

C H A P T E R 1



Introduction

I BEGIN WITH A PUZZLE. When I asked people who had rescued Jews during the Holocaust why they had risked their lives—and those of their families—to save strangers, rescuers invariably responded with bewilderment. “But what else could I do? They were human beings like you and me.” When I asked bystanders about this same time period and inquired whether they had done anything to help Jews, I came across the same baffled looks. “But what could I do? I was one person, alone against the Nazis,” was their reply.

The same puzzlement. The same lack of choice. But different perceptions of themselves in relation to others, and vastly different behavior. Identity, it seemed, influenced moral choice. But how, and why? I considered the fascinating complex of relationships among identity, choice, and moral acts in my analysis of the political psychology of rescuers (*Hand of Compassion*, 2004) but was unable, because of space and time constraints, to give it either the documentation or the systematic consideration it merits. This is my purpose in this book.

In particular, I ask if the psychological process of categorization I found so important in explaining altruism among people who rescued Jews also exists—albeit with a different focus and outcome—among bystanders and among those who tacitly or enthusiastically supported or engaged in ethnic, religious, and communal violence and genocide. In broader terms, this book thus continues my exploration of moral psychology by presenting data designed to capture the full range of behavior along a moral continuum.¹

My initial intellectual objective was to explain the psychology of genocide, determining what made some people rescuers while others actively supported Nazi policies or stood by and did nothing. A scholar dealing with the Holocaust, however, cannot long remain involved at only an intellectual level. The human anguish is too great, the emotions too universal, and most of us who write about this dreadful period do so in the hope that, in some small way, our work will help end the kind of pathology that lay at the heart of the Holocaust. I have been disturbed more times than I can recount when, lost in the daily newspaper, I find myself uncertain whether I am reading about current events or my academic research on World War II. The past seems to repeat itself with a vengeance that still catches me unaware. Worse, while the locale changes and the geography and specifics of the political groups involved shift, man’s inhumanity to man seems to remain a constant.

Nor is it only the news that blurs into my research themes. Pieces of literature and films about places far removed from the Holocaust—*The Cellist of Sarajevo* or

Hotel Rwanda, for example—describe psychological processes that feel eerily familiar to me. Identity and, more particularly, our sense of self in relation to others, play a powerful role in our responses to the suffering of others.

I thus became conscious of what should have been obvious all along: the themes found in the Holocaust resonate with other periods of genocide, other instances of ethnic cleansing, other acts of prejudice, discrimination and group hatred, and animosity, just as they resonate with other instances of compassion, heroic altruism, and moral courage. The psychological forces at work during the Holocaust partake of the same political psychology underlying other political acts driven by identity. The same need for affirmation, and the relation such validation can have to group identity and to those who are different, lies at the heart of other important political behavior, from prejudice and discrimination to sectarian hatred and violence on the one hand and forgiveness, reconciliation, and amazing acts of grace on the other.

I slowly realized I faced two challenges. First, I had to untangle the puzzle presented by participants of World War II, constructing the diverse parts of it into something that made sense in the hope that my interviews with rescuers, bystanders, and Nazi supporters were representative enough to lend insight into behavior of others in similar wartime situations. My goal in this part of the analysis was to reveal the political psychology of genocide and to determine whether the altruistic perspective I had detected earlier was part of a broader framework for thinking about ethics that all people share. Second, however, understanding the psychology of genocide meant I had to link my analysis of archetypal behavior during the Holocaust to deeper themes that run throughout other political periods, other instances of prejudice, discrimination, and group hatred that deteriorate into a wide variety of evil acts, from apartheid in South Africa or ethnic cleansing in Bosnia to civil war and political rape in the Congo or Darfur. Doing so resulted in using my analysis of Holocaust interviews to construct an empirically grounded theory of moral choice, one I believe accounts for influences on moral behavior that traditional theories—such as Kant's or Utilitarianism—leave undetected.

This book thus has two closely related goals. As a piece of political psychology, it tries to explain the psychology surrounding genocide. As a work in empirical political theory, it uses the examination of genocide as an analytical lens to bring into focus a critical foundational theme in ethics and normative political science: how we treat others. These goals worked in tandem, and I found making sense of moral choice during the Holocaust helped me appreciate how moral psychology influences our daily lives in a wide variety of situations, producing choices that are sometimes morally commendable and at other times morally neutral or morally repugnant. Ultimately, I developed a new theory of moral choice. Essentially, this theory argues that our sense of self in relation to others shapes and delineates the range of actions we find available, not just morally but cognitively.

