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**To Mercedes**

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## ABSTRACT

This work explores the philosophical implications of moral conversion: the fact that, at some point in their lives, people may change their deep-seated convictions, attitudes and patterns of action regarding moral matters in rather unexpected and surprising ways. The fact of moral conversion and the common characteristics of the process are established through the analysis of a compilation of stories of moral conversion from various sources and settings. This analysis yields the definition of conversion as an “existential change” in the person, and six classes of moral conversion are identified. Turning to the philosophical implications of moral conversion, the work examines its possible bearing, first, on the free choice/determinism debate, proposing that a study of moral conversion is of some interest to this discussion because the unpredictability of moral conversion challenges determinism, and because during the process the subject often undergoes certain experiences that may be revealing of free choice. Second, the work examines the implications of moral conversion for the debate on internalism and externalism, proposing that the fact of moral conversion supports an internalist view of morality, i.e., that the intelligible content of moral norms, as understood by the moral agent, is one of the central operative factors in the agent’s adopting (and then living by) the new moral standards.

## INTRODUCTION

This work explores the philosophical implications of the fact that, at some point in their lives, people may change their deep-seated convictions about morality in rather unexpected and surprising ways; that as a result they may adopt views, attitudes and/or patterns of behavior that are generally regarded as morally better than those held previous to the change, even if the moral standards involved appear to be in many ways more challenging; and that these changes take place when people find that their views, attitudes and/or patterns of behavior are in some way unreasonable. The expression *moral conversion* will be used to designate these instances.

The fact of moral conversion itself needs to be established; there is no shortage of views, in both the spheres of common sense and philosophical reflection, that reject the possibility of human beings changing morally for the better. Some would reject it on the grounds of a pessimistic view of human nature, that considers human beings just too strongly drawn towards selfish behavior, dishonesty, inauthenticity, the abuse of power, and other forms of behavior generally regarded as morally lacking. Others would reject it on the grounds of deterministic views that consider the change itself to be impossible, either from the belief that moral behavior is, for good or ill, entirely determined by original, inherited tendencies, or from the belief that change becomes impossible once a

person's moral habits – due to moral education or to the lack of it – settle in, “crystallize,” so to speak.

The fact of moral conversion cannot then be taken for granted; that moral conversion actually takes place has to be proved, and this in turn demands a specific methodology. The problem is addressed by providing, along with the philosophical discussion, a substantial amount of what is called here “narrative evidence”: evidence from real-life stories that exemplify and demonstrate the possibility of moral conversion in very diverse areas of life (political commitment, criminal rehabilitation, career shifts, alcoholic recovery, etc). These are the “narratives of hope” to which the title makes reference. They show that change is possible even in very dark corners of human experience.

Among the main goals of this dissertation, however, is that of demonstrating that these changes take place due to, as was said, the person becoming aware that his/her views, attitudes and/or patterns of behavior are in some way or other unreasonable, and that an interior demand for adopting a more reasonable position in this sense is operative in moral conversion. This claim involves what is often called an “internalist” position in reference to the origin of moral convictions, attitude and behavior. In essence, this view entails that a person's understanding of what is involved in certain moral rules and norms, or in the wider criteria that ground such norms, or even in living a moral life in general, is operative in a person's adopting and living by particular moral standards. A methodological difficulty for defending this view (or its opposite, for that matter: an “externalist” view of morality) is that, as is now commonly accepted, a person's moral

structures take shape (for the most part at least) early in infancy and childhood, when our capacities for introspective examination and for verbally articulating our cognitive processes are not fully developed; as a consequence, our access to cognitive processes during those stages is significantly limited. During moral conversion, however, the person is present to significant changes in these moral structures at an age in which the capacities for an introspective examination and articulation may be fully developed. A study of moral conversion, therefore, may offer a “privileged” window into the cognitive/volitional processes through which the moral structures of a person come into being.

Substantiating this internalist claim, however, requires that the narrative evidence provide, as much as possible, not only an external description of behavioral changes, or a statement of the observable evidence of a person’s moral convictions “before and after” the change took place, but as much insight as possible into the person’s thoughts, motives, reasons, or more generally, the cognitive and volitional processes involved in the change. This requirement imposes the methodological need to focus on a small number of narratives that provide sufficiently rich descriptions, rather than attempt an extensive survey of a statistically relevant number of events that would serve little purpose for this project. (The Appendix groups all the narratives used in one place, some summarized by the author, some transcribed verbatim from the source. Some readers have expressed that they benefited from reading at a certain point the Appendix as a whole, since this gave them a panoramic view of the stories covered, and an idea of their strength when read independently of the author’s commentary.)

The methodology employed, in other words, is in this respect closer to that of the historian than to that of the sociologist. Nevertheless, the variety of stories that, from a common sense point of view, could be considered as instances of moral conversion, is enormous. A framework is required to categorize the narratives and discuss their implications in a meaningful way. None of the available definitions of moral conversion, however, was either sufficiently inclusive or sufficiently specific to accomplish this. It was necessary therefore, as part of the methodology, to develop this framework.

The first third of this dissertation is devoted to these preliminaries. Chapter 1 introduces the notion of “conversion,” as it is often considered, almost identified with *religious* conversion, but not enough to preclude its fruitful use in other areas. Chapter 2 considers some of the few systematic attempts to study religious conversion, from which a more specific characterization of the notion of conversion begins to take shape. Chapter 3 considers how the notion of conversion was developed in the past century by Bernard Lonergan, producing as a result a renewed philosophical and theological interest in conversion and yielding explicitly the distinction between different types of conversion, moral conversion among them. The resulting scholarship produced most of the literature available now that deals specifically with moral conversion.

Chapter 4 presents a dynamic description of religious conversion. Though it does not correlate sufficiently with what can be gathered from narratives of moral conversion, this description helps visualize conversion as a dynamic process, with various stages of building tension (affective, psychological, cognitive, volitional) leading to it.

Chapter 5 develops a threefold framework for both including and categorizing specific instances of moral conversion. It takes into account both a Classical and a modern/contemporary notion of morality (the former focused on happiness, the latter on the ideas of right/wrong and moral obligation), and the possibility of conversion involving changes regarding ideas/convictions, attitude, and a person's coherence in their behavior with regard to their attitude and convictions. Once this framework is set in place, however, further questions arise as to the meaning of "moral conversion," in terms of its boundaries and connections with other important changes. Chapter 6 examines in further detail the distinction between moral and religious conversion, and Chapter 7 the distinction between moral conversion and psychological healing as the goal of psychological therapy.

A more substantial difficulty for a meaningful characterization of moral conversion arises from the observation (substantiated by research on the psychology of moral development) that human beings do as a norm go during their lives through various stages of moral development. Can these changes in the structure of a person's moral thinking be equated with conversion? Chapter 8 addresses this difficulty. In order to do so, it examines in more depth the characterization – presented in Chapter 5 – of conversion in general as an "existential" change, and contrasts this character with the "natural/spontaneous" character of developmental changes. This contrast is found with special intensity in the type of conversion characterized as "sharp-turn," as opposed to instances of "incremental" conversion, which do not show such an emphatic contrast with



normal dynamism of moral development. As a result, “sharp-turn” conversion becomes the focus of reflection in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 9 considers the implications of characterizing moral conversion as existential in terms of the debate on free will and determinism. Moral conversion is often presented in fiction stories as a highly dramatic event, involving intense deliberation and strenuous resolve, and thus such stories suggest that moral conversion may be a privileged setting for certain experiences that could be “revealing” of free will, such as indecision and resolve. A study of real narratives of moral conversion, however, suggests that the actual process is commonly less dramatic – it shows, so to speak, a quality more akin to reaching a conclusion than to reaching a difficult decision. Chapter 9 indicates some possible directions in which moral conversion may be used as evidence in the free will/determinism discussion, when considered in these more measured terms. While the results are somewhat ambiguous, the discussion of this chapter does highlight the importance, for the process of moral conversion, of the role of cognitive operations. This process is analyzed in Chapter 10, using as a working framework Bernard Lonergan’s analysis of cognitive operations, together with Brian Cronin’s reading of Lonergan’s theory of value. The conclusion reached in this chapter is that an examination of narratives of moral conversion supports what will be called a *joined affective/cognitive internalist view of morality*.

## CHAPTER 1

### CONVERSION: THE ETYMOLOGICAL CONTEXT

A first approach to the meaning of “conversion” can be attempted through an examination of the uses that the term (and related expressions) have had in previous times, and the use the word has in the present. The English word “conversion” derives from the Latin “*conversus*,” past participle of the verb “*convertere*” (*con*: toward, with, and *vertere*: to turn, to revolve, to change direction and orientation), which has the basic meaning of “to turn round,” “to change direction,” to revolve or to reverse. While the spatial connotation of the term was basic in its Latin use, it is worth noting that a specifically religious sense of the term accompanied from early times the spatial connotation: in Souter's *Glossary of Later Latin to 600 A.D.*, “*conversio*” is listed as meaning both the revolution of the celestial bodies and the turning of the sinful man to God.<sup>1</sup> The Latin term carries forward the religious meaning of the Hebrew *šûb* (noun *šûbâ*), and of the Greek verbs στρέφω and ἐπιστρέφω (noun ἐπιστροφή) frequently used in both the Old and New Testament, which refer literally to the idea of “turning” or “returning.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John E. Smith, “The Concept of Conversion,” in *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, ed. Walter E. Conn (New York: Alba House, 1978), 51-52.

<sup>2</sup> Catholic University of America, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., 15 vols. (Detroit; Washington, D.C.: Thomson/Gale; Catholic University of America, 2003). “Conversion I (In the Bible).” Art. by E. R. Callahan.

Within religious discourse, the meaning of the term is not univocal; it may be more accurate to speak of a “set of meanings” or a group of analogical notions. “Conversion” can be simply a synonym for “repentance.” It can mean that a person or a group of persons joins - with varying degrees of intellectual, affective, and overall personal commitment - a certain faith, belief, observance, or perhaps a certain denomination within that faith. It can mean the experience of interior assent to the reality of a living God, a meaning that is set sometimes in contrast to the external act of joining a Church. Depending on the source, varying emphasis is put on the importance of external actions as evidence of a “true” conversion. The Christian tradition emphasizes the role of divine grace (which the person should receive with an appropriately open heart) over the subject’s own efforts.<sup>3</sup> Within the monotheistic religions, the need for conversion has been consistently emphasized over the centuries, though any of these meanings may have been in the foreground during different time periods.

Beyond religious discourse, the term “conversion” came to be used in a wide variety of contexts and disciplines, sometimes becoming a technical term relevant to that field, most frequently with the meaning of “transformation,” of “turning something to something.” The term can refer, for example, to a mathematical operation in which a measure is transposed to a different measuring unit: converting Fahrenheit to Celsius, dollars to pounds, ounces to grams. In logic, “conversion” means an exchange in the

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<sup>3</sup> Condâe Bâenoist Pallen and John J. Wynne, “conversion,” in *The New Catholic Dictionary; a Complete Work of Reference on Every Subject in the Life, Belief, Tradition, Rites, Symbolism, Devotions, History, Biography, Laws, Dioceses, Missions, Centers, Institutions, Organizations, Statistics of the Church and Her Part in Promoting Science, Art, Education, Social Welfare, Morals and Civilization* (New York,: The Universal knowledge foundation, 1929). Also, see Emilie Griffin, *Turning : Reflections on the Experience of Conversion*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), 15-16.

position of the subject and predicate terms, while the proposition remains otherwise unaltered. A car can be “converted” to a different type of fuel, electronic equipment to a different energy source, and so forth. When the term is used in any of these senses, however, there is a significant variation from its religious use, in the sense that the transformation implied leaves the subject more or less unaltered. When converting from one unit to another, the ideal is to arrive at a result that is only nominally different from its origin; when “converting” a car or a T.V. set, the idea is that the object will retain its function. When used in religious discourse, instead, the term is consistently used to mean an about-face, an important change of direction in one’s convictions or in one’s way of life, a change that is in some way radical, that goes “to the roots” of personality; a new beginning. Not uncommonly, this change is characterized as abrupt, sudden or “catastrophic.”<sup>4</sup>

When used in everyday language, and in reference to personal attitudes, convictions, and relations in general (in other words, excluding references to non-personal changes, such as those applied to measuring units and electronic artifacts), the term has retained a meaning or set of meanings close to the religious. In fact, it is remarkable how commonly it is employed with an implicit awareness of its religious overtones, which frequently contributes to provide some humor or even sarcasm to the meaning by implying some analogy with the importance and depth of commitment

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<sup>4</sup> John E. Smith mentions that “there seems to be no indication in the etymology at least that the change or turning is sudden or catastrophic” (Smith, “The Concept of Conversion,” 52). But the fact that he has to mention this explicitly is an indication of how commonly conversion is thought of as an abrupt or sudden event. The term “catastrophic” is meant to convey the enormity of the change, at least as subjectively perceived. Originally it was not meant to imply that conversion is something “bad” or “disastrous” (the Greek verb *strepho*, as was mentioned above, is actually the Greek equivalent of *conversio*).

characteristic of religious convictions. (“He converted me to whole wheat pasta.”) With varying degrees of seriousness, the term is thus applied to changes in a person's “way of thinking” about topics as varied as art, economics, government, child rearing, technological preferences or eating habits.

Also in conformity with the religious set of meanings of the term, conversion is meant to be first and foremost an “internal” transformation of the person. The transformation is not expected to be observable directly from without, in the form of organic or physical changes; by “conversion” it is not meant that a person changed her physical appearance - sprouted new organs or changed the color of her skin. Rather, the drama of conversion is played in an internal field of convictions, beliefs, attitudes and emotions, directly accessible only to the subject who is undergoing this process, and, if it becomes known at all to external observers, it is only through acts of communication of the convert.<sup>5</sup> This frequently leaves external parties skeptical or confused, since they have not been present to the internal strife of the convert. Yet on the other hand there is an expectation that, if conversion is true, it will affect the convert's behavior, demeanor and actions: the tree is known by its fruits. This distinction, rough as it may be, between an “internal” and an “external realm” is essential to the everyday understanding of conversion, as are its assumptions regarding the relationship between both realms: that deep changes in personality and convictions will affect a person to the extent that they will be externally observable. It is theoretically possible to deny the reality of such a

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<sup>5</sup> By “accessible” it is not meant a Cartesian-like immediate presence of one's ideas to one's consciousness. At times (as will be mentioned in the last Chapter) the conversion process operates beneath the subject's awareness.

distinction (describing, for example, the “internal” realm in terms of epiphenomena causally related to organic or neurological processes); if the distinction is denied, however, one is left with what will be called an “externalist” notion of conversion, which is not compatible with its everyday understanding.<sup>6</sup>

This should suffice for an etymological introduction to the term. Once one begins to investigate its subtleties, however, it becomes evident that the term rejects univocity. A great number of varying meanings and emphases come to fore. Speaking of religious conversion, for example, one may focus on conversion as a sudden event, rather than a progressive, slowly developing process, and perhaps in that manner suggest the presence of supernatural forces at play during conversion. An emphasis on conversion as a process with a high degree of awareness will be consistent with the view of “justification” – in the religious sense of the term – as essentially connected to the intense experience of a personal encounter with God; whereas this view will oppose conversion as tied to the background work of timely rituals, the action of sacraments, etc. Again, an insistence on the notion of a “conversion of the heart” may oppose a notion of conversion that puts its emphasis on an argumentative or cognitive process (sometimes referred to as the “conversion of the mind”). And so forth. Thus an important part of this work will be to arrive at a notion of “conversion” (not just “religious,” but “conversion” in general) that somehow encompasses these variations and oppositions. There are difficulties involved

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<sup>6</sup> An example of this differing notion will be seen in the next section, when I discuss James Leuba’s treatment of conversion.

in employing a term that has such wide ranges of meaning, but these difficulties are counterbalanced by the depth that its rich tradition brings to this term; and by the fact that the notion has been studied to some degree by philosophy and by disciplines related to philosophy. To these studies I turn now.

## CHAPTER 2

### EARLY STUDIES ON CONVERSION

Studies on conversion have been generally sparse. They received a boost, however, at the beginning of the twentieth century, from a relatively new field of studies: that of psychology of religion. The two milestone studies that opened the door for an application of the methods of psychology to the subject-matter of conversion were published almost in the same year, at the very end of the nineteenth century. Despite their great limitations in terms of their empirical base (the range and number of subjects is rather limited) these studies – one by E.D. Starbuck,<sup>7</sup> the other by James Leuba<sup>8</sup> – are consistently mentioned in later studies; partly because they – especially Starbuck’s – play a significant part in William James’ analysis of conversion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This chapter will consider the contributions of James Leuba, E. D. Starbuck, and William James.

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<sup>7</sup> Edwin Diller Starbuck, "A Study of Conversion," *The American Journal of Psychology* 8, no. 2 (1897).

<sup>8</sup> James H Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," *The American Journal of Psychology* 7, no. 3 (1896).



