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978-1-009-43200-9 — Entering the Moral Middle Ground
Hubert J. M. Hermans
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Introduction

There are precious few at ease
With moral ambiguities
So we act as though they don't exist

L. Frank Baum[1]

Even evil must not be a triumphant or degrading enemy,
but a power collaborating in the whole.

Paul Klee[2]

This book proposes a nondualistic conception of moral good and bad. There exists an area where human behavior can be evaluated, depending on circumstances, as permissible, understandable, excusable, or even valuable. I propose to call this in-between area the "moral middle ground." In addition to what is usually defined as morally good or bad, behavior on this middle ground cannot simply be judged in terms of mutually exclusive opposites. The existence of this ground opposes the idea that there are only two polar categories: good and bad, and therefore it objects to the dualistic conception: "good is not bad and bad is not good." In contrast to this narrow view, I propose that on the moral middle ground "good" and "bad" can form productive coalitions that have the potential of delivering vitalizing contributions to self and society. In this book, I want to argue that there is not always and necessarily a "battle between good and bad" because there are moments and situations in which they go well together and fertilize each other.

This work can be read as a plea for the development of *moral multiplicity*, referring to the idea that various manifestations of moral good *and* bad exist not only in the other or in the outgroup, but also in one's own self and one's ingroup. Recognition of this multiplicity works as a counterforce to any

[1] Baum (1900). [2] Quoted by Jung (1964, p. 270).

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premature definition of one's self or ingroup as morally unified. Moral multiplicity serves as an antidote to seeing individuals, social categories, or groups as either good or bad and serves as a counterforce to processes of toxic polarization[3] between individuals, groups, or nations. Moral dualism entails the risk of hypocrisy resulting from the misconception that moral bad is attributed to the other individual or to the outgroup only.

Moral multiplicity not only allows us to distinguish good and bad within individuals and within social groups, it also creates space for the *possibility* that, in some situations, good and bad coexist and function as "allies." My main focus in this book is to explore situations where good and bad form combinations that are valuable to both self and society. I'm fully aware that a distinction between moral good and bad is necessary in any well-organized society because individuals have to rely on each other regarding what is allowed and what is not allowed. My central thesis, however, is that an excessively sharp distinction between them doesn't leave room for the existence of a moral middle ground and its potential fertility for self and society.

The book starts from two basic premises. First, moral good and bad are ways of *positioning* oneself toward the world, and as such they are part of a relationship with the world. And in different relationships, different conceptions of good and bad may emerge. What is considered good in one situation may be seen as bad in another. Second, the various ways people position themselves toward the world are not good or bad in themselves, they are not things in themselves, they are not inherent aspects of reality, but they are *judged* as morally good or bad. At most we can say: In this or that social, cultural, or historical context, behaviors of individuals or social groups are judged as being good or bad. These starting points provide the demarcation of good and bad with a *flexibility* that may lead to moral uncertainty, confusion, and even shock, but also to moral constructions where good and bad are brought together in ways that are productive to self and society.

Good and Bad as Coalition

I want to demonstrate that the coalition of moral good and bad on the moral middle ground has its own unique quality that differs from what a society or community usually considers to be right *or* wrong. With this purpose in mind, a range of phenomena on this middle ground will be discussed where good and bad can generate productive or even creative

[3] Coleman (2021).

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coalitions: *healthy selfishness* in which altruistic and selfish tendencies go together; so-called *Machiavellians*, adolescents who in their interactions with others use a combination of coercive and prosocial strategies, are evaluated as socially skilled, are liked by their peers, and are well-adjusted; the case of *Oskar Schindler*, whose morally problematic qualities were precisely the ones that put him in a position to save thousands of Jews from Hitler's genocide; *black humor* as expressed in sinister or misanthropic jokes by people who, surprisingly, put a low rather than high value on aggression; the existence of *grey hackers* who combine elements of white (good) and black (bad) hacking in their efforts to create transparency in society; the existence of a parent as a *morally bad other-in-the-self* that leads finally to accepting and acknowledging the other as an internalized problematic part of oneself; and forms of *transgressive art*, like Leon Ferrari's work "Western and Christian Civilization," a replica of a North American bomber jet hurtling downward with a wooden figure of the crucified Christ on its fuselage, or Chris Ofili's "The Holy Virgin Mary," in which elephant dung is placed on her right breast. These works, which may be experienced as offensive by adherents to a certain religion at first sight, may have a deeper moral messages and become acceptable and educational after a "second thought" (Chapter 4).

