

ENTERING THE MORAL MIDDLE GROUND

Many social and political groups consider each other as enemies rather than opponents with whom one can openly disagree. By introducing the concept of a moral middle ground, this book aims to overcome the perceived separation between good and bad, highlighting the possibility that human actions are permissible, understandable, and even valuable. To elucidate the nature of the moral middle ground and its psychological potentials, the author uses his theoretical framework, Dialogical Self Theory (DST). On the basis of these ideas, he portrays a variety of phenomena, including healthy selfishness, black humor, white lies, hypocrisy, and the worldviews of some historical figures. He then demonstrates how the moral middle ground contributes to the development of a human and ecological identity. As a result, students and researchers in various disciplines, including psychology, literary studies, moral philosophy, political science, history, sociology, theology, and cultural anthropology, will benefit from this book.

HUBERT J. M. HERMANS is Emeritus Professor at Radboud University. He is internationally recognized as the founder of Dialogical Self Theory (DST). He is also the Honorary President of the International Society for Dialogical Science, and he was decorated as Knight in the Order of the Netherlands Lion for exceptional scientific achievements.

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ENTERING THE MORAL
MIDDLE GROUND

Who Is Afraid of the Grey Wolf?

HUBERT J. M. HERMANS

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*To my beloved great-grandson, Damián,
whose birth reminds me that giving and receiving is a
most basic form of dialogue and a precious gift to be
cared for across generations.*

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Preface

On a memorable fall afternoon, my younger brother, Matthew, and I were together in his garden. Sitting side by side, we looked at the sun slowly sinking below the horizon. After some moments of silence, he said: “The Grim Reaper came already around the corner.” I answered: “Can’t we throw a stick between his legs, so that he falls flat on his face and his pace is slowed down a bit?” Matthew smiled broadly, a sign that he liked the remark.

A few months before, Matthew had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and he knew that he would die. Yet, he continued to ride his horses, play tennis, take care of his farm, and have fun with friends. When someone, worried about his health, asked him: “Matt, how are you?” he answered, annoyed: “Please, don’t ask me this, you draw my attention to my illness!” He wanted, as much as possible, to spend his days actively and optimistically and not worry too much about the sword of Damocles that was hanging over his head.

Some weeks before his death, he sent me a short video that showed an old man lying on a bed in an ambulance. A nurse dressed in a white uniform was behind the steering wheel. The destination of the ride was apparently unknown to the man. After some time, he turned his head to the nurse and asked: “Where are we going?” The nurse replied indifferently: “To the cemetery.” In a hoarse voice, the man protested: “But I’m not dead yet!” The nurse replied imperturbably: “We are not there yet.”

Apparently, Matt did not like to talk, in a serious way, about his disease and his upcoming death but preferred to keep it light and tell jokes that made us smile and laugh together. He found a way of addressing the topic of death indirectly, as doing otherwise would feel “too heavy” for him and would make him sad. Instead, laughing together allowed him to address the fate of his death in a way that was bearable to him, and, at the same time, it created a strong sense of intimacy and close contact between us. I had the strong impression that talking about his death with humor gave

him a sense of vitality that helped him to go on, with courage, through this final and difficult period of his life.

The conversations with Matt instigated my interest in what is known as “black humor,” which treats sinister subjects like death, disease, deformity, being disabled, or warfare with bitter amusement and presents tragic, distressing, or morbid topics in comic terms.¹ I realized that this kind of humor has two sides. It is morally questionable to make jokes about events that touch a person’s most personal sensitivities and vulnerabilities because we have learned to assume an attitude of respect for death and dying. At the same time, joking together feels morally acceptable as it provides social support, expresses concern, and stimulates bonding. Apparently, black humor is a kind of behavior in which good and bad come closely together to form a combination that, depending on the moment and context, has the potential of having a vitalizing influence on participants who share the experience.

Black humor is just one of the many topics I want to address in this book as examples of phenomena that occur on the moral middle ground, the area between good and bad: healthy selfishness, Machiavellianism, transgressive art, and many others. I mention black humor only as the first experience that instigated my interest in the topic and motivated me to explore its scale, variety, and energizing impact. I discovered that on this ground moral good and bad form a combination that has its own uniqueness and has, moreover, the potential of contributing to the vitality of self and society.

