellence he came to realize, is relevant to understanding how it happened. Lawrence Blum, in a seminal essay on moral exemplars, identifies Schindler as an exemplar of the *moral hero*: one who becomes engaged in a moral project of bringing about a great good or preventing a great evil, who acts to a great extent from morally worthy motives that are substantially embedded in his psychology (showing a depth of moral commitment and centrality within the system of his various motivations), who carries out the project in the face of risk or danger, and in whom unworthy desires, dispositions, sentiments, and attitudes are relatively absent.³⁸ The moral hero is different from another kind of exemplar who appears in the writings of Iris Murdoch, which Blum calls the Murdochian paragon: one who lacks the moral project of a hero but who acts from morally worthy motives substantially embedded in her psychology and in whom there is relative absence of unworthy motives. As Blum interprets Murdoch's paragon, this person is good, humble, selfless, and displays a greater absence of unworthy motives than the moral hero. The hero's moral project counterbalances a more impure set of motivations. Furthermore, the hero's project need not persist over all or most of the hero's life, though it should persist over a substantial period. By contrast, the paragon's state of moral excellence must show greater persistence.³⁹

Conversion to being a moral hero might be a significantly different process than conversion to being a Murdochian paragon. A person might be able to become one type of exemplar but not the other. Indeed, it seems difficult to envision the Schindler we know from the Second World War converting to the excellence of humility and selflessness for, say, most of the rest of his life. It would have required a far greater, and

far more unlikely, transformation of his character. The story of how Schindler became a moral hero, when seen with more detail, with less emphasis on his persona as a hard-drinking, womanizing, charming rogue on the one hand and as a man who risked his life and fortune to save lives on the other hand, appears less than miraculous. The conversion becomes intelligible as a fortuitous overlapping of character and circumstances: the basic capacity for compassion that his wife admired in him, his unusual independence from authority, the eye for a money-making opportunities that led him into the factory venture, the roguish charm that enabled him to manipulate Nazis officials, the organizational infrastructure of his factories and the German support of these factories that allowed him to shelter Jews in plain sight and to keep them reasonably healthy, and others such as Itzhak Stern and Emilie Schindler with whom he collaborated and who also reinforced his compassion and courage. In Schindler's case, the discontinuities that make his story one of moral conversion are underlain by continuities that help to make the conversion intelligible.

3. A Klansman's conversion

Here is another story involving a mixture of emotionally transformative experiences, continuities of character, other people who played important roles, and other situational factors that help turn a person in a morally better direction. It involves the agent's attitudes toward authority, but in this case the attitudes are substantially different from Schindler's. This is the story involves a friendship that developed between C. P. Ellis, the Exalted Cyclops of the Durham, North Carolina Klavern of the Ku Klux Klan, and Ann Atwater, the most militant black woman in Durham. Of this pair of friends, I concentrate on Ellis because his change was by far the most dramatic (which of course

does not imply that Atwater was less admirable). The context in which Ellis' and Atwater's friendship developed was Durham's attempt to desegregate its public schools in the 1970's. Ellis and Atwater were elected to co-chair a charrette created to promote communication between black and white parents of a newly integrated school. Ellis more or less fell into this situation, not initially motivated by good will but more out of a desire to increase the respectability of the Klan, to keep an eye (and not a benevolent or helpful one) on the unfolding desegregation process, and to represent the "white" point of view.