The argument behind this selection refers to the problematic aspect of any view that treats moral good and bad as mere opposites, as mutually exclusive, or as expressions of moral dualism. *If bad is rejected as entirely undesirable and as intrinsically conflicting with good, then, as a result of this rejection, the vitalizing energy of bad as part of a coalition with good would be lost*. The notions of vitality and vitalizing energy are used in the sense of zest, enthusiasm, and strength.[4]

The word "ground" in the concept of the moral middle ground refers, metaphorically, to the natural basis from which *life*, including the energy of the combination of good and bad, emerges and to which it returns. At the same time, the "ground" metaphor refers to the potential *fertility* of the combination of moral good and bad. I prefer it to the usual term "grey areas" because what emerges from this ground is, due to its rich multiplicity, more multicolored than grey. Moreover, the term "ground" creates room for the process of *positioning* as a spatial concept that is central in this book (Figure I.1).[5]

[4] Peterson and Seligman (2004).

[5] For the relevance of the concept of positioning in the social sciences see Davies and Harré (1990), and for its role in Dialogical Self Theory see Raggatt (2012).

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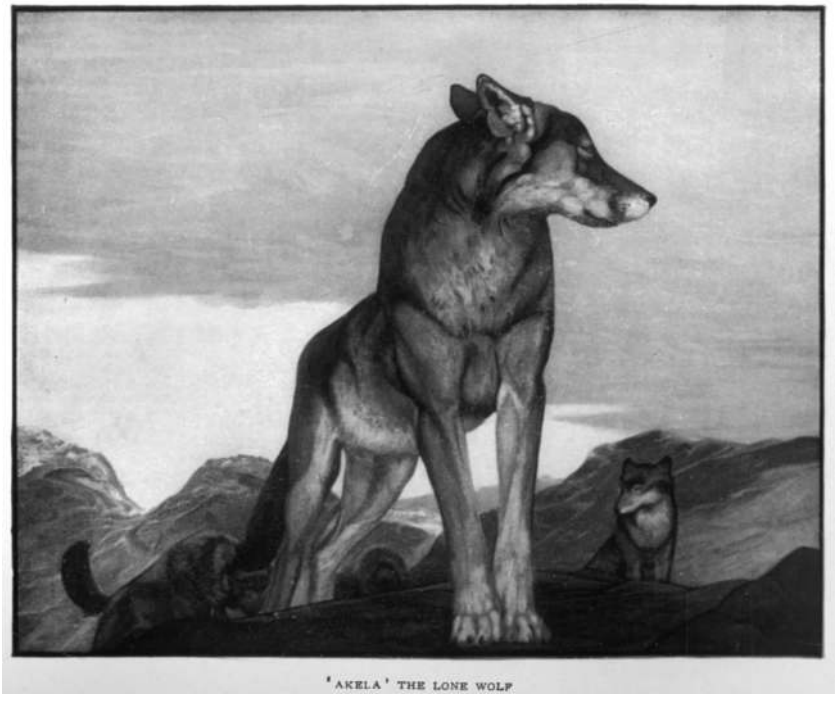


Figure I.1 Akela, also called "Big Wolf," a fictional character in Rudyard Kipling's stories *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *The Second Jungle Book* (1895). He is the leader of a pack of Indian wolves and presides over the pack's council meetings. When at such a meeting the pack adopts the lost child Mowgli, Akela becomes one of Mowgli's mentors. The wolf is portrayed as large, strong, and grey, and he cooperates with the child. I take the grey wolf, as the subtitle of this book, as representing a field of tension between environmental protection and the perception of the wolf as bad.
Source: Transcendental Graphics/Getty Images.

The Flexibility of Definitions of Good and Bad

In this book, I follow a dialectical method in order to demonstrate what the middle ground is but also *what it is not*. With the definitional *flexibility* of good and bad in mind, I decided to devote an extensive discussion to two moral views that have left their marks in human history and that *differ* essentially from the moral middle ground. One is the view that fully *embraces* bad as valuable in itself. The focus is on worldviews that, in strong opposition to the morality of the established institutions of their time, elevate bad to the level of goodness and even holiness so that no

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space is left for the existence of a middle ground. As prominent examples of such revolutionary philosophies, I analyze the works of authors who proposed a radical reversal of bad into good, not removing, sublimating, or changing bad, but adoring it just because it is bad and holds value in itself. In his autobiographical work *The Thief's Journal*,[6] the French novelist Jean Genet appropriates Christian concepts to pursue alternative forms of "sainthood" celebrating theft and betrayal as "virtues." Similarly, in his novel *The 120 Days of Sodom*,[7] the revolutionary writer Marquis de Sade worships crime as "the soul of lust" and observes that "[i]t is not the object of debauchery that excites us, but rather the idea of evil."[8] A more recent instance of reversal of good and bad is *The Satanic Bible*,[9] the codification of the Church of Satan, a religious organization dedicated to Satanism established in San Francisco in 1966 by Anton Szandor LaVey, who served as the Church's High Priest until his death in 1997. He perceived Christianity as a lie that promotes self-denigration and herd behavior and stimulates hypocrisy. The conclusion of the analysis of these works – *The Thief's Journal*, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, and *The Satanic Bible* – is that they advocate the combination of lust and violation of moral norms as a liberating act of protest against the dictates of the official religious institutions, which are accused of hypocrisy and suppressing the vitality of the self (Chapter 2).