### **1. James Leuba: “A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena”**

Leuba and Starbuck present some similarities in style, but they vary greatly in their empirical method and in the sophistication of their analysis. James Leuba’s “A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena” focuses on personal interviews and stories. The collection of stories of conversion he uses (that he offers in an appendix to his article) involves in its majority – with one or two exceptions – narratives of alcoholics who at a certain point in their life (marked by some concomitant religious experience, frequently connected to their attendance to a “revivalist” meeting) cease drinking, and from them onwards are able to keep a sober life.<sup>9</sup>

Leuba’s metaphysical assumptions, however, dominate his interpretation of the phenomena from the very beginning: the reader wanting to find an unbiased attempt at elucidating the common patterns found in instances of conversion will probably be disappointed. His article reads as a shrewd attempt to articulate a pan-deterministic interpretation of conversion. Leuba puts together the following elements: (a) An understanding of conversion as essentially a psychological event in which will/effort takes no part; this interpretation is buttressed by the emphasis in “self-surrender” common to reports of conversion phenomena. (b) His reading of a Protestant doctrine of justification according to which no good deeds need to be done in order to achieve justification, nor can good deeds in fact be performed by human beings (unless by divine intervention); as a consequence no “deeds,” or actual transformation in one’s behavior

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.: 371. For some examples from Leuba’s collection, see the Appendix, cases #12 to #18.

seems to be required to be “justified” (“saved,” in a religious sense), but only the experience (in this context, an event of great psychological intensity) of conversion. (c) An Illuminist critique of religious faith as involving specific intellectual content (“dogma”), replacing this notion of faith with one of *emotional support to beliefs*; in virtue of this emotional support, the individual will simply give assent to whatever doctrine or cognitive content is proposed. (d) Scientific theories of his day that equate “will” or “effort” with “the return sensations of muscle contractions.”<sup>10</sup> His conclusion – which may strike the reader as a somewhat original twist – is that the truth of pan-determinism has been present in the doctrines of the Christian churches long before scientists proclaimed it; it is only because of a scholarly obscuring of these doctrines that pan-determinism is opposed.<sup>11</sup> With regard to conversion in particular, the preeminent role given in the narratives to the subject’s “surrender” shows repeatedly that conversion takes place without the will of the subject taking any part on the process, thus contributing to demonstrate the truth of pan-determinism.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “The church denial of the ability of man to do good of himself means nothing more than the recognition of the inefficaciousness of the will-effort. It is here in agreement with the modern psychologists who see in the sense of effort merely the return sensations of muscle contractions.” (Ibid.: 370.)

<sup>11</sup> “However paradoxical it may appear ... modern empirical science cannot claim for itself the discovery of the illusory nature of free-will; that honor - if it is one - must be left to the Christian church, unless Buddhism should claim it. Long before science had reached determinism, experience had led the church to formulate as a fundamental principle of the psychology of the scheme of salvation the utter impotency of the will. To the question, what can men do to obtain salvation? The Christian church has but one consistent answer: Nothing.” (Ibid.: 364.)

<sup>12</sup> “One of the deepest impressions left by the perusal of the conversions we have seen, is the *passivity* of the subjects. They are lookers-on; they attend as spectators the drama that is being played in their consciousness ... But before assuming a quiescent attitude, they pass through a period of self-affirmation, of desperate efforts to bring about the desired salvation, - efforts which are muscular tensions. When their ineffectiveness is recognized, the failure of the will is acknowledged, and resignation to God's good pleasure takes the place of confidence in self.” (Ibid.: 366.)

While it makes for an interesting piece of philosophical discussion, Leuba's analysis is too tightly tied up to his metaphysical agenda; as such, it cannot be taken as an entirely reliable source. The patterns that he discovers in these stories, however, are generally consistent with those we will find in other studies and in more in-depth phenomenologies of conversion. Of particular relevance is the emphasis given to the moment of "self-surrender," the experience of "giving up," an experience that turns up quite frequently in stories of conversion (though not as much in stories of *moral* conversion) and that is usually attributed great importance by the narrators themselves, to the point that not infrequently the experience of self-surrender is deemed *constitutive* of conversion. This emphasis will also be found in Starbuck and in William James.

## **2. E.D. Starbuck: "A Study of Conversion"**

Starbuck's study, done during the last decade of the nineteenth century, involved a detailed questionnaire on different aspects of religious conversion (events leading to it, emotions present, permanence of the effects, etc.), sent to those who would answer it in good will. After selecting the usable ones he was left with 137 answered questionnaires, 51 belonging to male respondents, 86 to female ones, which were later tabulated using a method of linguistic analysis that was surprisingly sophisticated for its time.

The spectrum of topics covered opened the ground to a more varied set of experiences than those presented in Leuba's appendix; however, practically all the answers received were from participants under the age of 27 for males, and 23 for females (not counting some scattered reports from respondents up to 70 years old, which

were eventually excluded from the study).<sup>13</sup> This limited range of participants (possible reasons for the absence of older respondents are not addressed in Starbuck's article) makes his empirical base more restricted than it would be desirable, and his study ends up focusing on adolescent conversion; this to such extent that later scholars sometimes refer to his position as maintaining that "conversion is a phenomenon of adolescence," or at least as "overidentifying" conversion with adolescence.<sup>14</sup>

A further restriction comes from Starbuck's study focusing on conversion as the effect of 19<sup>th</sup> century "revivals" (the most significant dividing factor in his study seems to be whether conversion happened during one of these events or in some other circumstances),<sup>15</sup> which betrays a very specific, somewhat problematic meaning given to the term, if not by Starbuck, at least by many of his respondents: in some of the narratives presented in his study, to be "converted" means essentially the act of spontaneously "going to the altar" during a revivalist ceremony and giving public witness of this experience, to the point that "conversion" and "going to the altar" becomes, for many of his respondents, equivalent expressions. (It is significant that no Catholics, for example, participated in Starbuck's survey; rather, the empirical base is clearly composed of members of "revivalist" churches that deal with their rather specific understanding of the

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<sup>13</sup> Starbuck, "A Study of Conversion," 271.

<sup>14</sup> See Seward Hiltner, "Towards a Theology of Conversion in the Light of Psychology," in *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation* (New York: Alba House, 1978), 179; Wayne Oates, "Conversion: Sacred and Secular," in *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation*, ed. Walter E. Conn (New York: Alba House, 1978), 154.

<sup>15</sup> Starbuck compares the ages in which conversion is more frequent with factors related to puberty and growth, and concludes that both are closely related, except that revivals ceremonies seem to accelerate the process (the curves for such types of conversion precede the normal curves by up to 2 years). (Starbuck, "A Study of Conversion," 272-278.)

term “conversion.”) The snippets of witnesses that Starbuck reproduces (the whole questionnaires are not reproduced in the study) leave room to wonder whether his respondents were really talking about some sort of radical change in their outlook on life, or whether they are just using the term “conversion” in the way their community uses it, as a code word for “going to the altar” after feeling interiorly the spontaneous motivation to do so. Starbuck, unfortunately, does not seem entirely aware of this peculiarity in the meaning given to the term by his respondents; at least, he does not explicitly formulate any specific warning. (Nor does William James, who follows Starbuck closely, emphasize this point enough, if he was aware of it at all; James’ analysis will be consequently accompanied by similar caveats).<sup>16</sup>

With these limitations in mind, Starbuck’s study has an abundance of merits. He examines many aspects of conversion, regarding its apparent motivation, the process that leads to it, and even looks at a range of phenomena that present similarities to conversion. Starbuck looks at motivating factors, for example, and presents a list of what seem to be the most common factors leading to conversion, distinguishing among eight different categories: fears; “other self-regarding motives” (approval of others, heaven, virtue as something good for oneself); altruistic motives (the wish to please others, the wish to exert good influence on others, love for God...); following out a moral ideal (such as duty, controlling one’s passions, etc.); remorse and “conviction” (by which is meant a

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<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, Starbuck does phrase this phenomenon carefully enough to conclude that he is not implying this is the only possible form of conversion: he concludes for example that “if the cases which constitute this study are representative, it appears that early adolescence is the golden period at which there may be a definite, *radical readjustment of one's religious nature.*” (Ibid.: 278; emphasis mine.)

state of anxiety provoked by the “sense of sin”); response to teaching (meaning an intellectual response to readings and sermons); example and imitation (ranging from mere imitation to sympathy with a great personality).<sup>17</sup>

Starbuck notices, unsurprisingly perhaps, that social pressure and imitation seem to be very common factors in revival situations; however, he makes the interesting observation that this does not necessarily mean that conversions in revivals are due to social pressure. The factors “sense of sin” and “fears” are mentioned in these cases less frequently than in non-revival cases. Starbuck concludes,

this is evidence that the charge we so often make against revivals, that they stir up unduly lower religious incentives, such as fear, is not altogether just. They do not so much *awaken* these highly emotional states as appeal to those instincts already at work in the consciousness, and which would probably show themselves spontaneously a year or two later . . . The effect of revivals is to hasten the working of specific motives.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, it may be unwarranted to conclude that, because of the social pressure involved, the “conversion” should be attributed only to this pressure: it may very well be that there are other forces at play, that find a proper opportunity to manifest themselves when the pressure of the revival situation weakens other types of resistance.

Also of interest is the fact that in the younger (adolescent) respondents, self-regarding motives (particularly fears) appear to be predominant, and in older subjects their influence gradually decreases, while altruistic and moral ideals grow in number. We find already in this observation a germ of what will be later developed in great detail, for example, in Kohlberg’s theory of moral development.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.: 278-280.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.: 282.

It is interesting to note that, while Starbuck is open to integrate into his explanation the presence of psychological forces, his emphasis is not on deeply subconscious processes of which we might be mostly unaware (in the technical language of his time, “automatisms”), but on a more conscious type of phenomena: what he calls the sense of sin (or, in the words used by the communities he examines, the “conviction of sin”), a feeling of anxiety that may be sometimes magnified to the last degree of dejection, humility, confusion and uncertainty.<sup>19</sup> This “conviction,” he notices, varies in its manifestations according to age. Not surprisingly, given that the respondents are in a great majority in their adolescence, the sense of sin is frequently referred to in relation to sexual sins and temptations. Of deeper significance, though, is the fact that a “proper” sense of sin (dejection, awareness of recurrently “falling short,” etc.) is found more frequently in older subjects; in younger subjects, this anxiety seems to be tied instead to what Starbuck calls an “upwards-going” sense of imperfection or incompleteness,<sup>20</sup> a “wanting something and not knowing what,”<sup>21</sup> “longing for something out of reach”<sup>22</sup> which gives rise to the aforementioned feelings of anxiety, restlessness, depression, helplessness.<sup>23</sup> Starbuck describes this state as “a struggle after larger life,”<sup>24</sup> largely positive, but often accompanied by uncertainty and distress. Comparing both, the feeling of incompleteness appears as a more frequent adolescent experience, while the sense of sin proper appears in older subjects, usually accompanied by a “wayward” personal

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.: 278-288.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.: 284-288.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.: 284.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.: 289.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.: 284.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.: 288.

history. These experiences are very frequently present before conversion happens. They are not present always, though, and Starbuck notices that there may be also cases in which practically no feeling precedes the moment of conversion.<sup>25</sup>

Starbuck complements these observations with a tabulation of what he calls the “conscious element” in conversion. In his study, what is “conscious” represents “an element of purpose, insight and choice as distinguished from mere response to environment, reaction to physiological stimuli and blind determination.”<sup>26</sup> Indicating that this may be the most uncertain part of the discussion, Starbuck mentions as an interesting feature “the apparent smallness of the intellectual factor among the conscious motives to conversion, and also of the volitional element at the time of the change.”<sup>27</sup> (“Conscious following” out of teaching was mentioned only in 7% of the samples, and “response to moral ideal” in only 20%, while “external forces” were mentioned in 40%.)<sup>28</sup> Once this is said, the persistent struggle often shown during “conviction,” indicates in Starbuck’s opinion “the presence of incipient ideation and volition.”<sup>29</sup> To support this, he mentions how public confession is often made in spite of adverse surroundings, and the fact that

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.: 287.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.: 292.

<sup>28</sup> Starbuck distinguished between 5 gradations according to the prominence of the “conscious” element:

1. Those in which it was absent or nearly so (largely cases of imitation, adolescent ferment and the like).
2. Those in which it is small.
3. Those in which both conscious and “automatic” forces are equally balanced.
4. Those in which there was an apparent predominance of insight, moving along a clearly marked course.
5. Those in which the conscious element seems the determining factor.

Starbuck notes that age has much to do with the placing in this series, both in males and females. Revival cases are mostly set in the first two categories, while non-revival are set among the two last, though this is related somehow to the number of females, whose “conversion” is generally earlier; in females the “automatic” forces seem to be in predominance, and in males, evenly balanced. (Ibid.: 294.)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.: 292.



self-surrender generally means that the subject is drawn between two possible courses, and must decide between them.<sup>30</sup> By assigning thus a significant role to voluntary choice, Starbuck clearly sets his account on a different course from Leuba's. In the end, the overall picture seems to be "a flow of unconscious life rising now and then into conscious will, which, in turn, sets going new forces which readjust the sum of the old thoughts and feelings and actions."<sup>31</sup>

At this point it is possible to see an opposition between Leuba's account and Starbuck's, that illustrates one of the central points under discussion in this dissertation. Leuba's position, which can be characterized (in terms later to be defined in detail) as "externalist," explains conversion as a process in which the variety of psychological forces converge without the person's cognitive life having any contribution to the outcome. Starbuck's view, which can by contrast be characterized as "internalist," is that, while "a flow of unconscious life" must be acknowledged as a significant factor in the process, the process of conversion is also influenced, to a varying extent (small, according to the importance given to it by the respondents), by "an element of purpose, insight and choice," or the presence of "ideation and volition."<sup>32</sup>

Starbuck also draws to consideration another theme of central importance to this study: a discussion on whether conversion should be regarded as a somewhat accidental phenomenon – an anomaly perhaps -, or whether some types of conversion may be considered part of the natural development and growth of the human person – thus to be

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.: 294.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.: 292.

found, and even expected, at certain points during the course of a person's life. Starbuck begins to consider the possibility of inserting conversion into "stages of life" models of human development – an insight that predates the theories of a number of twentieth-century investigators (Erikson, Guardini, Jung), who observed that the span of a normal person's life could be structured into "stages" or "ages," each with distinctive characteristics, views, aims and goals, and that the passage from a stage to the next would sometimes be fraught with strife and the possibility of failure.

Suggesting a move towards a notion of conversion wider than the specifically religious one, Starbuck characterizes the phenomenon he is studying as

not a matter for the churches alone. It is under certain conditions a *vital, normal step in individual growth* . . . It should be recognized as never before that a birth into new life is something that belongs to human nature.<sup>33</sup>

With regard to the specific characteristics of this process, says Starbuck,

Conversion is primarily an unselfing. The first birth of the individual is into his own little world. He becomes conscious and self-conscious. The universe is organized about his own personality as a centre. His own will is law. His own individual insight is order . . . A clash is apt to come between the self and whole . . . He must learn to submit himself to [the larger world] and be guided by a larger life outside his own. With new insight comes new beauty. Beauty and worth awaken love . . . The individual learns to transfer himself from a centre of self-activity into an organ of revelation of universal being.<sup>34</sup>

The period of adolescence is naturally the time for the awakening into the larger life. Biologically that is the period when the person begins vitally and physiologically to reach out and find his life in another. The life of two united in love, each making demands on the other, and living for each other, becomes the centre of organized life . . .<sup>35</sup>

An "unselfing" (or, to borrow a term from Piaget, a "de-centering") seems to be the characteristic move at this stage; the adolescent, who is characterized as strongly self-

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.: 307 (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.: 303.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

centered, is called to reach out into a “larger world” – a passage to be described, not merely or invariably as moving from selfishness to altruism, but as an expansion of the young person’s horizons into the larger world of relations and community that he or she is invited to join in full. Conversion in this sense “brings the individual into closer relation with the objective world: persons, nature and God.”<sup>36</sup>

The life is continually prodded by forces from without. Reverses in life, deaths, the example of a beautiful personality, ideas from other people, the demands of established institutions, and the like, are frequently mentioned as among the things which shake the life from its self-content, and lead it into a recognition of a larger world than its own.<sup>37</sup>

In this manner, Starbuck expands the concept of conversion to include notionally a type of change that can be integrated into models of “normal” moral and psychological development, “normal” meaning in this context an empirical or descriptive notion. (That these may be considered normal occurrences does not subtract from the *pathos* and the strife characteristic of these transformations.) This is helpful, in the sense that it opens up the possibility of understanding “conversion” in less narrow terms than the religious – particularly than the rather narrow terms in which conversion is understood in the Revivalist context that constitutes the background of Starbuck’s investigation. It is less helpful in another sense: characterizing conversion as a “normal” occurrence brings up enormous difficulties at the time of distinguishing conversion from normal development (moral or otherwise), and dilutes the sense of “extraordinariness” that – it is claimed here – is characteristic of conversion. The thesis of this work will go on a different direction,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.: 297.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.: 294-295.

distinguishing instances of moral conversion from normal moral development, yet suggesting the possibility of integrating both.<sup>38</sup>

### **3. William James on conversion**

In his famous work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), William James devotes two chapters to the matter of conversion.<sup>39</sup> He does not diverge much from Starbuck (though he does expressly criticize Leuba on more than one occasion),<sup>40</sup> but he places the matter within the larger context of his theory of religious experience. Within this context, we can find in James two distinct but related notions of conversion. One is as follows:

To say that a man is ‘converted’ means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy.<sup>41</sup>

This first notion is close to one of the most usual meanings of *religious* conversion, in which a person’s life becomes substantially illuminated by religious knowledge, and his/her goals and aims – previously either diffused or focused on something else – become focused on religious goals and aims.