Osha Gray Davidson's telling of Ellis' transformation includes an illuminating historical context that concerns the changing class structure of the Klan.⁴⁰ The Klan arose in 1866, created by white Southerners of the higher social classes. Its leaders needed the support of lower-class whites, and to get it they encouraged the perception that whites were united against a common enemy, that the KKK, for example, would protect their families from the blacks.⁴¹ By the time Ellis found the KKK, the upper class whites found more respectable organizations to join. The KKK was left to lower-class whites sharing a past of poverty and failure and a common enemy. The Klan served as an extended family and offered the promise of better days with white supremacy.⁴² That the Klan answered to a strong need in Ellis for acceptance and recognition is clear from a passage in which Davidson describes his feelings during the induction ceremony:

As he looked out at the rows of men welcoming him, he felt the old shame of poverty, failure, and purposelessness melt away. A lifetime of being an outsider was over. He felt blissfully submerged into a new and yet familiar community. The Klansmen were the descendants of failed farmers and broken mill hands just like himself.⁴³

Ellis not only found a home in the Klan, but also was surprised to find that others respected him, and as he gained confidence, he spoke out more forcefully. He fell into the leadership role rather than actively seeking it, but once he became the Exalted Cyclops, he concluded largely on his own that the Klan should not worry so much about secrecy and should start effectively communicating its views. He went to city council meetings to take the Klan public.

When he begins participating in the charrette, things do not begin harmoniously. At the organizational meeting, C.P. shouts that the problem with Durham schools is “niggers.” Ann Atwater shoots back that the problem is “stupid crackers like C.P. Ellis in Durham.”⁴⁴ The organizer of the meeting, Bill Riddick, perceives Ellis as “hurting and hurtful, possessed of all the tedious, creaking, accumulated hatreds of the South, and yet guileless and—Riddick believed—essentially honorable, Klansman or not.”⁴⁵ After agreeing to co-chair the steering committee of the charrette with Atwater, Ellis has a revelatory diner meeting with Atwater:

That she was capable of sitting in a chair in a restaurant and eating food was a revelation to him. Ann had ceased being human to C.P. years before; she existed only as a symbol of everything he hated about her race. . . . But Ann doing something so ordinary as eating a meal in a restaurant—this was beyond C. P.’s powers of imagination. . . . He could hear the grinding of her teeth, feel the warmth emanating from her body. He sniffed, and swore he caught the scent of her hair. It certainly wasn’t sexual attraction that churned inside of him, but it wasn’t exactly disgust either. Unable to bear the confusion of feelings any longer, C.P. offered some excuse and hurried from the restaurant.⁴⁶

Davidson stresses Ellis' turmoil as he gets hostility from his fellow Klansman and as a teacher taunts his son for having a Klansman father who loves "niggers." In a meeting of the charrette, Ellis becomes particularly interested in the comments of a black woman who charges that teachers and the school administration treated her children as if they were stupid troublemakers. He had been about to say the same thing about his children, that they were treated badly because they were "poor white trash." This experience happened repeatedly throughout the day. For the first time, he really listened to black people and was stunned to hear, over and over, his own concerns coming from their mouths: "When arguments among kids erupted at school, it was the working-class children—black and white—who were always blamed and punished."⁴⁷

This led Atwater and Ellis to talking about how hard it was to raise children without much money, about how they were always having to tell their kids that they were just as good as kids from middle-class homes, to never to be ashamed of who they were. At the same time Atwater and Ellis confessed to each other they had to hide their own shame about not being better providers. They talked about the teachers never letting their kids forget that they came from impoverished households. Their stories were so familiar that they could almost be interchangeable.

C.P. couldn't believe what he was hearing. But even more amazing to him was what he was saying—and to whom. He was sharing his most intimate grievances, all of his doubts and failures, with the hated Ann Atwater. The militant he usually referred to with a sneer as "that fat nigger." And yet, here they were, talking like old friends. As if she wasn't black at all, or he wasn't white, or as if all that didn't *matter*. He looked at her and it was if he was seeing

her for the first time. He was stunned by what he saw. Mirrored in her face were the same deeply etched lines of work and worry that marked his own face. And suddenly he was crying. The tears came without warning, and once started, he was unable to stop them. Ann was dumfounded, but she reacted instinctively by reaching out and taking his hand in her own. She tried to comfort him, stroking his hand and murmuring, “It’s okay, it’s okay,” as he sobbed. Then she, too, began to cry.⁴⁸

Ellis comes to the realization that it was not blacks who were holding poor whites down but wealthy white factory owners and businessmen, such as James “Buck” Duke, founding figure of Duke University. Ellis called for poor whites to unite against their real enemies, and with that, lost his place in the Klan.