A very different expression of the flexibility of good and bad, also essentially different from the moral middle ground, is *rejecting* bad entirely, by radically removing it from one's self and from one's own social group and putting it exclusively in the shoes of the other. Elaborating on this theme, I analyze the worldviews of two political figures who, despite their apparent differences, nonetheless show a remarkable similarity on a deeper positional level: Nazi leader Adolf Hitler's autobiographical and political manifesto *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*)[10] and Vladimir Putin's worldviews as expressed before and after his invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. One of Hitler's biographers, Paul Ham,[11] has made an insightful remark that is, in my view, also applicable to Putin. It is all too easy and lazy, this biographer writes, to brand Hitler as a monster, a psychotic killer, the incarnation of evil, and then walk away as if we have understood his personal influence as the main cause of World War II. The unsettling truth is that Hitler, like Putin in our current time, personified the attitudes of significant parts of the population and still does so in many parts of the world. So, more important than to conclude prematurely what kind of

[6] Genet (2004). [7] Marquis de Sade (1785/1966). [8] Quoted by de Beauvoir (1966, p. 44).
[9] LaVey (1969). [10] Hitler (1939). [11] Ham (2014).

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people Hitler and Putin are, it is more productive to pose the question of how did they *become* that way, followed by the question: What can we *learn* from that? Precisely for this reason, I have dwelled, as a psychologist, on the consequences of these views for the identity construction of their followers (Chapter 3).

An additional reason for including these figures and their stories in this book is because life-historical methods and narrative analyses allow for a deep and rich description of people's moral conceptions as emerging from their social milieux and historical times. Such narratives also reveal the ways in which personal experiences play significant roles in shaping the morality of individuals and communities, for good or for bad.[12]

The structure of the book can be summarized in one sentence: On the moral middle ground bad is neither embraced as good (Chapter 2), nor separated from good (Chapter 3), but interwoven with good in a vital coalition (Chapters 4–6).

What Can We Learn from Moral Psychology?

Motivated by the question of what we can learn from the views presented in the previous section, I started to study recent developments in the thriving field of moral psychology.[13] I decided to include some of these developments in this book because they show us which moral processes occur in the selves of people in their everyday lives. Moreover, they demonstrate what can be our response to our own moral transgressions. Discussion of research in this field leads to the formulation (at the end of each chapter) of a series of practical implications.

For example, as a response to the problem of moral hypocrisy (Chapter 2), explorations in the field of moral psychology show that *self-awareness* manipulations have been found to reduce discrepancies between one's own behavior and relevant personal standards. Moreover, empirical studies have demonstrated that *perspective taking* is found to be a profitable way of reducing hypocrisy. Imagining oneself in the other's position significantly increases moral action.

As a correcting response to the worldviews of Hitler and Putin, or any other leader who puts the morally rejectable in the other group only, I strongly recommend, in the line of recent research in moral psychology, the development of *moral multiplicity* as a counterforce to any premature definition of the self or ingroup as morally unified. Both Hitler and Putin developed a worldview aimed at realizing a purification of their empire by

[12] Zigon (2009). [13] See Ellemers et al. (2019) for a review of studies in moral psychology.

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setting up a powerful propaganda machinery. The consequence was that Hitler became engaged in a project of killing a whole group of people – the Jews – that he defined as polluting the purity of the Aryan race. Likewise, Putin's goal is to clean the population of Ukraine that he sees as polluted by a process of "Nazification" and moral degeneration under the influence of Western sexual liberties, gender liberties, and same-sex marriage. As both dictators placed the moral bad purely at the outside, in enemies or dissidents, they rejected any moral multiplicity, a process that resulted in moral dualism with sharp boundaries between good and bad.