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<sup>38</sup> See Chapter 8.

<sup>39</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience; a Study in Human Nature: Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (New York: Mentor Books, 1958); Lecture IX, “Conversion,” and Lecture X, “Conversion Concluded.”

<sup>40</sup> James says of Leuba that he “subordinates the theological aspect of the religious conversion almost entirely to its moral aspect.” Leuba, says James, defines the religious sense as “the feeling of unwholeness, of moral imperfection, of sin, to use the technical word, accompanied by the yearning after the peace of unity.” “The word ‘religion,’” he says, “is getting more and more to signify the conglomerate of desires and emotions springing from the sense of sin and its release.” *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

The second notion of conversion that we find in James responds to his contrast between what he calls the “healthy-minded” and the “sick-soul.” In James’ terms, there are

two ways of looking at life which are characteristic respectively of what we called the *healthy minded*, who needs to be born only once, and of the *sick souls*, who must be twice-born in order to be happy. The result is two different conceptions of the universe of our experience. In the religion of the once-born the world is a sort of rectilinear or one-storied affair, whose accounts are kept in one denomination . . . and of which a simple algebraic sum of pluses and minuses will give the total worth. Happiness and religious peace consist in living on the plus side of the account. In the religion of the twice-born, on the other hand, the world is a double-storied mystery. Peace cannot be reached by the simple addition of pluses and elimination of minuses from life. Natural good is not simply insufficient in amount and transient, there lurks a falsity in its very being . . . It keeps us from our real good, rather; and renunciation and despair of it are our first step in the direction of the truth. There are two lives, the natural and the spiritual, and we must lose the one before we can participate in the other.

In their extreme forms, of pure naturalism and pure salvationism, the two types are violently contrasted; though . . . the concrete human being whom we oftenest meet are intermediate varieties and mixtures. Practically, however, you all recognize the difference: you understand, for example, the disdain of the Methodist convert for the mere sky-blue healthy-minded moralist; and you likewise enter into the aversion of the latter to what seems to him the diseased subjectivism of the Methodist, dying to live, as he calls it, and making of paradox and the inversion of natural appearances the essence of God’s truth.<sup>42</sup>

In this context, conversion is understood as a process by which “a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.”<sup>43</sup>

Conversion in this sense is salvation for the “sick soul.”<sup>44</sup> The two themes, however - the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 140-141.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>44</sup> On the term “soul,” James specifies: “When I say ‘Soul,’ you need not take me in the ontological sense unless you prefer to; for although ontological language is instinctive in such matters, yet Buddhists or Humians can perfectly well describe the facts in the phenomenal terms which are their favorites. For them the soul is only a succession of fields of consciousness: yet there is found in each field a part, or sub-field, which figures as focal and contains the excitement, and from which, as from a centre, the aim seems to be taken.” (Ibid., 161.)

distinction between the healthy-minded and the sick-souls, and the role of conversion in the context of that distinction – are not satisfactorily integrated. If, for example, we consider conversion as the unification of a divided self, it is not clear what role it plays in the life of the healthy-minded. I will not attempt to tie these loose ends here, but rather examine what new insights regarding conversion can be extracted from James' analysis of the subject.

An insight of great importance is the distinction that James makes between psychological well-being, and the status of the “sick soul” after conversion. What conversion brings is *not* a unification such that the existential anguish or sadness of the sick soul disappears. Thus James says of Tolstoy and of Bunyan,

They had drunk too deeply of the cup of bitterness ever to forget its taste, and their redemption is into a universe two stories deep. Each of them realized a good which broke the effective edge of his sadness; yet the sadness was preserved as a minor ingredient in the heart of the faith by which it was overcome.<sup>45</sup>

Further in the same lecture, James makes a similar comment on one Mr. Alline, a very austere Christian minister:

We must class him, like Bunyan and Tolstoy, amongst those upon whose soul the iron of melancholy left a permanent imprint. His redemption was into another universe than this mere natural world, and life remained for him a sad and patient trial.<sup>46</sup>

James is here putting his finger on the distinction between *psychological* and *religious* conversion, based in turn on a more general distinction between what may be termed psychological or psychic well-being, and other types of well-being (moral, religious) corresponding to other dimensions of human goals and aims. In a discussion of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 179.

moral conversion there is a similar danger of confusing it with *psychological* conversion; James' observation alerts us against doing so.<sup>47</sup>

James applies his analytical mind to the discovery of many helpful distinctions and qualifications regarding the concept of conversion. One such qualification is the distinction between *gradual* and *abrupt* conversions, which he names *lysis* and *crisis* respectively.<sup>48</sup> This distinction is of tremendous importance, because it arrests a tendency to consider as conversions only highly dramatic events, sudden in their manifestation. The distinction allows for a notion of "conversion" inclusive of both types.<sup>49</sup>

Further along, James presents a closely related distinction: that between a *volitional-type* and a *self-surrender-type* of conversion.<sup>50</sup> The volitional type (a "conscious and voluntary" type of conversion) usually coincides in James' analysis with the "gradual" type of conversion. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate much on the relation of the two themes; he merely adds that the volitional type is "usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits."<sup>51</sup> Implicit in his characterization of this type seems to be a high degree of cognitive

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<sup>47</sup> Some authors have accused James of identifying psychological with religious conversion (Griffin, *Turning*, 139-141). It is possible that he may confuse them at times, but the texts quoted above show that this was not his intended view.

<sup>48</sup> "The older medicine used to speak of two ways, *lysis* and *crisis*, one gradual, the other abrupt, in which one might recover from a bodily disease. In the spiritual realm there are also two ways, one gradual, the other sudden, in which inner unification may occur." (James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 152-153).

<sup>49</sup> Partly the reason why people may tend to conceive conversion in terms of the "abrupt" variety is that such instances may be considered, by reason of their dramatic quality, "worth telling." Thus the number of available narratives of one type or other will probably not be representative of the actual distribution of instances of conversion on one type or another.

<sup>50</sup> James attributes this distinction to Starbuck, and indeed it is present in Starbuck's study; but it is James who names it in this way and calls our attention to it.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

awareness and a high ratio of intention and self-determination among the causal factors.

The *self-surrender* type, instead, (which is mostly correlated to the *abrupt* type of conversion) is the topic of a much more detailed analysis by James. It is characterized by an intense struggle, both moral and/or intellectual; the person is both struggling towards a position that he/she sees as true and/or right, and resisting it. The struggle is finally resolved when the person “surrenders,” “gives up,” ceases resisting. William James follows closely on Starbuck’s steps, analyzing this experience of self-surrender in terms of emotional/subconscious buildup.<sup>52</sup>

These two conversion types are, in James, complementary. Speaking of the volitional (i.e. gradual) type, James says,

But there are always critical points here at which the movement forward seems much more rapid ... Our education in any practical accomplishment proceeds, apparently by jerks and starts, just as the growth of our physical bodies does.”<sup>53</sup>

And further below,

. . . the difference between the two types is after all not radical. Even in the most voluntarily built-up sort of regeneration there are passages of partial self-surrender interposed; and in the great majority of all cases, when the will has done its uttermost towards bringing one close to the complete unification aspired after, it seems that the very last step must be left to other forces and performed without the help of its activity. In other words, self-surrender becomes then indispensable.<sup>54</sup>

A third useful distinction in James is that between *new birth*-type and *layered* conversions.<sup>55</sup> What James is alluding to (without spelling it out in such terms) is how, in

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<sup>52</sup> Leuba, as was mentioned above, focuses on this experience in his analysis of conversion, concluding from it the fact of pan-determinism. James does not intend to suggest that religious experience (and conversion, in particular) can be understood in full as the result of “independent” (i.e. externalist) subconscious processes; rather, he regards the psychological dimension as one aspect of many that take part in the understanding of religious experience.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-158.



certain instances of conversion, the direction required seems to be towards such a radical change that the person fears his/her identity will disappear in the transformation. The person needs to be ready to “die and be born again”; not a literal death, of course, but an intense, daunting experience of transformation nevertheless. By a *layered* conversion, in contrast, James is alluding to the fact that, in some cases, the transformation just follows in the direction of or flows from earlier conversions. Some things must be given up, some new habits and perspectives must be adopted, but the process does not entail the “about face” with which conversion is usually identified. Rather, it consists in a progression through successively higher “horizons”: when the person looks back on earlier developments, she realizes they were oriented in the right direction, but incomplete.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, James also opens the door to the consideration of a specifically *moral* conversion, but this theme is presented only as a side comment when James describes a conversion “to the systematic religion of healthy-mindedness.”<sup>57</sup> In the same section, James also offers another interpretation of the concept of conversion, what he calls the possibility of “counter-conversions,” as in the case he relates of a man that underwent “a sudden conversion to avarice.”<sup>58</sup> But neither of these themes is developed more fully in James’ analysis.

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<sup>56</sup> The image of “horizons” suggests that there is an asymmetric element in conversion. While a higher point of view can incorporate the lower ones, the reverse may not be true. The converted person usually acknowledges the transformation as a necessary, useful step; but from the point of view of the situation previous to conversion, this step may be seen as unnecessary, utterly ignored, feared or even ridiculed.

<sup>57</sup> Specifically, James tells the story of one Mr. Horace Fletcher, who when he found out about “the self-control attained by the Japanese through their practice of the Buddhist discipline,” applied this possibility of absolute self-control to himself and very quickly got rid of his tendency to anger and worry. (Ibid., 150-151.)

These paragraphs sum up what was essentially a short era of psychological studies on conversion. After William James there is a gap in terms of significant scholarly developments on this area. A few decades later, when the discussion on conversion resurfaces, it is in most part due to its central importance in the philosophical and theological developments of Bernard Lonergan. In this context there is a renewed interest in the matter of conversion (a renewed interest that makes many go back to these earlier texts in search of material), and for the first time, an explicit, systematic distinction is formulated that makes it possible to talk specifically of “moral conversion.”

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 148.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONVERSION IN BERNARD LONERGAN: AN OVERVIEW

In the second half of the twentieth-century, the philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan revitalized the interest of Christian thinkers (particularly theologians) on conversion when he assigned it a constitutive place, not just in theological and moral reflection, but in his epistemology: in Lonergan's thought, epistemologically sound knowledge of any kind has to be grounded in the *intellectually converted* subject – a subject that has personally gone beyond epistemologically problematic positions (such as naïve realism or idealism), and achieved the sounder view of a *critical realism*. Furthermore, Lonergan explicitly distinguished between a *religious*, a *moral* and an *intellectual* conversion,<sup>59</sup> opening the ground to the study of moral conversion not just as an anomalous case of religious conversion (as seems to be the situation in James' sparse references to moral conversion), but as a specific type of conversion in its own right.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Later on, a number of Lonergan scholars incorporated into their own treatment a fourth type, *affective or psychic conversion*. Though each did this on their own and in slightly different manners, the incorporation of this type to the list has been generally accepted among Lonerganians.

<sup>60</sup> The key texts for conversion in Lonergan are in Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973; reprint, 1994 in Paperback by University of Toronto Press), 237-243. A very detailed analysis of the evolution of the notion of conversion in Lonergan can be found in Michael L. Rende, *Lonergan on Conversion: The Development of a Notion* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991). Rende traces the appearance of this and related notions in Lonergan thought throughout his whole work. It is to be noted, though, that the book slips frequently into what seems a common habit in

## 1. *Intellectual conversion*<sup>61</sup>

Much in the way in which the moral standard is for Aristotle the virtuous man, the standard for epistemologically sound knowledge is in Lonergan the *authentic subject*, the person that has attained the proper intellectual habits that permit him or her to be attentive to the data of the senses, grasp what is relevant in the empirical data with reference to the questions at hand, and habitually reflect on his or her judgments to corroborate that they are based in sufficient evidence. In Lonergan, however, there is a need for intellectual conversion in order for a person to attain these habits.

The need arises from the pervasive presence of a number of wrongful assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge, that obstaculize the development of such proper habits. Most common among these obstacles is “the myth that knowing is like looking.”<sup>62</sup> This myth overlooks the distinction between the world of immediacy (the world of the infant) and the world mediated by meaning. Attachment to this myth engenders the position known as “naïve realism,” whereas an excessive reaction against it engenders positions such as empiricism and idealism, which rather than solving the problem of knowledge, only succeed only in narrowing its range.<sup>63</sup> Overcoming these “counter-positions” (in order to achieve the Lonerganian epistemological standard of “critical

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Lonergan studies on conversion: the notion is used as an entry point to discuss Lonergan’s philosophy as a whole, but the notion of conversion itself is rarely developed enough to satisfy the reader.

<sup>61</sup> For a detailed account of intellectual conversion in Lonergan, see Richard M. Liddy, *Transforming Light: Intellectual Conversion in the Early Lonergan* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1993).

<sup>62</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 238.

<sup>63</sup> “The consequences of the myth are various. The naïve realist knows the world mediated by meaning but thinks he knows it by looking. The empiricist restricts objective knowledge to sense experience; for him, understanding and conceiving, judging and believing are merely subjective activities. The idealist insists that human knowing always includes understanding as well as sense; but he retains the empiricist’s notion of reality, and so he thinks of the world mediated by meaning not as real but ideal.” (Ibid., 238-239.)

realism”) entails undergoing a substantial shift in our conceptions with regard to what it means to know, reshaping one’s (originally naïve) assumptions and one’s view of the world that is thus known. Lonergan calls this shift “intellectual conversion.”

Intellectual conversion is a radical clarification and, consequently, the elimination of an exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth concerning reality, objectivity, and human knowledge. The myth is that knowing is like looking, that objectivity is seeing what is there to be seen and not seeing what is not there, and that the real is what is out there now to be looked at.

To be liberated from that blunder, to discover the self-transcendence proper to the human process of coming to know, is to break often long-ingrained habits of thought and speech. It is to acquire the mastery in one’s own house that is to be had only when one knows precisely what one is doing when one is knowing. It is a conversion, a new beginning, a fresh start. It opens the way to further clarifications and development.<sup>64</sup>

However, while Lonergan refers to this meaning in most occasions in which he talks of “intellectual conversion” (namely, to overcoming “the myth of knowing as looking”), it does not seem to be Lonergan’s intention to restrict the notion of intellectual conversion to this specific meaning. The fact that he addresses mostly this position (and its related, empiricism and idealism) when using the expression seems to be a consequence of the context of his investigation. Consequently, Lonergan scholars have often explicitly expanded the notion of intellectual conversion to include instead any epistemological shift that turns the subject away from positions that obstruct the achievement of a critical realism. Such is the case, for example, of Walter and Joann Conn, who talk of “cognitive conversion” as “the discovery of oneself as a knower” – another requisite, in their view, of critical realism.<sup>65</sup> It would be consistent with Lonergan’s intention to give the expression an even wider meaning, in order to include

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 239-240.

<sup>65</sup> Walter E. Conn and Joann Wolski Conn, “Conversion as Self-Transcendence Exemplified in the Life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux,” *Spirituality Today* 34 (1982).

any substantial epistemological shift on the part of the subject that helps the subject achieve a more sound epistemological position.

## **2. Moral conversion: a shift from satisfaction to value**

Lonergan does not treat moral conversion systematically; after establishing the distinction between the three types of conversion already mentioned, he provides only a brief sketch of moral conversion. It will be up to Lonerganian scholars to develop the meaning of this notion, not without encountering a number of difficulties on the way. Perhaps the most notable difficulty is found in trying to explicate Lonergan's most straightforward definition of moral conversion as *a change in the criterion of one's decisions and choices from satisfaction to values*.<sup>66</sup> This notion of moral conversion is based on his distinction among three *levels of the good* – the good of satisfaction/desire, the good of order, and value. Explicating the notion of “value” in particular will be the cause of many headaches for Lonerganians.<sup>67</sup>

The first “level of the good” identified by Lonergan is that of *good as the object of desire* – i.e. of particular desires such as sleeping, eating, acquiring things, etc. This level can be characterized by a certain immediacy (the person considers not long-term goals, or potential conflicts with their future well-being, but what they desire here and now), and by self-centeredness (the person does not, at least in a first moment, consider others' desires that may need reconciling with his/hers). At this level, the criterion for decision-making is that of *satisfaction*.

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<sup>66</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 240.

<sup>67</sup> The notion of *value* in Lonergan is discussed in Chapter 10, Section 4.