As in the case of Schindler’s witnessing of the vile and murderous acts of Nazis, emotionally transformative experiences seem to have played a key role in Ellis’s conversion. Indeed, the evocation of emotion is the intended result of a charrette, conceived as a series of hours-long face-to-face meetings of a diverse group of people for the purpose of working out their differences. In organizing the Durham charrette, Bill Riddick recognized that the “trick was to draw out people’s deepest longings and fears, their frustrations and their dreams—while preventing these raw and antipodean emotions, once exposed, from combusting into violence.”⁴⁹ It might be thought that Ellis’s transformation as a result of these meetings was primarily cognitive and not emotional—coming to believe that black people eat meals in restaurants just like white people; that black people’s children are victimized in schools just like poor white people’s children; that both black and poor white parents feel shame for not being able to protect their

children from such victimization; that “respectable” white people are happy to have poor whites as allies against blacks but not happy to have them as social equals. But Davidson’s descriptions of the occasions on which these insights hit home bring out the visceral nature of Ellis’s realizations. It would be misunderstanding the nature of Ellis’s conversion to regard it as primarily cognitive or to regard emotional transformations as mere consequences of cognitive gains. Ellis’s intense emotional experiences broke down defenses against having those insights. We have emotional investment in preserving beliefs that give us comfort and security, and correspondingly we have investment in overlooking, ignoring and denying what undermines those beliefs. In the Klan, Ellis found a community that accepted, respected, and then looked to him for leadership. In the charrette, Ellis in effect found a new community that recognized him as a leader and with whom he was able to share his “deepest longings and fears.” Without that kind of experience, it is doubtful that the crucial changes in mere belief would have taken hold.

As in the case of Schindler, the character plays a crucial role in conversion. In contrast to Schindler and his relation to authority structures, what strikes one about Ellis is his earnestness, the evident satisfaction he got from the Klan as a kind of extended family, and his desire to earn respectability that appears in people who are denied respect. Though Ellis might have seen himself as “socially marginal” in relation to respectable white society, he yearned for acceptance, not to manipulate authority structures to achieve his own ends. Before his conversion, his anger over his low status was directed at scapegoats in the black community, but Bill Riddick turned out to be right in seeing Ellis as “guileless” and “essentially honorable.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, there is Ellis’ capacity for independent thought. He recognizes that Klan meetings are simply the venting of

resentment and anger and seeks to be proactive in reaching out to the “respectable” layers of Durham society. More importantly, he is able to recognize what he shares with Ann Atwater and the other black parents in the charrette. Another might have noted the similarity but dismissed it by thinking that the black children and parents *deserved* the kind of treatment they got from the schools. Perhaps Ellis’ decency and ability to see a black person, whom he had formerly saw only as a kind of alien being, now as another human being in much the same predicaments as himself. Finally, it must be said that Ellis’ anger did not go away but got redirected more accurately at the upper reaches of Southern white society. Like Schindler, Ellis was capable of both compassion and moralized disgust. These are continuities of character that underlay Ellis’ transformation.

There is also the set of situational factors that helped to set up this transformation. Durham, along with the rest of the South was changing. Integration became inevitable, at least for those who could not afford to send their children to private schools or to move to parts of the metropolitan area where there weren’t many black families. The national and local movements towards desegregation resulted in organization, infrastructure, and material resources that could be deployed by its leaders. In his outreach for respectability, it is not miraculous that Ellis could have become involved in this community effort to deal with desegregation. As indicated earlier, the social structure of the Klan was changing: the “higher-class” whites were more eager to distance themselves from working class whites, and thus increasing the possibility that someone as independent-minded as Ellis could see who was really keeping working class whites down. Unlike Wiesler in *The Lives of Others*, who seemed thoroughly a creature of the Stasi authority structure, and unlike Schindler, who was suited to manipulate authority

structures for his own purposes, Ellis sought recognition and respect in a society whose authority structures were changing, and that allowed him to recognize the ways in which he and others like him had been used and deceived.