During the preparation of this book, I discussed the topic with some friends and colleagues. I noticed that many of them were hesitant to bring moral good and bad together and to allow that they can function, in specific situations, as “allies.” Many of my conversation partners preferred to keep them separate and wanted to know whether a particular behavior was morally good *or* bad. I got the feeling that, in their view, good and bad functioned like two magnets that repel each other. I noticed an irresistible tendency on their part to respond with a “thumbs up” or a “thumbs down,” with nothing in between. I wondered where this hesitation comes from, and I posed this question to some of my conversation partners.

Some of them thought the distinction and separation of moral good and bad to be deeply entrenched in our education and upbringing. From childhood onward, we have learned to be rewarded for “good” behavior and to be punished for “bad” actions. From an early age, we are classified

¹ Willinger et al. (2017).

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as a “good girl” or “good boy” or, as vice versa, as a “bad girl” or “bad boy.” If we would persist in clinging to unacceptable behavior, we would be at risk of losing the love and affection of our parents and educators, and this would make us feel unsafe or hurt. The most we could do would be to “test the limits,” but we should not cross any red lines.

Looking at the topic from a broader perspective, I realized that good and bad are deeply associated with the opposition between the clarity of the day and the danger of the night. From the beginning of life, we have come to fear the night as the realm of evil, where light is absent and where we feel unsafe. It is the playing field of thieves, monsters, and witches and a landscape where the law disappears.² In Tolkien’s work, the orcs are a brutish, aggressive, ugly, and malevolent race of monsters who hate the sunlight. In J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter book series, Lord Voldemort, or alternatively the “Dark Lord,” is feared as the most powerful and dangerous dark wizard of all time.

I realized that the separation between good and bad, and its deep connection with light and darkness, was already exposed in the book of Genesis: “And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness.”³ So, good was associated with light and bad with darkness. These associations received explicit form in the tradition of Manichaeism as founded by the Persian prophet Mani (c. 216–274 CE), who believed that the cosmos is involved in a permanent struggle between a good, spiritual world of light and an evil, material world of darkness. This dualistic theology of good versus bad had, via the church father Augustine, a far-reaching influence on the moral groundworks of Christianity.⁴

Initially impressed by the experience and effect of black humor, I became fascinated by phenomena where, in contradiction to moral dualism, good and bad come closely together and form hybrid combinations. Studying a variety of sources in the literatures of the social sciences and philosophy, I decided to explore, in biographies and social research, a variety of phenomena under the label “moral middle ground.” I made it my task in this book to discuss phenomena and processes on this fundament and demonstrate their vital possibilities. In the area in between good and bad there are potentials for self and society that would be lost in any form of moral dualism or toxic polarization where good and bad are thought to be mutually exclusive.

² Gerlach (2022).

³ Genesis 1.4 (English standard version).

⁴ van Oort (2020).

Acknowledgments

This was the most difficult book for me to write in my whole career. Sometimes I had the feeling that it was “loaded with dynamite” as it evoked heated debate with my readers who were willing to provide their critical comments during discussion of the book proposal and, later, the writing of the book. One of them jokingly said: “What is left for you to write, now you have brought God and the Devil together?” Given the explosive nature of the text, I’m extra grateful to my friends and colleagues who discussed its content with me – their comments often occupied my mind until late at night. They were masters of bringing me into a state of inner questioning, doubt, and struggle, sometimes liberating eureka moments.

My first thanks go to Anti Bax, who, as my personal editor, carefully and in a creative way inspected all my texts and gave numerous suggestions that enriched the content and structure of the book. Rens van Loon and Peter Zomer read all chapters of the book and gave their critical and highly useful comments that significantly improved the text. Some other colleagues and friends read selected parts of the text and were willing to give their valuable suggestions: Agnieszka Konopka, Reineke Lengelle, Toon van Meijl, Tim Magee, Cees van der Staak, Durk Stelwagen, and Frans Wijzen. I’m deeply grateful for their commitment and critical remarks that significantly widened my horizons during the struggles and inspirations of the writing process.

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