The second level of the good is called by Lonergan the *good of order*: as a result of the development of intelligence extending into the realm of action/decision, the person in a community discovers the need for reconciling desires with other people's desires and needs, and the goods that come from collaboration. These exceed in many ways (in quantity, in variety, in the creativity and sophistication involved) whatever goods a single person might accomplish on their own. The person also discovers the need for restraining one's desires in order to bring to being this good of order. Initially this sounds a lot like Hobbes; but in Lonergan this good of order develops a reality of its own. It does not consist in an external ordering of other goods; rather, it is experienced in a society's concrete system of laws and customs and organizations. People actively strive for this good of order - not for an abstraction, for the "ideal" of order, but for their concrete system of laws and customs, to prevent transgressions and breakdowns, and to make it better, more rational, by modifying it or adding to it, without pausing to consider at every step of the way whether such order actually benefits *my* individual desires or not. There is a shift in the motivations of the subject from what brings satisfaction (immediate or mediate) to what is good for the good of order.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> This shift from the good of desire to the good of order is central to Lonergan's explanation of the emergence of morality; but it does not appear prominently when he discusses moral conversion. This could be explained within Lonerganian theory by calling attention to the fact that, by being born into a community, most people would quite naturally "grow into" this understanding of the good of order, at least when the community's institutions are functioning properly, achieving an appreciation of it. This corresponds rather to the category of *moral development* (as will be explained below) than to that of moral conversion. When the community's institutions (especially those related to education) are working properly, it should be expected that only a handful of people would get developmentally stuck at the level of the good as desire (in what Lonergan calls "an incomplete development of intelligence"). These are the individuals who will use their resourcefulness to find gaps in the system and use them for their own satisfaction. See also Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, 5th ed., *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 245.

Nevertheless at this level the grounding criterion may still be that of satisfaction, even if it is satisfaction of a different kind, satisfaction in the good of order. Moving to the third level of the good, however, to the *realm of value*, requires from the subject a genuine transformation. The criterion for moral decision becomes, not what is “satisfying,” but what is “valuable,” “worthwhile.” It must be emphasized that this is a criterion *different* than the criterion of satisfaction, and not just a more complex form of the same criterion. (The ability to postpone satisfaction, for example, as a more sophisticated form of the criterion of satisfaction, should not be identified with the shift from the criterion of satisfaction to the criterion of value.)

When it comes to discussing the realm of value, however, Lonergan is sparse, almost cryptic. Elaborating on Lonergan’s notion of “value” requires tracking down his various pronouncements on this matter, and relying to a great extent in what his commentators have offered. This latter point is problematic, given that the scholarship has not arrived yet to the point at which one may speak of a “standard” understanding of the notion of value. Interpretations of the meaning of moral conversion in Lonergan will vary accordingly.

One possible interpretation of the meaning of this notion of value is eudaemonistic. According to Rende, when the criterion for decision/action is not something over and above that of satisfying one’s desires, this satisfaction turns sour fairly quickly:

The glamour and attractiveness of particular goods can quickly vanish. The feelings of excitement and opportunity at the outset of a marriage, a career, or any new venture can sour. One seeks new opportunities, new challenges, and new stimulation. Yet, because they are on the same level, they are subject to the same unsatisfactoriness. That



unsatisfactoriness is grounded in the real yet unacknowledged frustration of the pure and unrestricted desire for freedom.<sup>69</sup>

Turning this remark into an eudaemonistic reading, the good of value would be what makes the person really happy or fulfilled, as opposed to the good of desire, that (though it grounds the possibility for other goods) may at times present a certain “illusory” character, offering a satisfaction that, in terms of “true happiness,” would be empty. Lonergan’s distinction between the good of desire/satisfaction and the realm of value may thus be read as a distinction between the fragmentary criterion of satisfying one’s desires as they come, and a more comprehensive criterion that regards happiness, fulfillment, “the good life” as the goal. Moral conversion would then entail becoming able to choose not out of “desire,” as a fragmentary, somewhat accidental event, but from a more complete evaluation of what it is to be human, what it is to have specifically human tendencies, and what fulfills them. Lonergan’s alternative expression for “value,” the “worthwhile,” would in this reading play a role similar to the one that expressions such as “the good life” have played in other eudaemonistic philosophies.

Michael Rende presents an alternative way of understanding Lonergan’s third level of the good. According to Rende, the methodological neutrality with which Lonergan presents his notion of value – his attempt to avoid mentioning specific criteria, his focus on method – is of fundamental importance to the criterion of value itself; this to such an extent that attempts to specify the criteria of the “worthwhile” in too much detail entail the risk of forfeiting the notion of value itself. In Rende’s reading, the realm of value

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<sup>69</sup> Rende, *Lonergan on Conversion: The Development of a Notion*, 182.

consists in “an unrestricted pursuit of the good.”<sup>70</sup> This “unrestricted pursuit” continues the never-ending further-questioning of the “unrestricted desire to know,” a fundamental human drive in Lonergan. According to Rende, specifying a criterion (such as the ones provided by current theories of morality) could entail setting a limit to the unrestrictedness of intellectual and moral questioning (“this is the criterion; here we stop”), thus curtailing the very pursuit that the criterion of value is supposed to pursue. Instead, the “transcendental notion of value” is defined by Rende as a “dynamic state of freedom.”

The transcendental notion of value is not the notion of any particular good, nor the notions informing the concrete structures which insure the recurrence of particular goods, that is, the good of order. Instead, I would identify the transcendental notion of value with a dynamic state of freedom.<sup>71</sup>

I understand this not to mean that no criteria for the worthwhile should be sought or found, but that at the heart of the subject that has arrived at the “third level of the good” there is the persistent disposition to continue questioning, to let the “unrestricted desire to know” continue its work, never ceasing to revise the criteria so that the “worthwhile” is never replaced by “just one” of its possible manifestations. From Rende’s rendition of the notion of value follows accordingly a related notion of moral conversion. In Rende’s understanding, moral conversion, “the free response of the moral subject to the transcendental notion of value,”<sup>72</sup> entails a shift from the criterion of satisfaction, to a different, unspecified criterion for moral decision; this criterion (or set of criteria) must satisfy the subject’s demand for *reasonableness* (a reasonableness that goes beyond the mere satisfaction of incidental desires). Further, the criterion must not become

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

crystallized in such a way that the person no longer seeks ultimate good but unreflective fulfillment of a certain specific criterion or moral theory. A genuine moral conversion entails open-endedness, but not just an empty open-endedness: rather, this “dynamic state of freedom” is characterized by a constant, persistent drive to improvement.<sup>73</sup>

Rende’s rendition of the notion of value emphasizes Lonergan’s insistence upon open-minded questioning, but it does not help much in specifying the notion itself. Other authors have taken the issue of the “third level of the good” in different directions. Walter Conn, for example, has stressed *decentralization*, a shift from egoism to altruism (though his own interpretation of moral conversion has more to do with becoming conscious that one is a “chooser,” as will be considered in the appropriate place).<sup>74</sup> Kenneth Melchin, instead, puts emphasis on the methodological openness involved in the third level, a position not too far from Rende’s:

While the commitment to order is attuned to the obligations and requirements of maintaining social structures (the second level), the commitment to historical progress is attuned to changes in structures, particularly changes that affect human welfare. . . . The discernment of these values and how they are to be lived is neither clear nor simple. . . . but the values and obligations on the third level tend to tolerate a certain lack of concreteness or precision. Prior to working out concrete strategies for action, moral analysis asks more generally about directions of change, vectors for renewal, and possible goals that such renewal would seek to realize.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> “To decide for the transcendental notion of value is to opt for an open and dynamic orientation which ever presses us beyond our present moral achievement.” (Ibid., 135.)

<sup>74</sup> When contrasting affective and moral conversion, Walter Conn says: “If moral conversion is the recognition of the possibility, and thus the felt challenge, of becoming a living principle of benevolence and beneficence, affective conversion is the transformation of personal being which actualizes that possibility, which makes effective response to that challenge a reality.” Implied is the notion of moral conversion as “becoming a principle of benevolence and beneficence.” (Walter E. Conn, “Passionate Commitment: The Dynamics of Affective Conversion,” *Cross Currents* 34 [1984]: 330.)

<sup>75</sup> Kenneth R. Melchin, *Living with Other People : An Introduction to Christian Ethics Based on Bernard Lonergan*, Saint Paul University Series in Ethics (Toronto: Novalis, 1997), 58-59.

The most thorough study of Lonergan's notion of value, however, can be found in Brian Cronin's very recent book, *Value Ethics: A Lonergan Perspective*.<sup>76</sup> Cronin's work bids fair to become the "standard" understanding of Lonergan's notion of value.

According to Cronin's reading, there is an affective orientation to value that is essentially distinct from our affective orientation to satisfaction. It is in response to this orientation (a "spiritual feeling," in Cronin's terminology)<sup>77</sup> that we are able to desire, respond emotionally and *know* value – moral values in particular, such as the generous or the noble thing to do. This orientation, however – which he calls the "desire for value" – is not "thematic"; it does not provide us with a conceptually clear *knowledge* of value. The desire for value must be thematized through cognitive operations: values must become "known" and not just "felt." Cronin's interpretation of Lonergan – in support of which he provides substantial textual evidence – avoids an intuitionist position *à la* Max Scheler, in which values are directly intuited, and the kind of extreme intellectualist position that considers the affective sphere as ultimately irrelevant for establishing what is valuable and moral. From his reading follows an understanding of moral conversion as shifting one's operating weight towards this drive to value, and away from the ("non-spiritual") drives that focus on satisfaction.<sup>78</sup>

The matter of the meaning of "value" in Lonergan is open to discussion, and so is therefore the meaning of "moral conversion." This is less of a difficulty than it may seem

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<sup>76</sup> Brian Cronin, *Value Ethics: A Lonergan Perspective*, Guide to Philosophy Series (Langata- Nairobi: Consolata Institute of Philosophy, 2006).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>78</sup> Cronin's interpretation of Lonergan's notion of value will become very helpful in Chapter 10 (discussing the internalist-externalist debate), as an example of what will be called a joined affective/cognitive internalist view.

at first, however. For one thing, it seems part of Lonergan's *modus operandi* to work with open-ended notions rather than narrowly defined ones, so that these notions become "receptacles": complementary, mutually enriching developments. The notion of moral conversion seems to be of this sort, a receptacle that allows for expansion and development in many directions. More importantly, the notion of moral conversion that will be presented in this work (in Chapter 5) is only loosely inspired in Lonergan's notion; it is actually more inspired by his distinction than by his explication of the notion, and it is not intended as a development of the latter. There are, however, some aspects of Lonergan's thought on conversion that are worth looking at. One is his application of the notion to the concepts of "horizontal and vertical freedom." Another is his discussion of religious conversion – a matter that does not affect the question at hand directly, but that helps define moral conversion negatively. Finally, it is useful to look at further treatments of moral conversion by various Lonerganian thinkers, who have taken the notion and developed it in different directions. Their thoughts have helped shape the notion of moral conversion presented here, and distinguish it in particular from other forms of conversion and development.

### **3. Conversion as an exercise in "vertical freedom"**

Conversion in Lonergan involves *choice*, as an exercise of freedom. This choice, however, is of a peculiar kind. To articulate this peculiarity, Lonergan uses a model that he borrows from the work of Joseph de Finance. This model involves the distinction between *horizontal* and *vertical liberty*:

Joseph de Finance has drawn a distinction between a horizontal and vertical exercise of freedom. A horizontal exercise is a decision or choice that occurs within an established horizon. A vertical exercise is the set of judgments and decisions by which we move from one horizon to another. Now there may be a sequence of such vertical exercises of freedom, and in each case the new horizon, though notably deeper and broader and richer, none the less is consonant with the old and a development out of its potentialities. But it is also possible that the movement into a new horizon involves an about-face; it comes out of the old by repudiating characteristic features; it begins a new sequence that can keep revealing ever greater depth and breadth and wealth. Such an about-face and new beginning is what is meant by a conversion.<sup>79</sup>

The introduction of the images of horizontality and verticality is accompanied here by the introduction of the image/notion of *horizon*, a very helpful image to describe the process of conversion. It has a close similarity with the perhaps more popular analogy of “paradigm shifts.” A *horizontal* exercise of freedom occurs when we move within the limits of the paradigm - epistemological, scientific, moral - that we currently inhabit (the term “paradigm” may be here safely replaced with “horizon”). Normally there is no great stress or struggle involved in this operation. But when the current paradigm begins to reveal its deficiencies and limitations – when, starting from its basic premises, it becomes impossible to solve new problems and puzzles that have come up, or when practical problems accumulate without finding a satisfactory answer - then the subject may migrate to a new, hopefully more encompassing horizon or paradigm, revealing a higher intelligibility. This is not accomplished without struggle, of course, because the weight of established habits of thought and behavior becomes a strong obstacle that the subject must overcome. The drive that moves the subject towards the new horizon or paradigm is in Lonergan the *unrestricted desire to know*; if it is working properly and is not weighed

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<sup>79</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 237.

down by bias, it has the capacity to break through the established habits (intellectual, moral, practical) of the paradigm the person is inhabiting.<sup>80</sup>

In the text cited above, Lonergan contrasts what he calls “a sequence of vertical exercises of freedom” that, arriving at “notably deeper and broader and richer” horizons, are none the less “consonant with the old and a development out of its potentialities,” with what he calls “an *about-face*,” that “comes out of the old by repudiating characteristic features” and “begins a new sequence that can keep revealing ever greater depth and breadth and wealth.”<sup>81</sup> It should be noted here that it is possible to consider *both types* of process as “conversion,” without straining the everyday use of the term. This possibility is reflected in William James’ distinction between a “layered-type” conversion (corresponding to the former), and a “new birth-type” conversion (corresponding to the latter).<sup>82</sup> The present work intends to develop a notion of “conversion” inclusive of both types. This distinction, however (articulated as “progressive” vs. “sharp-turn” conversion), will be of great relevance when the need comes to distinguish between moral conversion and “normal” moral development (in chapters 7-8).

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<sup>80</sup> When it comes to the dimension of action and decision, this drive takes the form of what Lonergan calls “and exigence for self-consistency in knowing and doing.” This represents the continuity of the unrestricted desire to know when extended into the affairs of practical life. (Lonergan, *Insight*, 622.) A more detailed examination of this idea (and its limitations) is found in Chapter 10.

<sup>81</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 237.

<sup>82</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 157-158.

#### **4. Religious conversion, and the relation between the three types of conversion**

The notion of religious conversion in Lonergan is theological and – unlike, for example, William James’ notion of religious conversion – it would betray the meaning of the author to attempt to consider it while disregarding the theological context. A brief description of his treatment of religious conversion must be attempted if we are to place his notion of moral conversion in context.

Much as he does with moral conversion, Lonergan does not define religious conversion as a shift from a specific stance (e.g. atheism) to a different specific stance, but as a radical shift in a person’s metaphysical, epistemological, practical and affective relation to the world. If intellectual conversion is driven by the desire to know, and moral conversion is characterized by a shift towards value, the key category in religious conversion is *love*. This is not just any kind of love, however, but love understood from a theological context, as “other-wordly” love:

Religious conversion is being grasped by ultimate concern. It is other-wordly falling in love. It is total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations. But it is such a surrender, not as an act, but as a dynamic state that is prior to and principle of subsequent acts.<sup>83</sup>

This transforming, other-wordly love is interpreted differently in the context of different religious traditions. Lonergan refers to this overflowing love through the Christian concept of *grace*, as

God’s love flooding our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us. It is the gift of grace, and since the days of Augustine, a distinction has been drawn between operative and cooperative grace. Operative grace is the replacement of the heart of stone by a heart of

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<sup>83</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 240.



flesh, a replacement beyond the horizon of the heart of stone. Cooperative grace is the effectiveness of conversion, the gradual movement towards a full and complete transformation of the whole of one's living and feeling, one's thoughts, words, deeds, and omissions.<sup>84</sup>

There is here a movement (as a free gift) of love from God to the human person, that causes a transformation in the person far deeper than what the person could achieve through his or her own means. Naturally, this transformation will have repercussions at every level of personality - providing the ground for a more efficacious pursuit of both intellectual and moral ends.<sup>85</sup> In terms of its influence on *moral* conversion, religious conversion (understood as the transformation produced by this overflowing, “other-worldly love”) predisposes the subject to a much more efficacious moral agency. Good habits are acquired and maintained with less effort, bad tendencies are identified and kept in check; the subject's emotions facilitate the process of conversion, since bad habits are perceived as unattractive or morally ugly.

Religious conversion transforms the subject into a subject in love. The subject is not automatically cured of all sin and all bias, but the state of love is an habitual actuation of one's capacity for self-transcendence. The subject's apprehension and response to values is more secure because he or she is a subject in love. The subject's desire for truth and being is more efficacious because it is included within the richer context of the pursuit of all value.<sup>86</sup>

These effects on the subject's moral agency, however, are not at the central focus of religious conversion: religious conversion has a dimension and finality of its own;

Holiness abounds in truth and moral goodness, but it has a distinct dimension of its own. It is otherworldly fulfillment, joy, peace, bliss. In Christian experience these are the fruits of being in love with a mysterious, uncomprehended God.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>86</sup> Rende, *Loneragan on Conversion: The Development of a Notion*, 162.