And there are others who played crucial roles in Ellis' transformation. Bill Riddick, whom Davidson credits with acute psychologically perceptiveness and having extraordinarily persuasive powers, saw the honorableness in Ellis and first raised the possibility of having him co-chair with Ann Atwater. Riddick perhaps saw that Ellis would turn in a fundamentally new direction if he were given responsibility for making things go well.⁵¹ Ellis' insights as to who was keeping whites like him down were prompted by events such as the time the black militant Howard Clement, to whom Ellis responded angrily at the meeting, spoke respectfully to Ellis after the meeting and wanted to shake his hand. This reminded Ellis of the fact that a white city councilman had talked strategy with him over the phone and secretly met with him but deliberately crossed the street in order to avoid having to publicly greet and shake hands with him.⁵² Again in contrast, Joe Becton, a black city official, invited Ellis to meet publicly with him and in fact insisted that all interactions between the Klan leader and him occur in the open. And most of all there is Ann Atwater, who was extremely surprised to see Ellis afraid of attending a charrette meeting at a predominantly black school in a black neighborhood. She of course was used to seeing the Klan as a terrorizing force, but when she realized that Ellis was concerned to be protected against black people, she reacted with humor instead of anger: "Don't you worry about that, C. P. I'll protect you."⁵³ And indeed, she did. When Ellis sets up an information table to distribute Klan literature at a school fair,

and some black teenagers angrily threaten to destroy the exhibit, Ann comes over and in no uncertain terms turns them back.

It might be thought that in emphasizing the role of others in the individual's achievement of moral excellence, I am diminishing the role of personal responsibility.⁵⁴ If recognizing the role of personal responsibility simply means endorsing the idea that individuals should do what is right for them to do even if others fail to do so, I can hardly dissent from such an idea. But I am skeptical that solemn reminders to "take personal responsibility" will have much effect on their own. Even the efficacy of conscious awareness of one's personal responsibility to do something may be overrated. If our moral upbringing has been adequate, much of the good we do will be habitual and unself-conscious. At a time of crisis when we ask ourselves what responsibilities we have, the efficacy of the answers we give to ourselves might crucially depend on our emotional responsiveness and which others are with us. I do not deny that recognition of one's personal responsibility has a role in the achievement of moral excellence, but we would do well to recognize its limits and the fact that people can mutually support one another in taking responsibility.

4. The vision and habituated character that underlies moral conversion

To close, let me compare the tentative conclusions of these studies with a philosophical conception of moral conversion. This conception is that of vision that becomes unclouded. Moral reality is there to be seen, and those who cannot see it have their vision clouded. For the philosopher-novelist Iris Murdoch, who holds something like this conception, selfishness clouds moral vision (see the contribution in this volume

by Romand Coles for an articulation of Murdoch's conception of moral vision in relation to the environment). This vision is a matter of seeing people clearly and fairly, with "just and loving" attention.⁵⁵ To love someone is to struggle against selfishness to be fair to that person, to see that person in all his or her particularity, not just the parts one wants to see but everything there is. This struggle is for Murdoch first and primarily a private internal struggle for the individual, because it is the fantasies one imposes upon others that must be recognized for what they are by the individual.

To illustrate these themes, Murdoch tells the story of M, who has previously judged her daughter-in-law D to be "pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that he son has married beneath him."⁵⁶ Murdoch asks us to imagine that this is a set of opinions that M has kept entirely to herself. M has not let on in the slightest her view to anyone else and particularly not to D. And now she is reconsidering and asking whether she has been old fashioned and conventional, prejudiced, narrow-minded, and snobbish. So M says to herself, let me look again. Since M has not let onto her feelings about D to anyone, especially to D, nothing that has occurred in the interaction between them has prompted M to reconsider her view of D. M's struggle to see D fairly is a purely private struggle. So M looks again and now finds D to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful.