This theory begins by assuming we each have a moral framework through which identity sifts and filters perceptions to set and delineate the possible choices we find available and thus can act upon.² The ethical framework is the cognitive scaffolding—akin to an innate ability for language—that is filled in by

life experiences. Its key parts are our self-images, worldviews, and the integration of particular moral values into our self-images. Identity works through the ethical framework to produce an ethical perspective, unique to each individual and situation and developed in phenotypic fashion according to the individual and external influences that frame the situation demanding a moral choice, the person needing help, and so on. It is this ethical perspective that helps us make sense of the ethical situations presented to us. The way we categorize and classify others, our perceived relationship to the person in need, our idealized cognitive models, and our canonical expectations about what constitutes appropriate behavior all work through the ethical perspective to produce both a cognitive menu of choice options we find available and a sense of moral salience, the feeling that the suffering of others is relevant for us and therefore demands action to help, not just a generalized sense of concern or sympathy. These last two factors produce the acts that affect others, whether these acts are morally ethical, immoral, or ethically neutral. The sense of moral salience provides the impetus to act; the menu of choices determines the type of action taken.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

As with my previous work on altruism (*The Heart of Altruism*, 1996) and moral choice (*The Hand of Compassion*, 2004), I begin by listening to ordinary people as they speak about their behavior. Their words are important, for they reveal the minds of the speakers, their self-images, and their way of seeing and making sense of the world. Although I spoke with many people who lived through the Nazi period, some informally, some in formal interviews that were taped and transcribed, I focus on one remarkable and especially rich set of interviews, broadening my own prior narrative interpretive analysis of altruists to also include bystanders and both tacit and enthusiastic supporters of Nazi policies.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on genocide to define it, ask what scholars already know about it, and provide a context within which we can analyze the stories that constitute the heart of the data section of the book. This chapter is important for it makes clear that my findings are not simply about the Holocaust; these findings also suggest how people react to moral challenges in a wide range of situations, extending far beyond genocide. We often think of the Holocaust and World War II as so horrific that they become unique. This is not the case.

Chapters 3–7 contain the interviews in the form of first-person narratives. Parts of Tony's narrative were printed in an earlier book,³ and occasional quotes from other narratives appeared in journal articles.⁴ This is the first opportunity, however, to print all of these narratives in full. I do so for several reasons, some familiar to readers of my earlier work on moral choice. First, the stories constitute a particularly rich data source, one I hope other scholars will be able to utilize to better understand World War II, the psychology of genocide, the importance of cognitive frameworks for choice, and the process by which individuals accord moral salience to the needs of others. As our scientific knowledge of human cognition

expands, such data constitute a valuable historical archive for future analysts to probe using superior methodological tools.⁵

Second, the stories themselves are rich in human drama. They engage the reader's imagination as they reveal the speakers' cognitive frameworks and how the speakers think about ethical issues. Such data present a rare opportunity for the researcher by demanding that the reader engage with them sufficiently to reach an independent judgment concerning the material. This reassures the analyst that there is a natural corrective for the inevitable selectivity inherent in excerpting passages to illustrate analytical points. For this reason, it is important that the interviews precede my own analysis and thus are presented first with no commentary on my part.

Third, narratives provide a unique insight into the human mind, suggesting how decisions are made and how the individual interacts with cultural forces to create the moral life.

Finally, and most simply, the stories are exciting to read. So much scholarly work is dry and analytical that it is a treat—albeit sometimes an unsettling one—to be able to leave behind the world of academia and try entering another time and worldview, even when that worldview is deeply disturbing. I have tried to recreate the experience for the reader in the narratives. To do so, I print the stories with minimal comment and save my analysis until after the reader has had a chance to form an independent impression of the speakers. Only then do I put forward my analysis of the narratives. By placing the stories before my analysis, I hope to provide the reader the opportunity to form an independent judgment and to have a richer context within which to understand and evaluate the analysis I present.

The stories begin (chapter 3) with an interview with Tony, who was a young Dutch cavalry officer when the war began. Tony was extremely articulate, and I had the opportunity to spend time with him over a number of years—from 1988 to 2004—so his interview is both lengthy and insightful. As with all my interviews, I present Tony's narrative in as unadorned a form as possible, with limited editing and no analytical comment. I do so to facilitate the reader's entering into Tony's head, to understand how Tony's ethical framework, and particularly his perceptions of himself in relation to others, worked to limit the choices Tony found available.

The rest of the interviews presented here were selected via a respondent-driven sample because of the speakers' relation to Tony. Chapter 4 presents a narrative interview with Tony's cousin, a woman I call Beatrix. I interviewed Beatrix in her apartment in Rotterdam in 1992. Since the two are related, Beatrix shared many background characteristics with Tony, and she spent much time with Tony's family after her mother died. In terms of behavior, however, Beatrix would be classified as a bystander, whereas Tony was a rescuer.

The most elusive person I interviewed was Kurt, a German soldier whose interview contains fascinating insight on how identity constrains choice. Kurt matched Tony in many background characteristics. Both Tony and Kurt were the only children of affluence, both were in the military, and both saw heavy fighting. Although I never asked directly, and Kurt never volunteered information about his personal participation in Nazi activities, he did express what seemed to be clearly racist

views. At one point Kurt appeared even to question the extent to which the Holocaust existed, or at least to suggest that the magnitude of the Holocaust has been greatly overstated. I classify Kurt only as a soldier who fought for the Nazis. But I found his interview extremely helpful, precisely because it reflects so much ambiguity, dissembling, and—to my mind, at least—self-deception. I present the chapter on Kurt (chapter 5) as reflective of the moral psychology of many Europeans whose support—implicit or militarily—kept the Nazis in power.