<sup>87</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 242.

The interrelations between the three types of conversion, intellectual, moral and religious, is described by Lonergan in terms of “sublation.” Intellectual conversion is “sublated” by moral conversion; intellectual and moral conversion are both sublated by religious conversion;<sup>88</sup> a hierarchical order is established between the three types of conversion. There is continuity in their purpose: the structure that is higher in the hierarchical order (religious conversion) does not destroy or contradict the finality of moral or intellectual conversion; but it transforms them to some extent, infusing them with higher meaning or purpose. At the same time the higher structure has a relative dependence on the lower ones: the actualization of religious conversion may demand, for example, that moral conversion take place, previously or jointly with it.

The exact details regarding how the three types of conversion are connected is a matter that Lonergan scholars have pursued to great lengths,<sup>89</sup> and that exceeds the purpose of this work, since it has to do mostly with theological issues. It is interesting to note, however, that some scholars have felt the need to emphasize the unity of the process of conversion over the threefold distinction. Michael Rende, for example, cites Fr. Curran as arguing (on the basis of the necessity for supernatural grace) that Lonergan’s threefold distinction should be dropped, or unified into one general type of “existential conversion.” To which Rende answers by emphasizing the methodological character of this distinction:

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<sup>88</sup> Rende, 162.

<sup>89</sup> This is partly because the matter is closely connected with the traditional discussion within Catholic theology on the natural and supernatural finality of the human being, and the question of the necessity for supernatural grace in order to do good deeds. The discussion, though not important for the purpose of this work, may be a natural road to follow by those interested in moral conversion from a theological perspective.

In daily living, the primary distinction, I think, is between converted and unconverted. Secondly, we can ask about the degree to which conversion has penetrated into and has been integrated with the totality of their living. . . Although the threefold distinction of conversion belongs to the context of methodical theology, it is not to be regarded as simply irrelevant to the concrete existential order. From the methodical point of view, the concrete existential order is not some ultimate court of appeal. It is not the standard or criterion of reality. That standard or criterion is still the true judgment.<sup>90</sup>

Rende does not simply reject Curran's objection, but rather concedes some weight to it, suggesting that the philosophical question about moral conversion gets its full weight not isolated from but in dialogue with the dimensions of religious and intellectual conversion. Whether he concedes too much weight to it or not, it can be safely stated at least that the three types of conversion should not be considered in Lonergan's thought as isolated events, nor as entirely independent from each other, especially when considering their occurrence in the concrete person.

Stating this unity of the three types of conversion in absolute terms, however, would seem to be excessive: it is possible to find narratives of moral conversion that do not seem to make any reference whatsoever to religious elements, and others that do not seem to involve an intellectual conversion. Thus one should be cautious as to how to understand this emphasis: it makes fuller sense in the theological context in which the distinction between types of conversion has been established, in which the main goal in mind is to understand religious conversion in the wider context provided by the other types of conversion.

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<sup>90</sup> Rende, *Lonergan on Conversion: The Development of a Notion*, 191.

### **5. *The scholarly development of Lonergan's notion of moral conversion***<sup>91</sup>

Among the scholars that built on Lonergan's thought, a few took it upon themselves to further explore and develop the notion of conversion. Among these the most prominent are Walter E. Conn, Robert Doran, Bernard Tyrrell and Donald Gelpi. These authors expanded the notion to consider a psychological or psychic type of conversion, explored in further detail the role of the affective sphere in moral conversion, and speculated about the social dimension of conversion. Though there is an initial intention to remain consistent with the structures suggested in Lonergan's work, these scholars did not take their speculations in a unified direction – rather, each explored according to their own interests, developing their own structures and terminology. As a consequence of their investigations there followed a brief period during which discussion on conversion expanded in many directions.

In all of these authors, it must be noted, the theological focus is central, and the intent when developing the notion of conversion is to better understand religious conversion. The downside, for present purposes, of this theological emphasis is that reflections on moral conversion are frequently cursory at most; and while the concept of moral conversion is complemented by reflection on other types of conversion, Lonergan's understanding of moral conversion is not examined as thoroughly as could be desired – certainly not to the same extent to which his notion of religious conversion is examined, developed and/or challenged. The result is that Lonergan's notion of moral conversion,

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<sup>91</sup> In this section I must especially acknowledge Thomas Dunne's brief but insightful review of the many Lonergan scholars that expanded on the topic of conversion, presented in his doctoral dissertation. See Thomas A. Dunne, "Lonergan on Social Progress and Community: A Developmental Study" (Doctoral dissertation, University of St. Michael's College, 1975), 12-34.

itself the least developed of the triad in his work, remains vague and substantially unchallenged in a sizeable portion of the relevant scholarly literature.

### Walter Conn

Walter Conn is arguably the scholar who has most actively pursued this course of investigation within Lonergan studies.<sup>92</sup> Among his achievements most relevant to our topic can be counted the expansion from three to four types of conversion – or five if one counts “Christian conversion” as distinct from “religious conversion” - and the introduction of an extensive discussion regarding the role of symbolic imagination in conversion.

In Conn's view, the characterization that Lonergan makes of religious conversion, as “the surrender of absolute autonomy in the acknowledgment of one's radical dependence on the power of God,”<sup>93</sup> should be understood as describing an extreme type of religious conversion, a “special, extraordinary transformation of religious consciousness,”<sup>94</sup> an extreme that should be aimed at, but that is not found very usually. Conn acknowledges however that this characterization of conversion does not reflect the common usage of the term, nor is it applicable to common religious experience. To bridge this gap, Conn introduces the notion of *Christian conversion*, which is used to

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<sup>92</sup>Apart from numerous articles, Conn has a book on the subject, and edited a collection of texts from many historical periods and disciplines dealing with conversion. See Walter E. Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986); Walter E. Conn, ed., *Conversion, Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation* (New York: Alba House, 1978).

<sup>93</sup> Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 216-217.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

characterize the first stage of (Christian) religious conversion. In this manner Conn opens the way for a more nuanced characterization of religious conversion.

### Affective conversion

The introduction of the notion of affective conversion, as *structurally antecedent* to cognitive and moral conversion is perhaps the most salient feature of Conn's analysis. In Conn's view, the affective aspect of conversion has been fundamentally ignored by Lonergan's tripartite distinction.<sup>95</sup> Affectivity, however, should not be seen as an isolated, relatively autonomous aspect of personality. The drives that are seen as constitutive of the human person – the unrestricted desire to know, the desire of happiness, of self-transcendence – are at their very core affective. Affective conversion normally grounds the possibility of other forms of conversion taking place.<sup>96</sup>

Lonergan, in Chapter 6 of *Insight*,<sup>97</sup> distinguishes among many “patterns of experience” in which the person may operate – biological, aesthetic, intellectual and others. Operating on any of these different patterns is dependent on accentuating, at certain times, the relevance given to certain functions of one's intelligence and on making abstraction of the relevance for life of other functions: while the researcher is absorbed in his investigation, for example, the practicalities of eating and sleeping may take a second

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<sup>95</sup> Lonergan's thought, particularly in his work *Insight*, has been consistently criticized as lacking an appropriate treatment of the role of affectivity. This criticism has been acknowledged by Lonergan, who, due to his strongly intellectualist inclinations, had to struggle frequently with this deficiency. See Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 316 (note 59).

<sup>96</sup> “In such affective conversion from the possessiveness rooted in obsessive concern for one's own needs to the self-giving of intimate love and generative care of others lies the possibility of actually living the morally converted life (critical or uncritical). Instances of moral self-transcendence do occur in persons who have not experienced affective conversion, but possessive need is not the best soil for the morally converted life. A consistent pattern of sustained moral self-transcendence, a flourishing moral life, requires the richer loam of affective conversion.” *Ibid.*, 152-153.

<sup>97</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 204-212.

or third place. But Lonergan considers also an overarching pattern of experience (Lonergan characterizes it as “artistic”) that addresses life in all its polymorphic relevance; this is called by Lonergan the *dramatic pattern of experience*.<sup>98</sup> Its unifying quality seems to be affective rather than intellectual. Conn’s treatment of conversion gives full relief to this “dramatic unification” of the different aspects of human life, drawn together by human affectivity. For conversion to be more than an abstract recognition of certain possibilities, or of possibly fulfilling or good ways of living, there must be a *transformation of the affectivity* through which the whole person is transformed. Because now the new way of life is desired, liked, cherished, loved, the possibility of such a way of living becomes actualized.<sup>99</sup>

### The role of imagination

Another distinctive contribution of Conn regards the role of imagination in conversion. This role may be understood by recalling the Aristotelian view of knowledge that is active at the core of Lonergan's theory of understanding. According to this view, it is in “images” - in concrete examples, in symbols, in narratives, in role-models, in parables and metaphors - that we grasp what there is to be understood. For one lacking the relevant images, understanding becomes improbable or even impossible. But if the role of images for understanding is so important, their importance in the process of conversion is also crucial. Thus, argues Conn, conversion implies *a change in the images* that are at the root of our understanding of the world – we tell ourselves different stories,

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 210-212.

<sup>99</sup> Conn, "Passionate Commitment: The Dynamics of Affective Conversion," 330; Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 135.

we look at different role-models to trace the life we would like to live. This change is both an effect and a causal element in conversion. Operating in “Christian conversion,” for example, will be the rising image of Jesus and his Gospel – a theme that will be taken, and further developed, by Bernard Tyrrell, below.

The matter of the role of imagination is closely connected to the importance that Conn gives to the role of affectivity. Imagination is not a purely cognitive function for Conn. Affectivity has a cognitive dimension, and affectivity and imagination are “inextricably linked in a symbolic world that recognizes no divorce.”<sup>100</sup> The affective substance of symbols, stories, cultural archetypes and such is as essential to the constitution of our world as is their cognitive content. As a consequence, the transformation of imagination and of affectivity are inextricably linked: the introduction of new images and symbols, the focusing of our attention on symbols, myths, archetypes, stories, of which we were hitherto unaware, should naturally have the effect of triggering a transformation not just of the intellectual but of the affective components of personality.

#### Moral conversion as becoming a chooser

As was mentioned above, Lonergan’s notion of moral conversion is not framed in such definite terms that it precludes alternative (though complementary) definitions and varying emphases. Conn’s own take on the notion of moral conversion is colored by a strong emphasis on conversion as the moment in which the person becomes a self-determining, self-creating, autonomous agent (and becomes aware of it). By this is meant not only that the person becomes capable of making choices in discrete instances, but that

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<sup>100</sup> Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 125.



the person becomes aware of being a chooser – and in particular, of being up to them to abide by moral norms, criticize them, or disregard them altogether.

For within this long and gradual process of personal becoming and increasing autonomy the subject may reach that crucial point, that existential moment when he discovers that his judging and deciding affect himself no less than the objects of his judgments and decision; that it is up to himself to decide for himself what he is to make of himself (Lonergan, *Method*, 240). In such a discovery one recognizes oneself as an originator of value who creates himself in every deed, decision, and discovery of his life. . .<sup>101</sup>

This discovery becomes essential for the person to lead an “authentic life” – the normative ideal in Lonerganian philosophy, consisting essentially in performing one’s cognitive and affective operations without the distortions (bias, myth, neurosis, etc.) that typically plague them. Conn adds another twist by distinguishing between *uncritical* and *critical moral conversion*. The latter (which is closer to the normative ideal) occurs when coupled with an intellectual conversion: the person discovers that he/she is a knower, and as such is capable of critical thinking; and that this critical ability may be applied to one’s moral structures. The agent becomes ever more authentic then because he/she can

*critically* recognize and accept the responsibility of discovering and establishing one’s own values (in dialogue with one’s community), or one may merely turn *uncritically* toward and accept some *given* set of values of whatever conventional source.<sup>102</sup>

Conn is very insistent on the importance of this critical move for the achievement of the moral ideal, applying this structure, for example, to the biographical accounts of Thérèse of Lisieux<sup>103</sup> and Thomas Merton.<sup>104</sup> He even goes as far as applying it to his reading of Kohlberg’s developmental model, identifying Kohlberg’s “postconventional

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>103</sup> Conn and Wolski Conn, "Conversion as Self-Transcendence Exemplified in the Life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux."

<sup>104</sup> Conn, *Christian Conversion*, Chapter 5.

moral thinking” with a critical stage in moral development. This will be discussed in Chapter 8.

The usefulness of Conn's contributions for an analysis of moral conversion is not difficult to recognize. Both his notion of affective conversion and his attention to the role of imagination bring to light elements that, if not absent from Lonergan's thought, require for a comprehensive study of conversion a more focused analysis than Lonergan provides. Additionally, Conn's insight, implicit in his works, of the primacy of one mode of conversion over the others at any given stage (identified by Dunne as “the description of a conversion stage by that dominant type”) offers a useful approach to the common problem of determining types of conversion in the actual situation.<sup>105</sup> According to this approach, it is possible in an instance of conversion to identify a dominant type of conversion; but besides this dominant type, other types of conversion may be operative too, though they can be considered subordinate. Thus, when characterizing a conversion, for example, as “intellectual,” one can already be on the lookout for affective and moral conversion accompanying the intellectual transformation, as it were, on the background. This way of looking at conversion helps to avoid the mistake of describing the different modes of conversion in too isolationist terms, while avoiding also the extreme opposite approach of fusing all types and overlooking their distinctiveness.

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<sup>105</sup> Dunne, “Lonergan on Social Progress and Community,” 17.

## Robert Doran

Following essentially the same line as Conn, Robert Doran emphasizes the importance (the primacy, perhaps) of affective conversion. Doran complements Conn's achievements by introducing a more specific focus on categories that have belonged traditionally to the realm of modern psychology – subconscious processes, structures of resistance and repression in the psyche, etc.; what is sometimes called “deep” psychology. What in Conn was “affective conversion” becomes in Doran's works *psychic* conversion. Doran also transforms these categories to some extent by attributing to them an *aesthetic* dimension.

Doran's treatment is an original cross-pollination of traditional psychological categories and the Lonerganian emphasis on the cognitive role of imagination. The function of the “censor,” for example - that structure of the psyche that, in traditional Freudian theory, is in charge of keeping specific sets of memories from arising into consciousness – is formulated by Doran in terms of repressing *images*. Given that one of the constitutive elements of psychic conversion is the “transformation of the censor” (this idea is present in Lonergan<sup>106</sup>), psychic conversion then implies that the censor reforms its operation, letting hitherto repressed images go uncensored.

For Doran, however, it is not only images and insights that are inextricably linked to each other, but also *feelings* (thus, for example, incoherence and breakdown at the

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<sup>106</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 215.

level of affectivity can result if the psyche represses images, or if feelings become attached to non-corresponding images).<sup>107</sup> Some of the originality in Doran resides in characterizing this store of accumulated images, which operate to a great extent below our conceptual awareness, as *aesthetic*. The “aesthetic” represents in Doran a confluence of the affective and the imaginal. The imaginal (now the “aesthetic”) dimension becomes then essential to the development of affectivity.

Further, feelings play – according to standard Lonerganian doctrine – an important part in the apprehension of values.<sup>108</sup> As a consequence, the moral dimension of the person becomes to a great extent dependent on the stored images that are operative at the aesthetic level. In Doran, “the capacity for image formation is critical to affective conversion and therefore to all subsequent conversions.”<sup>109</sup>

Ethics is radically aesthetics; and the existential subject, concerned with character as his or her issue, is the aesthetic subject.<sup>110</sup>

Even in such an extremely brief account it can be seen that Doran has expanded the limits of the field under consideration, in order to include pre-conceptual factors operative in conversion at its many levels, factors that are operative in the images active in the imaginal ground of our affectivity.

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<sup>107</sup> Dunne, “Lonergan on Social Progress and Community”, 19.

<sup>108</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 66-67.

<sup>109</sup> Dunne, “Lonergan on Social Progress and Community”, 20.

<sup>110</sup> Robert M. Doran, *Theological Foundations*, vol. ii (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994), 123.

### Bernard Tyrrell

Of lesser importance to our project, but clearly in continuity with the former thinkers, is Bernard Tyrrell.<sup>111</sup> Like Conn and Doran, Tyrrell puts to use Lonergan's distinction between intellectual, moral and religious conversion, but also, like Conn and Doran, he states the need of adding to this list the consideration of a conversion of the affective/psychological dimension. Tyrrell's central work has been the development of a faith-based form of psychological therapy which he calls "Christotherapy." The central idea is that, through the presentation of the image of Christ (actually a number of images, since Christ is presented under the aspects of savior, brother, healer, friend, beloved, lover), and through the mediation and loving support of the therapist, who acts as a concrete presentation of the love of God, the healing of the patient's wounded psyche is promoted. In particular, the patient finds a way of re-creating his/her self-image after the model of the images being presented. As was said above, Tyrrell's project is of comparatively less relevance to this dissertation because the central focus is on a form of unified psychological/religious conversion, and therefore moral conversion is not central to his work. But his work is useful as yet another reminder of the transforming power of concrete images, and can serve to further illustrate the points made by Doran. It could also serve (though it will not be thus used in this work) as a working example of a psychotherapy with a strongly cognitivist or internalist approach.