By analyzing the worldviews of Hitler and Putin, I find four common features that I qualify as the "dead ends" of identity construction: *purification*, *dehumanization*, *internal unification/external division*, and *enemy image construction*. They seem to offer a promising future but actually lead to aggression, violence, and even genocide. Along these lines I will argue that many utopic visions (e.g. communism, Nazism, the existence of heaven versus hell in Christianity, teachings of holiness that preach death to unbelievers in some Islamic traditions) often start with ideals of pure goodness but, finally, may result in discrimination, extermination, or genocide. That leads to the conclusion that bad is not simply the opposite of good but, instead, that moral bad is *potentially present* in moral good from the onset. See Figure I.2 for an example of the irreconcilable conflict between heaven and hell as a form of moral dualism.

Investigating the moral implications of the four dead ends, I place them in the context of recent developments in the psychology of morality. I will pay special attention to Albert Bandura's[14] dynamic model of self-sanction because it gives a clear insight in what happens in the self when good people do bad things. I will also elaborate on a highly dynamic model proposed by Stephen Reicher and colleagues that shows how a process that starts with ingroup unification can ultimately result in outgroup annihilation. This led them to conclude that "the way we define ourselves may often be more relevant to genocide than the way we define others."[15] In our thinking of racism, discrimination, and hate, they argue, our gaze is so firmly focused on our perception of the outgroup, and on negative outgroup perceptions in particular, that we almost totally ignore the fact that our definition of ingroup virtue is a first step toward outgroup destruction. Therefore, the researchers conclude that it is "important for psychologists and anti-racists to redirect their gaze and understand the centrality of *self-understandings* to the treatment of others."[16]

[14] Bandura (1990). [15] Reicher et al. (2008, p. 1338). [16] Ibid., emphasis added.

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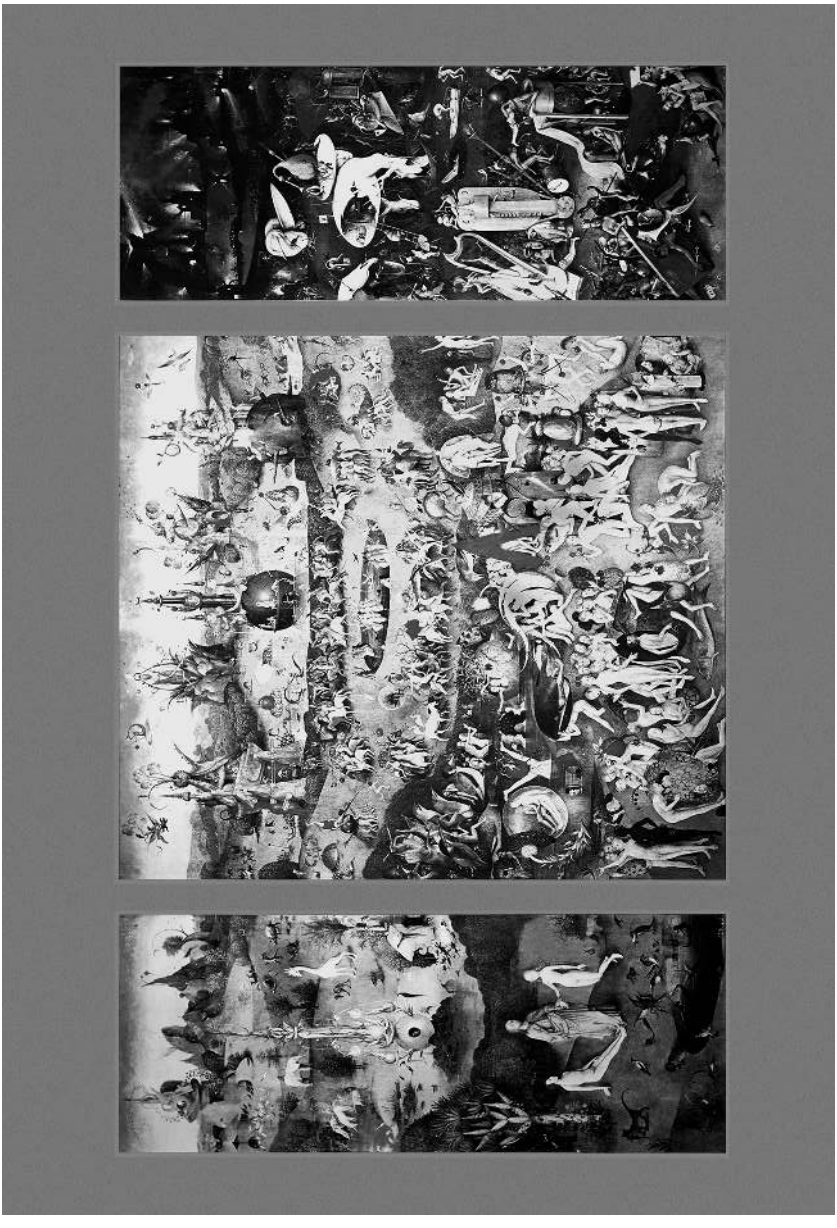


Figure I.2 *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, triptych by Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516). The left panel portrays Eden and the right panel refers to the Last Judgment. The middle panel depicts the fleshly lusts spread over the earth. I take this garden as symbolizing the irreconcilable conflict between good (Eden) and bad (condemnation).
Source: Buyenlarge/Getty Images.