Through Tony's contacts at the National Institute for War Documentation, I was able to interview a Dutch collaborator named Fritz. Fritz shared many of Tony's prewar conservative opinions in favor of the monarchy and traditional Dutch values, although he was of working-class origins, unlike Tony and Beatrix, who were Dutch bourgeoisie. But unlike Beatrix or Tony, Fritz joined the Nazi Party, wrote propaganda for the Nazi cause, and married the daughter of a German Nazi. When I interviewed him in 1992, Fritz indicated he was appalled at what he later learned about Nazi treatment of Jews but that he still believed in many of the goals of the National Socialist movement and felt that Hitler had betrayed the movement. I thus classify Fritz as a disillusioned Nazi supporter who retains his faith in much of National Socialism. Chapter 6 is presented as illustrative of the psychology of those who once supported the Nazi regime but who were disillusioned after the war.

Finally, in the summer of 1999, I interviewed Florentine, widow of Meinoud Rost van Tonningen, one of the two top Dutch Nazis during the Hitler period.⁶ Asked to head the SS (Schutzstaffel) for Holland, Florentine's husband instead turned over the position to Florentine's brother. But Florentine's husband served as the Dutch plenipotentiary to the League of Nations during the 1930s and as head of the Dutch National Bank during World War II.⁷ Offered the chance to be secreted to South America after the war by the Nazi leadership, Florentine and her husband elected to stay in Holland to "tell people the truth" about the war. Florentine never knew how or when her husband died, and believed he was beaten to death while imprisoned by the Allies immediately after World War II. Florentine remained an unrepentant Nazi until her death in 2007, traveling as much as her health permitted to speak in favor of the Nazi cause. She was extremely proud of her job as former leader of the Dutch Nazi Youth Movement for Women and was devoted to the memory of her husband. Although the interview is chilling, the chapter on Florentine (chapter 7) makes fascinating reading and offers rare insight into the mind of an unapologetic supporter of genocide, racism, and ethnic cleansing.

Chapter 8 focuses directly on the puzzle that initially intrigued me. Why did all of the participants—rescuers, bystanders, or perpetrators—claim they had no choice in how they treated others during World War II? What caused this feeling, and what accounted for the dramatically different responses toward others? Since my earlier work suggested psychological factors were the critical determinants of altruists' treatment of others, I wanted to try to isolate the psychological component as much as possible, while still utilizing data from a real-world situation. Obtaining four narratives that are so well matched with Tony's offered a unique opportunity to conduct a more systematic analysis of the psychological constraints

on moral choice. I thus chose these five interviews for my published, in-depth analysis and because they serve as an approximate match, designed to control background characteristics as best we can in real-life situations. Certainly, it is striking how, despite their many background similarities, these five individuals' actions locate them at quite different points along a very rough moral continuum. Yet their narratives suggest identity works to constrain choice among all of them.

Chapter 8 also presents other findings I found striking. First, I discovered what I call the ethical framework. I define the ethical framework as the cognitive scaffolding consisting of an individual's self-image, worldview, agency, and the integration of particular values into this self-image. Once filled in by life experiences, each individual's framework produces a particular way of seeing the world and one's self in the world. This creates the individual's ethical perspective. Second, I found knowledge of the critical parts of an individual's ethical perspective are far more important than background characteristics, early childhood socialization, or even traumatic events in explaining the variation in wartime treatment of others. This is true whether the treatment was good, bad, or indifferent. Third, the route through which the critical psychological parts of the ethical perspective exercise their ethical pull is via a process of cognitive classification involving the speaker's expectations about what is normal behavior toward others. The classification schema and categories used by these five individuals as they negotiated their way through World War II accounted for their dramatically different actions during the war and yield insight into other rescuers, bystanders, and Nazi supporters I interviewed.

In chapter 9, I step back from the immediate analysis to contemplate the broader themes and implications of the work and to construct a new theory of moral choice. Doing so suggests there is a critical gap in existing moral theories, especially those that tend to emphasize deliberative reasoning. Utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, religious admonitions, indeed, most existing theories designed to guide our moral behavior and help us understand the ethical acts of others fail to adequately capture what appeared in my analysis to be the critical importance of psychological factors. In chapter 9, I thus propose a new, empirically based identity theory of moral choice. I sketch the outlines of this theory and relate how it was derived from my empirical analysis. I then note important literature in a wide range of fields, from linguistics and cognitive science to primate behavior and neuroscience, which offers scientific underpinnings for the theory. Finally, I suggest how this theory can usefully help us understand other forms of ethical political behavior.

My conclusion presents some thoughts about the implications of this study for our understanding of ethics, moral psychology, and other work on prejudice and genocide. A methodological afterword considers the ethical and methodological issues involved in the research. Appendix A considers the reliability of narrative interviews as a tool for doing social scientific research; a glossary (Appendix B), contains key concepts utilized in my discussion of moral psychology.⁸