I want to stress, to be fair to Murdoch, that she is not presenting the case of M and D as a case of *moral conversion*. I am sketching her general picture of the moral life and then inferring what that picture implies for the nature and possibility of moral

conversion—the idea that at least some cases of moral conversion depend on dispersing the clouds of selfishness gathered over one’s vision of what is worthy of one’s love and care. Surely there is truth in this idea. Schindler sees what is happening to the Jews, unlike many others, who very well might have self-interested reasons for not seeing clearly or not looking further because they suspect that what they find will put them in an awkward position. A crucial event in C. P. Ellis’s conversion is when he sees Ann as a human being, eating as he does. He also *hears* Ann and other black people speak about their shame and knows it to be the same as his shame. He also had self-interested motivations to sustain his clouded vision and hearing.

On the other hand, Murdoch’s exclusive emphasis on *perceiving* the moral reality of the other is seriously misleading if it leaves out the necessity of emotional impact, the sickening process that left Schindler concluding that he had no choice but to act, or the emotionally cathartic process in which Ellis affirmed with Ann their shared vulnerability, shame and inability to protect their children from shame. To adequately name a felt solidarity like that seems to require more than the metaphors of seeing and hearing accurately. Of course, Murdoch would add the words ‘just’ and ‘loving’ to ‘attention’. I would need to add, then, that such words must point to something substantially independent of vision, something that grips the body and that prepares it to see and to respond to what it sees; the words cannot merely *qualify* vision to identify merely a kind of perception. I have cited work in psychology and neuroscience to suggest that human moral motivation depends on tapping primal drives such as attachment and disgust. The metaphor of clear vision may mislead as to the gritty roots of morally inspired judgments and choices. Human beings capable of seeing what is worth loving in others and

responding in an appropriate way are *embodied* creatures whose primal drives spring from the emotional equipment that evolved to sustain reproduction and child-rearing. Without such primal drives and the very complex elaboration, refinement, and transformation of these drives through culture, socialization, and personal experience, there is no moral nobility. There would be nothing to see clearly that could also motivate.

Murdoch stresses the role of art in helping us to see clearly what is of worth in the world. So does *Lives of Others*, in implying that a pivotal moment in his conversion was listening to a sonata for a good man. This was the least persuasive element of the film for me. This is not to deny the possibility that art may have transformative effects (as can natural beauty; see the Coles contribution to this volume), but only in a context in which it can grip the body and prepare it to respond. The most plausible suggestion of the film, on the other hand, is that a man who becomes utterly disillusioned with the cause that has given the sole meaning and purpose to his life will grasp at an alternative and defend a life of connection as demonstrated by the artists he is assigned to spy upon.

Disillusionment with what has given one's life meaning also plays a role in Ellis' conversion, as well as anger and a sense of betrayal at upper-class whites he came to see as using him and others like him. In both these cases, the agent's vision becomes clearer, but there is much more that happens: emotional turmoil, despair, anger, and new-found connection with others that prepares the way for better vision and gripping the body and preparing it to respond.