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<sup>111</sup> Bernard Tyrrell, "Affective Conversion: A New Way of Feeling," in *The Human Experience of Conversion*, ed. Francis A. Eigo (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1987).

## Donald Gelpi

Donald Gelpi<sup>112</sup> can also be added to the list of authors that expand both thematically and in depth Lonergan's notion of conversion. Like the authors above, he also distinguishes an affective type of conversion, and emphasizes the role of images in conversion, particularly – like Tyrrell - the primary role of the vision of Jesus in conversion, “the aesthetic element which transvalues all previous developments to the religious level.”<sup>113</sup> Additionally, Gelpi introduces the notion of *sociopolitical* conversion: a “second moment” that “deprivatizes” conversion, when the person takes responsibility for influencing the choices of others. This consideration is a result of Gelpi reflecting on the ecclesial dimension of religious conversion, the ecclesial community being the setting in which the experience of religious conversion takes place. Gelpi, however, seems to place the moment of sociopolitical conversion as fifth in a series of steps, one that allows the person to move beyond the four previous, “private” modes of conversion (affective/psychological, intellectual, moral, religious).<sup>114</sup> Gelpi's addition of a sociopolitical moment in conversion is an important contribution, though his reading of the first four moments as essentially private (and only the fifth as open to the sociopolitical) may be open to criticism.

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<sup>112</sup> Donald Gelpi, "Religious Conversion: A New Way of Being," in *The Human Experience of Conversion*, ed. Francis A. Eigo (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1987).

<sup>113</sup> Dunne, “Lonergan on Social Progress and Community”, 25.

<sup>114</sup> Donald Gelpi, *The Conversion Experience: A Reflective Process for R.C.I.A. Participants and Others* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 31.

This brief review of the historical efforts to develop the notion of conversion has hopefully provided enough background (if not of the specifics, at least of existing projects and orientations) to begin in earnest the task of characterizing the notion of moral conversion in more precise terms. A phenomenological analysis (in the loose sense of the expression) of conversion follows (in Chapter 4); this is focused mostly in existing accounts of religious conversion. Chapter 5 will circumscribe the notion in more precise terms, by considering what is meant by “moral,” and once this is done, identifying three ways in which moral conversion is commonly understood.

## CHAPTER 4

### A PHENOMENOLOGY OF CONVERSION

Another approach to conversion worth exploring comes from what may be considered a sub-genre in Christian religious literature, that of convert biographies and autobiographies. These may be found in short form in numerous compilations, or may take the form of in-depth, full fledged autobiographical books.<sup>115</sup> From such literature it is possible to gather common features of the process of religious conversion, at least as it happens in the Christian world. These features generally coincide with what has been described already: (a) a series of events, some of them apparently random, but all of them

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<sup>115</sup> See for example Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness; the Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (New York,: Harper, 1952); Hugh T. Kerr and John M. Mulder, eds., *Conversions: The Christian Experience* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983); David J. Leigh, *Circuitous Journeys: Modern Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955); Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York,: Harcourt, 1948); Gilbert Lawrence Oddo, *These Came Home : The Odyssey of Fifteen Converts* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1954).



of narrative relevance<sup>116</sup> (b) lead to a more or less pronounced buildup in tension that deeply affects the life of the person involved for a period of time, (c) eventually (often through an event characterized as “self-surrender”) resolving into the process of change called conversion.

### **1. Emilie Griffin’s four-stage model**

Emilie Griffin, in her book *Turning: Reflections on the Experience of Conversion*,<sup>117</sup> has taken the trouble of sifting through a sizeable number of these stories of Christian conversion. Classic autobiographical accounts such as those of Augustine, Thomas Merton, C. S. Lewis and Dom Bede Griffith are considered, but also less-known stories (some gathered from her own acquaintances), with the experience of her own conversion grounding many of her points. Griffin presents a very useful four-stage model, *desire, dialectic, struggle* and *surrender*, followed by a post-conversion period simply named “*afterwards*”; which, though focused on Christian religious conversion, outlines some categories present in conversion in general. This model will be used as the basis for the phenomenology of conversion presented in this section.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> By “narrative relevance” it is meant that, even though some events do not appear to be of great significance at the time they take place, at the time of the narrative reconstruction of the person’s life story the event gains or is recognized a certain importance in how things turned up. The relevance of the event may be considered as causal or symbolic; causal, if the event puts further events in motion (the particular humiliation produced by being forced out of a train makes Gandhi reflect about the evils of racism, and decide about doing something about it) or symbolic, if the event becomes for the subject, presently or retrospectively, the expression of a pattern that was already present in the subject’s life (being forced out of the train becomes, at the moment or retrospectively, the symbol of a whole state of events that needs to be changed).

<sup>117</sup> Emilie Griffin, *Turning: Reflections on the Experience of Conversion* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980).

<sup>118</sup> The term “phenomenology” must be understood here in its loose methodological sense, as a study of the structures of experience or of consciousness, primarily from a first-person point of view. (Smith, David Woodruff, “Phenomenology,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed. Winter 2005 Edition). The term does not refer to the more specific meaning given to it in the philosophies of Husserl and others.

### (1) Desire or Longing

The first stage, desire or longing, is characterized by a general dissatisfaction, a feeling of emptiness that may be present even in lives that might otherwise be considered quite fulfilling or accomplished. Characterizing this stage, Griffin rejects the claim (which she attributes to Starbuck, though, as was mentioned, this seems to go beyond Starbuck's intention) that conversion is mainly a phenomenon of adolescence. According to Griffin, this dissatisfaction is felt with particular acuteness in the lives of mature, accomplished people, precisely perhaps because adulthood and its achievements do not succeed in putting this longing to rest.<sup>119</sup>

Griffin writes from the viewpoint of faith. This desire, longing, hunger (which expresses itself differently according to one's personality) is traced back by her to a desire for God embedded in every person.<sup>120</sup> This desire for God Griffin identifies as the source of her own past dissatisfaction, and she goes on to show that this claim is present in each of the various accounts of religious conversion that she examines.

Tracing the desire back to God, however, is ordinarily done in retrospect, that is, *after* conversion. At the time the person is struggling through the experience, the desire or longing is experienced as a need for something or someone, but the something/someone cannot yet be called "God." "In fact," Griffin says, "this new knowledge [at the time the "someone/something" begins to become clearer] is profoundly disturbing, for we are not yet able to admit our need for God to ourselves out of a fear that he may not exist, after

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<sup>119</sup> Griffin, *Turning*, 32.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

all.”<sup>121</sup> To feel this longing, in other words, is one thing; identifying it with a desire for God is another: it may take a long, arduous time, and it may not happen at all.

The demands of intellect must be met; the questions must be raised; answers must be found. The desire itself must be examined and understood: if it does not have a corresponding reality, then clearly it will be diagnosed as an ailment, an affliction caused by the frustration of some other need.<sup>122</sup>

## (2) Dialectic, or the argumentative phase

The “desire” phase may vary greatly in duration, and it is followed by another phase that Griffin calls dialectic, or the argumentative phase. The argumentative phase is carried out through either an intellectual, “argued” dialectic, in which arguments and reasons are weighed pro and con, or by a “lived” dialectic “of discovering [through the experiences of life] whether the desire for God can eventually be satisfied by something else instead.”<sup>123</sup>

How long this dialectic period will extend, and which of these forms it will take (“argued,” “lived,” or both) cannot be specified in advance. For some this period may last years, while some may almost seem to skip it altogether, resolving its tension quickly and without apparent struggle. According to Griffin, however, this argumentative phase can carry a person only so far, that is, to a point at which the person apprehends both belief and non-belief as reasonable positions. The person then can get locked into a “game of intellectual shuttlecock,” which, if it is to be resolved, will be resolved only by an act of faith, a leap that cannot be equated with intellectual weighing or calculation, “not without

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 49.

trust, not without a framework of reason and thought, but a risk-taking jump into a realm beyond logic and reason.”<sup>124</sup> What could be called a “leap of faith” - which may be a very “small” leap, just a very hesitant choice at times – is what puts the person, however timidly, on the side of belief:

*Solvitur ambulando*, said the ancient philosophers; in our case, the answer is *solvitur credendo*. I do not offer this as an explanation for the crossing from Dialectic to Struggle. I simply say that it does take place, and converts themselves cannot always say why or how.<sup>125</sup>

### (3) Struggle

The third phase, that follows this act of faith, is characterized by (and therefore called) struggle. One foot is already on faith, moving it forward; but the other foot is ready to step on the brakes. There is a reluctance to fully convert, partly due to a fear of change in general (since the new experience is “an unknown”<sup>126</sup>), partly due to the concrete knowledge that a radical change of lifestyle may be required, partly due to a feeling of unworthiness. This latter point is what Griffin calls “the appearance of sin,” a pressing consciousness of being morally lacking that seems to be characteristic of this stage. The subjective experience of this unworthiness can be very powerful, and at times may be at odds with the way in which the people around the convert think about him or her. Making mention of this unworthiness, says Griffin, often causes a certain embarrassment in “outsiders” who have not shared this experience, and can hardly understand the context. Nevertheless, says Griffin,

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 82. Agnosticism would be the refusal to make any leap at all. (Ibid.: 82.)

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.: 90.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 123.

there is no way around sin when it comes to Christian conversion. The inevitable result of beginning to glimpse the immensity of God's goodness and power and love is to see at the same time our unworthiness; to gain a knowledge (which is sometimes overwhelming) of our own flawed nature.<sup>127</sup>

This experience of sin, however, is not characterized by Griffin as a depressing experience, but rather as a profoundly liberating one. This seems counterintuitive in times in which "feeling good about oneself" constitutes one of the reigning paradigms of psychological well-being. But there is a reason for this, according to Griffin:

At last, perhaps even for the first time, we have been honest with ourselves about what we are; and we have been honest with the one Person before whom there is no deception.<sup>128</sup>

Another element characteristic of this phase (mentioned with less frequency, which indicates that is probably not as common in the conversion experience) is the "feeling of being surrounded", of finding signs, people, books, etc., pointing in the direction of conversion all over the place. This phenomenon may be read as having both psychological and theological implications: psychological, if it is read as an effect of the mind being consistently focused on the struggle, so that the person becomes predisposed to find meaning in signs and events around him/her, to find ways in which they are

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 111. Griffin warns, however, that "while a sense of sin is common to all conversions, I think conversion should not be confused with a mere effort to overcome bad personal habits." (Ibid.: 113.) A "successful" religious conversion, in other words, cannot be identified with a successful moral conversion. William James also makes mention of a "conviction of sin" (James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 143.) In his account, however, this experience seems to be restricted to a specific set of mind (the "sick soul," as opposed to the "healthy soul"), or characteristic of specific religious traditions. "In Catholic lands, for example, and in our own Episcopalian sects, no such anxiety and conviction of sin is usual as in sects that encourage revivals. The sacraments being more relied on in these more strictly ecclesiastical bodies, the individual's personal acceptance of salvation needs less to be accentuated and led up to." (Ibid.: 165.) Following Starbuck, James remarks that emotions that are symptoms of a normal phase of adolescent development (brooding, depression, morbid introspection, sense of incompleteness and imperfection) may be expressed in terms of sin and conversion. These adolescent phenomena, according to James' interpretation of Starbuck, may be actually shortened by bringing the person to a definite crisis, as is done in the revivalist tradition.

relevant to the struggle.<sup>129</sup> Theologically, this can be read as the intensifying of God's presence – through people, readings, signs, conversations – at the times in which the “struggle” approaches its crucial point.

#### (4) Surrender

The fourth phase, called by Griffin surrender, consists in the final, relatively complete assent of the convert to whatever is the view, set of convictions, or way of life that he/she is converting to. The expression “relatively complete” must be emphasized: while the person may perceive his/her conversion as complete and final at the moment, it is usually the case that the convert discovers later, and rediscovers again and again, that each realization of it is just the beginning of a long road, one more step in a process to be later perfected by further realizations of conversion. But until the person has already extensive experience (either personally or vicariously) with conversion, or with the human resistance to change, the “relativeness” of this step will in most cases be missed – until later at least. What happens most often is that the phase of surrender is subjectively experienced as being as final and complete as jumping off a cliff.

Even though the process leading to the phase of surrender may be very long - sometimes spanning years, if one counts the struggle of the preceding phases - the moment of surrender seems to be circumscribed to a specific point in time. The mechanism of this phase is, to say the least, mysterious. In some cases it involves intense feelings and emotion, and converts offer vivid narratives and images of the experience – Augustine's is a classic example. In other cases, the moment of surrender is accompanied

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<sup>129</sup> An example of the experience of “being surrounded” appears in Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 206.

by very little emotion. In many cases, converts are able to pinpoint a moment before which they did not believe, and after which they did, yet seem unable to say anything else about what happened between the before and after.

Griffin's description of the moment of surrender is very similar in its details to William James';<sup>130</sup> but while James focuses on providing a psychological explanation, Griffin's approach offers an account in terms of an encounter with a reality independent from the one experiencing it – God –, who is actively influencing the subject but, while doing so, takes in loving consideration the peculiarities of the human psyche, and the particularities of the convert's personal, emotional situation. She speculates, in a sense, about God's *modus operandi*. According to Griffin, a moment of great interior freedom (freedom from coercion, rewards, promises, etc.) precedes the moment of surrender: one must be able to encounter reality unencumbered. Pressure or coercion at this moment, she says, would only produce discouragement in the subject. Griffin compares the situation to the experience of a child who is learning to walk: she must do it by herself! God, Griffin says, knows this, and lets our feelings alone at this moment.<sup>131</sup>

The final moment of "letting go" seems to be accompanied by the experience of complete, total exhaustion: "You do it, God, I can't go another step on my own." It would seem that surrender does not take place

until the convert somehow gets beyond wanting, beyond his own efforts and demands, into a state where he wants nothing or cannot say with any clarity or confidence just what he wants. At this moment when he wants nothing, he is able to will something -- but dispassionately: in Milton's phrase, 'all passion spent.'<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Griffin's implied claim that all conversions (or at least all Christian religious conversions) involve some moment of self-surrender seems to be in agreement with James' views. (James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 169.)

<sup>131</sup> Griffin, *Turning*, 137.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

William James also elaborates on this phenomenon, providing an interesting psychological theorem as its background, a “psychology of self-surrender”:

There are only two ways in which it is possible to get rid of anger, worry, fear, despair, or other undesirable affections. One is that an opposite affection would over-poweringly break over us, and the other is by getting so exhausted with the struggle that we have to stop, - so we drop down, give up, and *don't care* any longer. Our emotional brain-centres strike work, and we lapse into a temporary apathy . . . So long as the egoistic worry of the sick soul guards the door, the expansive confidence of the soul of faith gains no presence. But let the former faint away, even but for a moment, and the latter can profit by the opportunity, and, having once acquired possession, may retain it.<sup>133</sup>

The conscious center of resistance, says James, has to “shut down” for a moment – his psychological explanation for why conversion is usually preceded by this sort of apathy, or by a deep emotional exhaustion. Emphasizing the intervening subconscious processes, James says:

Starbuck seems to put his finger on the root of the matter when he says that to exercise the personal will is still to live in the region where the imperfect self is the thing most emphasized. Where, on the contrary, the subconscious forces take the lead, it is more probably the better self *in posse* which directs the operation. Instead of being clumsily and vaguely aimed at from without, it is then itself the organizing centre. What then must the person do? “He must relax,” says Dr. Starbuck,-- “that is, he must fall back on the larger Power that makes for righteousness, which has been welling up in his own being, and let it finish in its own way the work it has begun ... The act of yielding, in this point of view, is giving one's self over to the new life, making it the centre of a new personality, and living, from within, the truth of it which had before been viewed objectively.”<sup>134</sup>

Note that, by his own account, it is not James' intention to out rule the theological side of the explanation; rather, his intention is to present the psychological side of the matter, which he hopes will be complementary – and thus, enriching overall – to considerations regarding other aspects of the matter. This approach can be conceived as

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<sup>133</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 173.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 172. James' quote is from Edwin Diller Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness* (New York,: C. Scribner's sons, 1901).



complementary with one that conceives God's action as being respectful of the peculiarities of the human psyche, together elucidating different aspects of religious conversion without stepping on each others' toes.<sup>135</sup>

### Afterwards

Returning to Griffin's account, the aftermath of conversion is considered under the simple name of afterwards. Under this rubric she considers a number of common elements:

First, there is what could be named a "retrospective recognition" of the forces at play. For the convert, God's influence, often obscure during the whole journey, is now recognized with retrospective clarity. In Griffin's words,

It is like Roxanne's final recognition that Cyrano has been her lover for a lifetime, though she had known him only in disguises and mediated through the love of others; now she sees that it was his love that shaped her life from the beginning, and she says, "It was you, and I might have known every time I heard you speak my name."<sup>136</sup>

A second element is the feeling of being finally at peace, after the long struggle. This may be articulated also in terms of a newfound, deep-seated joy, in addition to peacefulness, which Griffin compares with the experience of Ebenezer Scrooge, in Dickens's paradigmatic story of conversion:

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<sup>135</sup> To James' credit, he is considerably sober regarding the explanatory reach of his psychological explanations (and of psychology in general): "Now if you ask of psychology just *how* the excitement shifts in a man's mental system, and *why* aims that were peripheral become at a certain moment central, psychology has to reply that although she can give a general description of what happens, she is unable in a given case to account accurately for all the single forces at work. Neither an outside observer nor the Subject who undergoes the process can explain fully how particular experiences are able to change one's centre of energy so decisively, or why they so often have to bide their hour to do so." (James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 162.)