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Dialogical Self Theory as a Bridging Conceptual Framework

Conceptually, the book is based on Dialogical Self Theory (DST),[17] which defines the self as a *dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions in the society of mind*. This nuclear definition of the dialogical self will appear in different parts of the book as it allows us to establish a diversity of relationships with other concepts and theories. DST is developed as a bridging theory[18] that aims to search for productive connections with other developments in the social sciences and beyond.

I-positions function as ways of placing oneself and orienting oneself toward the other and oneself (e.g. I as caring for my children, I as strongly opposed to injustice, I as dreaming about a better future). Moral good and bad are ways of positioning oneself toward the world, and as such they are *subjective* configurations of a relationship with the world. The theory allows these processes to be studied both at the individual level (as I-positions) and at the collective level (as we-positions). Positions are considered to be morally good if they are *judged* by one's social group, society, or culture as beneficial to the physical or psychological well-being of others and oneself (e.g. I support my family members). They are considered to be morally bad when they are judged as damaging the physical or psychological well-being of others and oneself (e.g. I benefit myself at the expense of others).

In stark contrast to dualistic evaluations of good and bad, conceived of as different in their essences, this book starts from the assumption that they are dynamically related in the sense that we can move from one I-position to another one and back and that positions can change over the course of time. Just as individuals or groups can cooperate in society at large, positions in the self also can cooperate in adaptive or maladaptive coalitions. At the moral middle ground, the "meeting" and cooperation of good and bad have the potential of generating hybrid I-positions (e.g. I as grey hacker) or we-positions (e.g. we as violating the law in the service of a sustainable environment) that contribute to the vitalization (increasing zest, vigor, force) of self and society. The middle ground is assumed to be fertile soil for the emergence of coalitions of positions that work as a buffer against sharp good versus bad dichotomies.

I-positions can express themselves with a *voice* so that their needs and purposes can be exchanged with the positions of other people and with other positions in the self. DST assumes that, as part of dialogical

[17] Hermans and Gieser (2012); Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010); Lehmann and Valsiner (2017).
[18] Hermans and Gieser (2012).

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relationships, the tensions, discrepancies, and conflicts amongst positions can be discussed, compared, and shared. The moral middle ground is a space par excellence where dialogues between moral positions have a chance to develop. This aligns with developments in moral psychology where there has been, in the past decades, much debate over the relative merits of deliberative and intuitionist models.[19] Researchers in this field have proposed dual-process models of moral judgment in which emotionally driven gut feelings take primacy but can be overridden by effortful reasoning, leading to more deliberative moral judgments.[20] Such deliberations fit very well with the conception of dialogue between emotion and reason as voiced positions in the self as stipulated by DST[21] (see Chapter 5). Moreover, the principle of dialogue allows discussion, criticism, and correction of alternative or opposing moral judgments and, as such, escapes the problem of "anything goes."

More specifically, the moral middle ground can be defined as a space in the self or between different selves where moral positions, judged as good or bad, come together in coalitions. Sometimes these coalitions feel "natural" (e.g. healthy selfishness) and don't need much dialogical processing. When a tension among these positions is experienced (e.g. I'm helpful but this also feels egoistic), they can be reflected upon and compared in internal and external dialogical relationships. This may result in agreement, disagreement, conflict, or reconciliation of good and bad positions as a basis for decision-making. Moral positioning is a highly dynamic process that is personally, socially, and culturally contingent and may change over time. The middle ground is conceived as an open space where positions are not fixed and static. Positions that are usually considered to be exclusively good or bad can enter the middle ground and become included as parts of good and bad coalitions and stimulate internal or external dialogues. Even when dialogues evoke disagreement and are sometimes experienced as "difficult" or "unpleasant," they have the potential of energizing internal or external processing of moral issues. After all, where there is friction, there is energy. On the moral middle ground this energy stimulates, at the edge of confusion, moral dialogues and controversies (Chapter 6).

The Moral Middle Ground as Part of a Multilevel Identity Concept

Taking into account the dominance of individual and social (group) identity levels in the area of moral psychology, I explore the relationship

[19] For a review, see Ellemers et al. (2019). [20] Feinberg (2012). [21] Hermans (2018).

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