The point about connection leads to my second point that it seems seriously misleading to leave out the roles that others can play in the kind of feeling attention that can bring about moral conversion. It seems theoretically possible to see clearly all by

oneself as a result of a purely internal struggle, but it is a mistake to valorize this possibility, because surely there are others from whom we have much to learn and much to gain in the way of inspiration and support. Third, selfishness in any clear sense of the word is not the only problem by any means. The human impulse to submit, eagerly, to social hierarchy is deeply rooted and widespread if not universal. The impulse can be wedded to selfless sacrifice (see the Grant contribution to this volume on the moral liabilities of selflessness) as well as craven self-service. Fourth, the circumstances surely do play a role in which of a person's character traits help or hinder moral conversion. Both before and after the war, Schindler never did anything that approximated the moral value of his actions during the war. Fifth, circumstances also play a role in what kind of person can do good. It is difficult to imagine a man with Schindler's traits playing a constructive role during something like the Durham desegregation crisis; and equally difficult to imagine a C. P. Ellis succeeding in Schindler's circumstances. As noted earlier, a person's capabilities and resources shape his vision of what can be done, and this in turn shapes his judgment of what he should do. The relevant capabilities and resources are relative to the circumstances in which they can be exercised. All this is so much more than overcoming selfishness and attaining clear vision.

So is moral conversion possible? My conclusion is that it is, and in ways that make it less mysteriously heroic but simply human, and still supportive of hope. I stress that it is *hope* that is warranted, not optimism, for the same kind of processes that result in a Schindler or an Ellis could produce conversion to moral vice rather than excellence. Wiesler initially saw the meaning of his life in serving the East German regime. Ellis initially found his community and meaning for his life in the Klan. These points weigh

against optimism, which is premised on the stance that the odds are on one's side. Hope is focused on what is possible, not necessarily probable. But hope can spur efforts to better understand what might make for conversions to excellence. The stories of conversion examined here suggest inquiry into ways in which moral education can engage emotion as well as critical reflection and inquiry. The stories further suggest that we would do well to recognize what a complex and varied phenomenon moral excellence is—how one form of excellence that builds on a particular person's strengths can be suitable for one set of circumstances but not another set. And the stories suggest we would do well to wean ourselves away from the moral romance of the lone hero. If we pursue these lines of inquiry, we may have warrant in the future for something more than hope, but for now, hope will have to be enough.

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¹ I have greatly benefited from comments from Sin Yee Chan and Ruth Grant on the version of this essay presented in the conference “In Search of Goodness” at Duke University, from comments from other participants at the conference, and from an audience at Kent State University, where I delivered a later version as the Veroni Lecture for 2009.

² Anna Funder, “Tyranny of Terror,” *The Guardian*, May 5, 2007. Accessed on May 19, 2008 online at <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,2072454,00.html>. Her

book on the Stasi is *Stasiland: True Stories from behind the Berlin Wall* (London: Granta Books, 2003).

³ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: The Unique Experiment That Challenged Human Nature* (New York: Harper, 2004), 24. A recent partial replication of Milgram's experiments was done by Jerry M. Burger at Santa Clara University, "Replicating Milgram: Would People Still Obey Today?" *American Psychologist* 64.1 (2009): 1-11. Only a slightly lower rate of conformity was found. The replication was only partial because conformity to current ethical guidelines required that the simulated shocks go up to (only) 150 volts instead of the 450 volts in the original experiments. However, study of Milgram's data led the author to conclude that willingness to administer 150 volts was a good predictor of one's willingness to go all the way to 450. However, since the replication was only partial, it is open to debate whether there is full confirmation of Milgram's conclusion for the present.

⁴ Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Become Evil* (New York: Random House, 2008).

⁵ See Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1998–99): 315–331; and "The Nonexistence of Character Traits," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100 (1999–2000): 223–226; John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁶ Milgram, 138-40.

⁷ Gilbert Harman in particular makes this radical claim. See note 4.

⁸ Milgram, 48-49.

⁹ Michael L. Gross, “Jewish Rescue in Holland and France during the Second World War: Moral Cognition and Collective Action,” *Social Forces* 73.2 (1994): 463-96.

¹⁰ David M. Crowe, *Oskar Schindler: The Untold Account of His Life, Wartime Activities, and the True Story Behind The List* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

¹¹ Crowe, 8.

¹² Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's List* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1993), 34.

¹³ Crowe, *Oskar Schindler*, 139-40.