<sup>136</sup> Griffin, *Turning*, 149.

The chuckle with which he (spoke) and the chuckle with which he paid for the turkey ... were only exceeded by the chuckle with which he sat down breathless in his chair again, and chuckled till he cried. ... And found that everything could yield him pleasure. He never dreamed that any walk -- that anything -- could yield him so much happiness.<sup>137</sup>

But although peacefulness and joy commonly follow the surrender phase, Griffin (and James is in agreement) emphatically denies “happiness” as an ordinary consequence of conversion, if by “happiness” is meant something like the disappearance of all sources of anxiety, sadness or pain. What has been a major source of worries and unrest – perhaps *the* major source – during recent times, the resistance, the struggle, the fears preceding surrender, are gone. But this does not mean that other sources of pain or struggle have magically disappear, nor has the individual’s basic psychology been completely transmuted by conversion. Those whose lives are filled with trials and difficulties may draw further courage and resolution from their turning, especially if conversion has oriented them towards a meaning of life that is more fulfilling or satisfying; but they are not necessarily turned from unhappy to happy persons.<sup>138</sup> Similarly, in James’ view the “sick soul’s” existential pessimism or melancholia persists after conversion (the person does not become “healthy-minded”); but because the person is now living a “two-storied” life, the standards of the spiritual dimension makes this melancholia bearable – to some extent at least. Thus the previous quote by James on Bunyan and Tolstoy,

They had drunk too deeply of the cup of bitterness ever to forget its taste, and their redemption is into a universe two stories deep. Each of them realized a good which broke the effective edge of his sadness; yet the sadness was preserved as a minor ingredient in the heart of the faith by which it was overcome.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1843), 157-60.

<sup>138</sup> Griffin, *Turning*, 149.

<sup>139</sup> James, *op. cit.*, 151.

In addition to this, there are objective repercussions of the person's conversion in their social and relational life. In some cases conversion is received by others with little fuss; but in some cases it raises waves that wreak havoc among a person's relations, professional opportunities, etc. This potential for wreckage throws into relief the objective cost of conversion, and the extent to which a person may go in pursuit of whatever it is that drives them towards it.

Griffin's descriptive model of religious conversion, though without offering a general definition of conversion, helps illustrate what is common to the *process* of conversion, and thus to identify it when it takes place. Griffin identifies a characteristic buildup in tension, prompted by the awareness of a deficiency or need (in the desire/longing phase); a resistance to the demands of this deficiency or need; an internal argumentation for and against moving in the direction of transformation ("dialectic"); an intensification of this resistance of conversion draws nearer ("struggle"); and finally, the cessation of this resistance and struggle, resolving in the direction of the demand ("surrender"). The "defeat" of surrender is paradoxically experienced as chosen and welcomed by the subject, and if at the time the subject often feels "beaten," this is commonly followed by intense feelings of gratitude or joy, retrospectively supporting the subject's submitting to these demands.

## **2. Assessment: Griffin's model applied to moral conversion**

How universal is the model that Griffin presents? In arguing for its generality, Griffin uses as evidence a selection of well-known autobiographies of Christian converts, most of which have become classics. Griffin's is not a work of erudition; it does not attempt to cover all corners of the available literature. But she is able to show a clear, easy-flowing correspondence between the categories presented in her model and the events described in the autobiographies examined. The textual evidence she provides is further supported by anecdotal accounts from Griffin's numerous convert acquaintances, and by Griffin's analysis of her own experience.

The model seems also to apply quite faithfully to the majority of cases of religious conversion found during research for this dissertation. The exception seem to be those cases in which religious conversion takes place very gradually and without a great deal of dramatic awareness, in which case identifying such stages becomes more difficult. Significant variations in the amount of attention paid to the process – and consequently, in the degree to which it is experienced as a dramatic struggle – seem to be closely related to personality traits.<sup>140</sup>

Some differences between moral conversion, and religious conversion as described in this framework, can be advanced here. First, accounts of moral conversion seem to be more rare in terms of how often they are reported, and this rarity is compounded by the

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<sup>140</sup> It could be speculated that, if there is a correlation between a reflective personality and the drive to write, a majority of autobiographical accounts will be of the more reflective/dramatic kind, without necessarily reflecting (and possibly inflating) the actual, "numerical" occurrences of this kind of conversion.

fact that they are seldom characterized explicitly as “moral conversion.” This poses a methodological difficulty. Reports of moral conversion usually provide less reflective detail than religious conversion accounts. In the mind of those that provide autobiographical accounts of religious conversions there is often the explicit awareness of an apologetic function for these accounts, and this awareness seems to foster an attention to the relevant details, whereas accounts of moral conversion seldom reflect an awareness of that kind.

But besides this methodological difficulty, there seem to be more substantial differences between the structure of religious and of moral conversion accounts. The *desire* or *longing* phase is not universally present in moral conversion, though it does take place in specific classes of moral conversion, as will be seen in the following chapter.<sup>141</sup> But when it does, it appears to be less intense and focused – a longing for happiness, perhaps, or for “something better.”<sup>142</sup> The presence of something like a “dialectic” phase is not frequently mentioned in accounts of moral conversion, and descriptions of a period of “struggle,” though less rare, are also infrequent. This may be a consequence of the briefness of the accounts, or it may be due to more substantial reasons having to do with the distinctive nature of moral conversion. In rough terms, religious conversion has the form of a search or quest, and there is the drama produced by the existential involvement of the whole person in this quest, while moral conversion very often has rather the form of an awakening, or a slap on the face. These dissimilarities limit the use of Griffin’s

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<sup>141</sup> Namely, in “conversion regarding happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning.”

<sup>142</sup> See, in the Appendix, the case of Russ Fee (case #22) and “Subject L” (case #13).

model for this project. Thus, though it helps to identify some general aspects of conversion, the model itself will not be applied to an examination of narratives of moral conversion.

The dissimilarities mentioned have to do principally with the structure of narratives of moral and religious conversion (reflecting, one would expect, dissimilarities in the processes themselves). A discussion of more substantial differences between the notions of moral and religious conversion is necessary, particularly because moral conversion takes place frequently within a process that might also be characterized as a religious conversion. This discussion will take place in Chapter 6. But it is now time to address the notion of “moral conversion” directly.

CHAPTER 5  
THE NOTION OF MORAL CONVERSION  
AND THE THREE CLASSES OF MORAL CONVERSION

**1. *Introduction: Towards a notion of moral conversion***

Towards a general notion of conversion

The previous chapters have provided sufficient material to establish a general notion of conversion. The concept has most frequently been studied within the realms of theology and religious studies (or, within the realm of psychology, as a subtopic within the larger topic of psychology of religious phenomena), and as a consequence conversion is frequently understood to mean *religious* conversion. The meaning of the term, however, is far broader. Intellectual, moral, affective, psychological, aesthetic, social types of conversion have been identified by those having these experiences, and by scholars who have studied them. Possibly the list could be expanded to include further types.

This makes the task of formulating a definition of conversion rather difficult: not only are the types of conversion mentioned above quite varied, but each seems focused on a different, specific dimension in a person's life.

In a first look, what is common among these types seems to be some form of change in the person. This change is of tremendous importance to the person, in the sense that the relations of the person to the world, to others, to truth, even to the self are fundamentally affected. How the person is affected, and in respect to which aspect of the person's relation to the world, to others, to truth or to self is what identifies the type of conversion involved. For example, intellectual conversion could be described as the redefining of one's understanding of notions such as "certainty," "facts," "knowledge," etc., in such a way that the person's cognitive relation to the world is fundamentally altered. (It could also be described, from a slightly different perspective, as a fundamental alteration in the way in which one conceives oneself as knower.)

The task at hand is to formulate this fundamental alteration in more precise terms. It will be proposed here that the best term to characterize the kind of change that conversion constitutes is the term "existential." This term is difficult to pin down precisely, given how it is used in widely different contexts – and sometimes rather loosely - in contemporary philosophy. But "existential" captures very adequately in its general meaning the essential characters of conversion, so much so that it is not unreasonable to define conversion as an *existential change*. A detailed characterization of conversion as existential – applied specifically to moral conversion - will be provided in Chapter 8,



Section 5; but it is useful to state here in advance what is meant by characterizing conversion in general in this way.

The term “existential” draws attention, first, to the importance of the change. A phrase like “he made an existential decision,” for example, can be legitimately understood to mean that the person made a very important decision, in the sense that the decision affects that person’s life fundamentally – though not necessarily other people’s lives. An event, it has been claimed, must affect a person’s life and relations in significant ways to merit the name of “conversion”; otherwise the name is misplaced or used only metaphorically.

Second, the term implies something being real and concrete, as opposed to something being “merely academic,” detachedly theoretical, etc. Thus, an event having “existential consequences” means that those consequences are expected to really take place and to have an impact on other things or persons, and an “existential decision” is understood to have real, concrete consequences.

Third, the term *existential* has the connotation of something being personal. This connotation makes the term useful to indicate the rather obvious fact that conversion is a change that happens to *persons*. But this rather obvious fact has significant implications. Conversion as existential change may be thus opposed to structural changes happening to institutions, to the restructuring of systems of law, to the training of animals, not to mention material changes in physical structures. That the meaning of “existential” is here close to that of “personal” may be corroborated by the inadequacy of talking of “existential changes” happening to an institution, a system of law, an animal or a

building. “Conversion” applies to persons and persons only – though perhaps the notion may be extended to groups of persons, and thus it may make sense in certain situations to talk about “social” conversion.

Fourth, saying that something is *existential* can be used to indicate or emphasize the contingency of the concrete – the fact that things happen that are not planned, plans fail, accidents occur, and contingency in general cannot be excluded from human existence by any amount of rational planning. This connotation of the term “existential” also applies to conversion, insofar as conversions typically have an element of unexpectedness, even of working *against* expectations.

Fifth, “existential” has the connotation brought forth by the philosophical tradition named precisely “existentialism”: an emphasis on freedom, and specifically of freedom as a harsh blessing, a resistance to empirical/quantifying descriptions, and other themes that will be discussed in Chapter 8. The existentialists’ discussions of freedom provide a suitable platform for examining the issue of whether conversion is an event that requires the freedom of the human agent to take place at all.

The five connotations of the term are interconnected: in some philosophical accounts of freedom, for example, personhood involves freedom; freedom and “unexpectedness” may be closely related, and so forth. These matters will be discussed later, as indicated. At this point, the intention is only to present the term “existential” as suitable for characterizing the kind of change that conversion entails. It should be made clear, however, that at this point the term “existential” is presented only as a terminological aid, in order, that is, to simplify the exposition by bringing forward an

adjective that – despite its frequent unruliness – adequately describes conversion in general. Whether conversion can legitimately or not be understood as an “existential event” in a more substantial way is an issue that will be discussed in detail in Chapter 8; resolving this question is not intrinsically relevant for the exposition that follows here.

### Towards a notion of *moral* conversion

This chapter is structured on the basis of two distinctions, that are then cross-related. These are briefly presented here, in order to make the subsequent exposition clearer. The first distinction concerns the different focus given to the question about the meaning of morality by classical and by modern/contemporary philosophy. While the modern/contemporary investigations on ethical theory have focused strongly on the question on right and wrong, there is a classical understanding of the subject-matter of ethical theory (common to both Plato, Aristotle, and Christian medieval philosophers) that focuses rather on the question for happiness and “the good life” (contemporarily phrased also as “the meaning of life” question). In principle, both provide acceptable – if incomplete -ways of answering the question about what constitutes a matter of moral concern, and consequently, what differentiates moral conversion from other types of conversion. Collapsing both meanings, however, can only be attempted at the cost of much confusion, or by a very complex conceptual apparatus that may or may not succeed in bringing both together in satisfactory ways. I will therefore address these two meanings of morality separately.

The second distinction concerns the meaning of conversion itself. A closer look at the phenomenon shows that its manifestations can be enormously varied, rendering a

definition aimed at covering all or nearly all instances of conversion extremely general and vague. Thus, rather than attempting to articulate one common but overly general and vague definition of moral conversion, the task of circumscribing the notion for present purposes will be accomplished by differentiating *three general “classes” of conversion*: conversion regarding content, conversion regarding attitude or degree of commitment, and conversion regarding behavioral coherence. Instances of all three classes are consistently found in narratives of moral conversion. Each of these processes entails a change profound enough and existential enough to merit the name of conversion as was indicated, but collapsing the three classes would only lead to a confusing exposition. It should be noted in advance, too, that in the narratives of real conversions we can find processes belonging to the three classes deeply intertwined, but not in such a way that a single, overarching definition of conversion can be readily constructed.<sup>143</sup>

## **2. *The modern/contemporary notion of morality: the question of right and wrong***

Our focus is *moral conversion*. Once the notion of *conversion* has been at least characterized in general terms, the next step is to clarify the meaning of the adjective *moral*. The question could alternatively be formulated in terms of the meaning of its abstract noun *morality*, or by inquiring about more general expressions such as what constitutes a “matter of moral concern.” The intention is to circumscribe the notion in

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<sup>143</sup> Terminological note: instead of the term “types,” the word *classes* will be used to specifically designate the three process-types of conversion (conversion regarding content, regarding level of commitment and regarding behavioral coherence).

such a way that it includes a reasonably wide variety of experiences that may be called “moral conversion”; in other words, we are looking for a notion of “moral” (in the expression “moral conversion”) that is inclusive of at least the most generally accepted theories of morality.

The reader who follows contemporary discussions on ethics and moral theory will probably be familiar with two approaches to the right/wrong question that occur frequently in moral theory, and are used by diverse authors as a useful first step in the investigation of the meaning of “moral.” One common approach is to begin such a discussion by asking about the meaning of “right” and “wrong,” the polarity most frequently associated with moral judgments (i.e. judgments on the moral quality of human actions and decisions). Another very common approach to the right/wrong question begins with a discussion on the experience of “oughtness,” the peculiarly human experience of regarding oneself as duty-bound with respect to certain courses of action. Both of these approaches may or may not eventually be collapsed into one, and depending on the particular author, may lead to different theories of morality (consequentialist, deontological, etc.) The aim here is only to make reference to what are the most frequent ways of initiating an investigation regarding the meaning of “moral.”<sup>144</sup>

These two approaches to the right/wrong question, asking about “right/wrong” and “oughtness,” are intrinsically bound to each other. The question about why a moral agent ought to do (or not-do) something may be answered by saying that such a course of

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<sup>144</sup> The more classically-minded reader will perhaps initiate the discussion by asking, for example, about what constitutes “the good life.” This approach will be taken into consideration later in this chapter.

action is (morally) right/wrong, while, conversely, “right” and “wrong” (in the moral sense) may be defined in terms of what the moral agent, for whatever reasons, experiences as something that he or she ought/ought-not to do. Because of the interrelatedness of these two approaches, and to simplify matters, I will refer to them as if they were a single approach, and I will use in most occasions the simple expression “right/wrong.”

The reader, however, should be aware of the enormous diversity of approaches behind this simple expression, and therefore of the enormous complexity of the task of describing what is right or wrong.<sup>145</sup> What can be identified as common to contemporary ethical discussion (despite its many, varied orientations) is this focus on right/wrong; whether they attempt to ground their reflections on value-maximizing operations, human rights, self-sustaining rational principles, or some other principle is irrelevant to this discussion.

This common element in contemporary discussion provides us with a first meaning for moral conversion: *a change in the subject* (perhaps the expression *moral agent* would be more appropriate) *with regard to her/his existential involvement in the task of acting rightly or wrongly, of doing what ought to be done*. This change may involve both big, consequential decisions and the small, perhaps half-thought actions of daily life.

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<sup>145</sup> In particular, I would like to avoid the impression that, by choosing the expression “right/wrong” over “ought-to” I am discarding deontological theories. The intention, rather, is to choose an expression that can easily accommodate other theories (utilitarian/value-maximizing ones, for example); and the expression “right/wrong” is, in this sense, more inclusive, since “ought-to” seems to belong particularly to the dominion of deontological theories.

Against this background – i.e. morality as the consideration of what is right/wrong - three possible classes of moral conversion can be identified. (The same three will be further explained in relation to morality as the question for happiness or the meaning of life, later in this chapter.)