¹⁴ Crowe states at one point (177) that Schindler's motivation did become one of working “solely to save his Jewish workers,” but then in the next sentence states that he had “business as well as moral reasons.” His dream was that his factory at Brünnlitz could supply post-war Europe with pots and pans, with his Jewish workers at the core of his labor force.

¹⁵ Keneally, 129-30.

¹⁶ J. Bargh and T. L. Chartrand, “The Unbearable Automaticity of Being,” *American Psychologist* 54 (1999): 462-79; J. A. Bargh and E. L. Williams, “The Automaticity of Social Life,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 15 (2006): 1-4.

¹⁷ Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), chapter 3.

¹⁸ Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Penguin, 2005), chapter 8. As in most science that is new there is controversy over the extent to which Damasio's evidence supports his hypotheses about the workings of emotion and their role in decision. For some analyses of the controversy, see Alan G. Sanfey and Jonathan D. Cohen, "Is Knowing Always Feeling?" *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 101.48 (2004): 16709-10; Tiago V. Maia and James L. McClelland, "A Reexamination of the Evidence for the Somatic Marker Hypothesis: What Participants Really Know in the Iowa Gambling Task," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 101.45 (2004): 16075-80; Giovanna Columbetti, "The Somatic Marker Hypotheses, and What the Iowa Gambling Tasks Do, and Do Now, Show," *British Journal of the Philosophy of Science* 59 (2008): 51-71. Whether the details of Damasio's theory are right as a theory of rational decision-making and the role that emotion plays in it is less important for my purposes that his more general theme that motivation for acting on our judgments of what we believe to be right depends on those judgments being connected to a more primal source of motivational energy.

¹⁹ Damasio, 170-71.

²⁰ John McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?" in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplemental Volume* 52 (1978), 26-8.

²¹ See C. S. Carter and E. B. Keverne, “The Neurobiology of Social Affiliation and Pair Bonding, in *Hormones, Brain, and Behavior*, 5 vols., ed. D. W. Pfaff et al., 1:299-337 (San Diego: Academic Press, 2002).

²² See C. S. Carter, L. Ahnert, K. E. Grossman, S. B. Hrdy, M. E. Lamb, et al. *Attachment and Bonding: A New Synthesis*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); T. R. Insel, (1997) “A Neurobiological Basis of Social Attachment,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 154 (1997): 726–735; P. J. Zak, “The neuroeconomics of trust,” in R. Frantz (Ed.), *Renaissance in Behavioral Economics* (New York: Routledge, 2008); P. J. Zak, (2005) “Trust: a Temporary Human Attachment Facilitated by Oxytocin. *Behavioral Brain Sciences* 28 (2005): 368-69; P. J. Zak, R. Kurzban, W. T. Matzner, “Oxytocin is Associated with Human Trustworthiness” *Hormonal Behavior* 48 (2005): 522–527; M. Kosfeld, M. Heinrichs, P. J. Zak, U. Fischbacher, E. Fehr, (2005) “Oxytocin Increases Trust in Humans,” *Nature* 435 (2005): 673–676; P. J. Zak, R. Kurzban, W. T. Matzner, (2004) “The neurobiology of trust,” *Annual of the New York Academy of Science* 1032 (2004): 224–227; P. J. Zak, A. A. Stanton, S. Ahmadi, “Oxytocin Increases Generosity in Human Beings,” *PLoS ONE* 2(11), November 2007: e1128. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0001128.

²³ See Jorge Moll, Frank Druöger, Roland Zahn, Matteo Pardini, Ricardo de Oliveira-Souza, and Jordan Grafman, “Human Front-Mesolimbic Networks Guide Decisions about Charitable Donation,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 103 (2006): 15623-628. That is, human beings biologically evolved to become creatures that become attached to cultural norms

specifying abstract causes and principles by way of the same motivational mechanisms that attach them to food, sex, drugs, money, mates, and children. The more reflective and reasoned attachments of human beings piggyback motivationally on the most primitive layers of the motivational system.

²⁴ Paul Rozin and Jonathan Haidt, "Disgust," in M. Lewis and J. M. Haviland (Eds.), *Handbook of Emotions* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993); and Paul Rozin, "The Process of Moralization," *Psychological Science* 10 (1999): 218-21.

²⁵ W. F. Arsenio and E. A. Lemerise, "Aggression and Moral Development: Integrating Social Information Processing and Moral Domain Models," *Child Development* 75.4 (2004): 987-1002; Jorge Moll, Ricardo de Oliveira-Souza, and Paul J. Eslinger, "Morals and the Human Brain: A Working Model," 14.3 (2003): 299-305; and Dan Jones, "Moral Psychology: The Depths of Disgust," *Nature* 447.7146 (2007): 768-71.

²⁶ Quotation from a German documentary made in 1964, quoted at <http://www.deathcamps.info/Leyson/Schindler.htm>, accessed March 8, 2009.

²⁷ Herbert Steinhouse, "The Real Oskar Schindler," *Saturday Night* 109.3 (April 1994): 43-49. Text reproduced online at <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Holocaust/steinhouse.html>, accessed on November 23, 2008.

²⁸ Sin Yee Chan suggested this possibility in commenting on a draft of this paper.

²⁹ The pronominal reference is in the interview with Steinhouse.

³⁰ Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 5.

³¹ Tec, pp. 152-53. She cites Perry London's earlier work that supports similar conclusions, but which also identifies a third characteristic of a love of adventure. See Perry London, "The Rescuers: Motivational Hypotheses about Christians Who Saved Jews from the Nazis," in *Altruism and Helping Behavior*, ed. J. R. Macaulay and L. Berkowitz, pp. 241-50 (New York: Academic Press, 1970). Tec believes that adventurousness is but a form of marginality, although she simply asserts this and does not argue for it.

³² Crowe, 3-4, notes that very little information is available about Schindler's early family life. Most of his information seems to have come from Emilie, who blamed her father-in-law for her husband's worst traits. Crowe gives no information as to what kind of role Schindler's mother played in Oskar's upbringing.

³³ Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (New York: MacMillan, 1988), 142-177, 257. The other motivation that frequently played a role in empathic arousal, according to the Oliners, was empathic arousal.

³⁴ Gross, 473-81.

³⁵ Crowe, 102.

³⁶ Emilie Schindler, with Erika Rosenberg and translated by Dolores M. Koch, *Where Light and Shadow Meet: A Memoir* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 90-91.

³⁷ Crowe, 541.

³⁸ Lawrence Blum, “Moral Exemplars: Reflections on Schindler, the Trocmés, and Others,” in *Moral Perception and Particularity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 75. Blum acknowledges some uncertainty as to whether Schindler fully satisfies all the criteria for being a moral hero. For example, he worries that Schindler was a bit too taken with his self-image as savior of “his” Jews, but argues that his attachment to that self-image did not run as deep as his concern for the welfare of others.

³⁹ Blum, 78-79. His description of the Murdochian paragon is drawn primarily from her book of philosophical essays, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970)

⁴⁰ Osha Gray Davidson, *Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

⁴¹ Davidson, 126-27.

⁴² Davidson, 188.

⁴³ Davidson, 123.

⁴⁴ Davidson, 253.

⁴⁵ Davidson, 255.

⁴⁶ Davidson, 263.

⁴⁷ Davidson, 274.

⁴⁸ Davidson, 276.

⁴⁹ Davidson, 249.

⁵⁰ Davidson, 255.

⁵¹ I owe this interesting point to Rom Coles and Suzanne Shanahan.

⁵² Davidson, 242-43, 255.

⁵³ Davidson, 267.

⁵⁴ Sin Yee Chan raised this issue in her comments.

⁵⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 34.

⁵⁶ Murdoch, 16.