#### A. Moral conversion regarding the content of right and wrong<sup>146</sup>

The first class of conversion focuses on what is considered to be right/wrong in general. It is possible to imagine someone changing their moral judgments only on specific issues; but if this is a change affecting, so to speak, only the final verdict on a specific issue, this would hardly be a reason to consider such a change an instance of moral conversion. Suppose, for example, that a practice about which one previously had no objection came now to be considered by the person to be environmentally unsound, and in the light of this new information, the practice came to be considered morally dubious. This change would amount at most to a revision of one's judgments, or to a change of opinion: it would not count as an instance of moral conversion.

But one can also imagine a change in a person's moral judgment about the said practice happening due to a more fundamental shift in the person's basic criteria for judging; in its wake, a revision of moral conclusions and previously accepted rules occurs. Such a shift could take place for example when a person adopts a new criterion

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<sup>146</sup> Terminological note: while originally I considered designating each class of conversion with a letter and number (i.e. "class A-1," etc.) I have opted for designating them simply using these long expressions (i.e. "conversion regarding content about right/wrong" and so forth), possibly shortening them as their meaning becomes more familiar. While this decision may account for some awkwardly long phrases, it is my opinion that this is still less awkward than using arbitrary technical notations (and forcing the reader to either become familiar with them or constantly check for their meaning).

that was previously not considered relevant to ethical decisions – a person may now consider the environmental consequences of one’s acts as a very important criterion for decision, when previously there was no consideration of the importance of this factor. Or the change could affect not just the criteria, but the way in which the person arrives at a moral judgment – the person, for example, might shift from being strictly rule-abiding to a more outcomes-focused form of compliance, and weigh actions more in terms of a case-by-case examination of the potential consequences of acting one way or another.

Thus regarding the first class of moral conversion, in order to judge whether there has been a moral conversion one must investigate, first, whether there has been a change in the “content” of a person’s moral judgments; and in second place, whether such change can be attributed to deeper changes affecting a person’s overall structure of moral judgment, rather than changes in particular matters when the bases of such judgments have remained unchanged.

Sometimes such a change in the criteria for moral reasoning is accompanied by a shift of another sort: this is the move from a life ruled by uncritically accepted moral principles and/or rules, to a life in which one’s criteria for moral action are habitually reflected upon, weighed and critically considered. A moderately reflective person can hardly change long-time held principles and rules without wondering about the epistemological status of such principles and rules in general – if one could be wrong about them, why could it not happen again? This form of moral conversion (a sub-type of the class of moral conversion described in this section) coincides with what is called by



Walter Conn a “critical moral conversion”: a moral conversion that is coupled (as was explained in Chapter 3) with some degree of *intellectual conversion*.

#### Narrative evidence for this class of conversion

In order to go beyond a mere description of categories and show that these categories describe something that actually takes place, I will conclude each section of this chapter with a sub-section providing real-life evidence. Much of the evidence provided is narrative, drawn from a survey of biographies, interviews, etc. as well as psychological and sociological investigations and similar sources. The focus, it should be emphasized, is not on finding statistically comprehensive studies, which in fact provide very limited information regarding mental and emotional processes, but on locating narratives in which care has been taken to articulate such processes (and other concurring factors) in reasonable detail. This said, it should be kept in mind that the people who gathered or wrote down these stories did not have in mind the categorization of moral conversions into classes as it is offered here, and for this reason their narratives often might be put into more than one category, depending on where the major emphasis is put when they are read. As Aristotle said,

our discussion will be adequate if it achieves clarity within the limits of the subject matter. For precision cannot be expected in the treatment of all subjects alike.<sup>147</sup>

So at this point the intention is only to provide evidence that these classes of conversion actually happen.

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<sup>147</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, I,3.

An instance of *moral conversion regarding content about right/wrong* is found in Donald Gelpi's account of his conversion from racism (case #29 in the Appendix).

Having been born in New Orleans, Louisiana, Gelpi acknowledges having grown up “a racial bigot,” his racism focusing on black people.

I do not remember ever doing anything to hurt black people, but I did grow up believing in their essential racial inferiority to myself and to other white people.

No one challenged my racial bigotry in a systematic way until I went to high school. The Jesuits who taught me waged ceaseless war on my racism and on the racism of my white classmates. I resisted them for two years, but eventually I conceded that they had the right of it. I recognized the immorality of racism and renounced it in my own heart.<sup>148</sup>

Gelpi's account is devoid of any drama, but acknowledges quite simply the fact that he essentially agreed with racist views – despite not having hurt anyone on account of such views – and in a two-year process eventually came to see such views as immoral and renounce them. There is clearly a change in the content of what he regards as right/wrong – despite his having grown up immersed in such views, and his resistance to change being supported by his classmates. But further, Gelpi finds in this instance of conversion also a deeper kind of change:

I look back on that experience as a personal moral conversion. I regard it as an initial moral conversion because, for the first time in my life, I took personal responsibility for my disagreeing with the conventional morality taught me by my society. By disagreeing, I took personal responsibility for my own conscience.<sup>149</sup>

This transition - in Gelpi's words, from “conventional to autonomous morality”<sup>150</sup> - exemplifies a shift in criteria for moral judgment, which is accompanied (and supported, in a sense) by a cognitive conversion: Gelpi experiences a need for *reasoned support* for

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<sup>148</sup> Gelpi, *The Conversion Experience*, 29.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 30.

accepted moral practices and views, rather than accepting conformity by others as a kind of evidence for them.

Arun Gandhi – Mohandas Gandhi’s grandson – tells of the parallel turn from racism of South African politician Jacques Besson, who professed for a long time an overt, active racism (case #28 in the Appendix). According to Gandhi, Besson, stranded in India for a few days, was received by Arun himself, and Arun made a conscious decision to be polite rather than berate him. In the few days Besson stayed with Arun’s family, the two had harsh arguments over and over again, changing the subject when the discussion grew too heated. But in spite of this, Arun and his family continued in their polite kindness and eventually made some headway in lessening the harshness of the exchanges. By the time of them parting – a matter of only a few days - Besson and Gandhi embraced in tears; and Besson became an anti-racism activist on his return to South Africa.<sup>151</sup>

In this story we do not know what went through Besson’s mind, as we do in Gelpi’s story. But it is hard to imagine Besson’s activist racism turning to activist anti-racism without some accompanying change of significant moral categories within his thinking. What had been judged to be profoundly right was now judged to be profoundly wrong. So this also seems an instance of moral conversion regarding content of right/wrong.

Other instances can be succinctly mentioned. Helen Haste reports about a young woman, “Sandra,” who, staying for a few days with a French family, was shocked by the way meat was cooked in France (case #5 in the Appendix). After returning to England and reflecting on the issue, she began to see meat-eating “as a moral issue on which she

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<sup>151</sup> Arun Gandhi, in a talk to the Loyola University Chicago Community, during the *Peacemaking in an Age of Terror Conference*. Chicago, March 21, 2007.

could exercise some personal responsibility,” and became vegetarian.<sup>152</sup> The reasons Haste reports for becoming vegetarian are phrased by her in moral terms: she has come to see something that she previously considered morally acceptable as at least morally dubious. Another example is provided by Robert Bellah in his interview of Wayne Bauer, (case #2 in the Appendix).<sup>153</sup> Raised in an unreflective acceptance of traditional patriotic values, Wayne joined the Marine Corps in the 60’s; but during this time, friends who had gone to college began to argue with him about the Vietnam War. This went on for a few months, and Bauer finally concluded that his best arguments held no weight. His resolution was strong enough, in the practical sense, to lead him to go AWOL, and then to lead an underground life for many years. Eventually he surrendered to the military and was spared a court martial. This process eventually led to another conversion, that will be classified as moral conversion *regarding content about happiness and the meaning of life* (considered below). That is, Wayne became later a political activist and an advocate for poor tenants; but the first steps of the process of change in Wayne can be read as a *moral conversion regarding content about right/wrong*: he came to see joining the military – at least at that particular place and time – as morally objectionable, and acted accordingly.

These examples should suffice to indicate the reality of this class of moral conversion.

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<sup>152</sup> Helen Haste, "Moral Responsibility and Moral Commitment: The Integration of Affect and Cognition," in *The Moral Domain: Essays in the Ongoing Discussion between Philosophy and the Social Sciences*, ed. Thomas Wren (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 336.

<sup>153</sup> Robert N. Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 17-20.

B. Moral conversion regarding the degree of commitment with respect to right/  
wrong

Another class of moral conversion can be described as a shift from a general lack of concern for the morality of one's actions to genuine concern for this. The opposite movement can also occur; but as will be shown, the contrary movement is rarely called “conversion.” An initial way to characterize this class of moral conversion could be as a conversion “from frivolity to seriousness,” or “from amorality to morality.” The rules and principles that previously defined right and wrong for a person, and that were in all probability learnt in that person’s childhood, may have been up to that point regarded as non-binding; perhaps the understanding is that these are rules laid down by society in general, but are to be followed only by those obedient enough to abide by them. But when this class of moral conversion takes place, these rules and principles, previously comprehended in this detached manner, become now existentially pressing for the person. No longer are these rules something exclusively “for other people.” Nor are they regarded as rules that one “happens to follow,” arbitrarily or for personal reasons, but are now followed because they are grasped as binding on all moral persons – i.e. as universally binding.<sup>154</sup>

On closer analysis, however, the characterization of this class of conversion becomes more complex. First, because the inverse process is also conceivable. A person who lived by certain rules believing that they should be followed may come to doubt

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<sup>154</sup> “Universally” here does not mean, of course, that these moral rules will be the same for absolutely everyone, but the same for those that share the same morally relevant circumstances.

their foundations, or their hold on him/her in terms of right/wrong, and so become more distanced and no longer see him/herself under their rule. This process, however, is rarely the exact inverse; for while the shift towards a higher degree of commitment usually entails a process of “positive” determination on the side of the agent, its opposite usually resembles rather a process of decreasing determination, dis-integration, an “entropic” process, so to speak. Such a process fits neither the use of the term “conversion” in its common, everyday usage – so it is rarely called a conversion – nor the technical use of the term as developed in this work.

Second, quite a bit of variety can be found in the shapes that this class of conversion can take, and some ambiguity, even controversy, in their valuation. Simone de Beauvoir for example, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*,<sup>155</sup> has traced a number of moral/existential profiles that range from the “Serious Man,” - a dangerous being, in her account, who takes the world to be the source of absolute, unconditioned values – to the “Free Man” who, aware of the (claimed) absence of such unconditioned values, commits to the existentialist ideal of the exercise of his freedom; and in so doing, by accepting the freedom of others as something like an absolute, regains a “legitimate” kind of seriousness. In her description we find a number of moral profiles – the “sub-men,” the Adventurer, the Nihilist, the Passionate Man – characterized in subtle distinctions by the ways in which they commit to values, including whether they regard them as absolute

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<sup>155</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949).

and unconditional or as something else. (De Beauvoir uses in fact the term “conversion” to describe the movement to a profile closer to the “Free Man” ideal.)<sup>156</sup>

These examples suggest that very lengthy discussions would arise if we tried to establish in precise, absolute terms what constitutes “conversion,” and what constitutes “counter-conversion,” if the former is understood as a shift towards a “morally better” standpoint and the latter as the opposite. The matter must be left undiscussed here, since such a discussion may only be resolved by the positing and defending of a full-fledged ethical theory explaining the notions of moral progress and decadence; but the suggestion is made here that the matter may be usefully approached by examining whether the process can be categorized in terms of integration or disintegration.

#### Narrative evidence for this class of conversion

Identifying narrative evidence for this class of conversion poses a peculiar kind of challenge, because a change in attitude is usually accompanied (or even caused by) a change in the way the person perceives moral issues (i.e. content), not to mention by possible difficulties adapting one’s behavioral patterns to the new attitude (the third class of moral conversion, considered below), which in turn may affect the attitudinal change itself. Thus a conversion will be considered to fit this type not when *there is no change* regarding content, but when, even if significant changes regarding content can be identified, there is a perhaps more significant attitudinal change towards morality. In the case of Wayne Bauer, for example, already described (case #2), where a relatively similar

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 51.

intensity in the agent's commitment to moral values can be identified before and after the change, the case must be deemed a *conversion regarding content* rather than one regarding commitment or attitude. As indicated above, the three classes are being proposed to shed light on how moral conversion occurs; there is no claim here that the classes invariably occur in isolation from one another.

A well-known episode that may be read as an instance of this type of conversion is the story of Mohandas Gandhi being forced out of the train (case #8).<sup>157</sup> While traveling first class through Natal, South Africa, as representative of his Indian law firm, an official told him (because of his "coloured" skin) that he should move to third-class. When he refused, the official called a constable that then took him by the hand and forced him out of the train, together with his luggage. Gandhi then sat in the waiting room, dark and cold, and considered whether to fight for his rights, to continue on his journey without responding to the insults, or – ultimately his choice – to dedicate himself "to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process."<sup>158</sup>

The change in him that Gandhi describes in his autobiography can be best described as a change in attitude. The injustice and the brutality of racism in general could hardly be something unknown to Gandhi at the time – in fact, he had already been involved in a similar quarrel regarding the use of turbans in court.<sup>159</sup> But, even though the hardship he was subjected to in this episode was somewhat superficial, still the humiliation and shock seem to have acted as a sort of "triggering event," making him reevaluate the morality of

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<sup>157</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography; or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. Mahadev Desai (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House, 1927), 103-105.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.



ignoring the problem in general, and make a commitment; that is, adopt a new attitude, a “committed” attitude towards its solution. Gandhi does not report a significant revision of his view of the morality of racism itself on his part (i.e. a revision of the content of his moral evaluations). Rather, there is a significant change in the moral weight of the obligation to combat structural racism: it is now perceived as an imperative (a personal imperative, in Gandhi’s case) that one cannot just shrug off or set aside for another time.

An experience with some similarities to that of Gandhi is that of Helen John (case #6) a mother of five that left her family to take part on a permanent anti-nuclear demonstration around a base in Greenham, England.<sup>160</sup> According to her account, she was driving into Builth when it suddenly occurred to her how the beautiful scenery would be altered in a nuclear war – an image that left her physically unwell, forcing her to stop the car until she could compose herself and drive away. Until then, she had been

one of those people who knew about nuclear weapons for years, and put it into the backs of their minds. . . because we were assured that we had enough nuclear weapons to stop any country attacking us. . . And it was on that particular day driving into Builth that I realized that this was nonsense.<sup>161</sup>

As in Gandhi’s case, she had been previously aware of the evils of nuclear war, but not with the sense of pressing urgency that, in her view, demanded of her that she took action. Here there seems to have been a *content* shift: the counter-deterrent justification for nuclear weapons ceased to be regarded as a sound argument. But the word Helen uses is not “mistaken,” or “false”: it is “nonsense,” a word that indicates significant emotional content, especially given that it is accompanied by committed, sharply counter-cultural

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<sup>160</sup> Haste, "Moral Responsibility and Moral Commitment," 337-341.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

action. The change in attitude, though likely prompted by a change in content, is what is most significant in her story.

Both Gandhi's and Helen John's cases seem to deal with a person's attitude/commitment with regard to moral issues that are very specific.<sup>162</sup> It is possible to find also instances of a more general change in attitude towards morality – the cases, for example, of people with a criminal career that significantly “reform.” A narrative of this kind can be found in the story of CeaseFire activists Antonio Pickett (“Lil’ Tony”) and Evans Robinson (“Chip”) (cases #20 and #21).<sup>163</sup> Childhood friends, both were raised in strict homes “where grace was said at the dinner table and swearing was forbidden.”<sup>164</sup> They, however, “quickly grew enamored of the thrill and payoff of petty crime,” joining a gang, eventually getting into drug dealing, and beginning their rotation in and out of prison. By 1996, though, Tony found himself facing conviction, and weary of “worrying [that] the next person he saw might try to kill him.” While awaiting placement in a state prison he let his gang's leadership know he was stepping down. He mentions the prayer and support of his mother, a “loving but stern evangelical minister,” as instrumental in his “turning his life around.”

His friend Chip, in the meantime, ran wild, making many enemies, and was only slowed down by the tragedy of his cousin dying in a shooting.

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<sup>162</sup> Both Helen John's and Gandhi's cases are discussed by Helen Haste within the context of a study of the development of *political* commitment (which Haste identifies in her article with a higher degree of moral commitment in general). Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Rex W. Huppke, "Four Who Watch over the City," *Chicago Tribune*, December 10 2004.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

Tony was released in 2001, but couldn't risk getting pulled back in. His mother connected him then with CeaseFire, an initiative to take on high-risk individuals, help them find jobs and educational opportunities, and counsel them about the pitfalls of street life, and before long Tony became a counsellor for CeaseFire. Chip became one of his first clients, taking with his help a factory job; and in 2002 he was also hired by CeaseFire. An article in the *Chicago Tribune* describes them as having significant street clout due to their criminal past, which makes them very effective in recruiting teenagers out of gangs. They are also described as loving their adrenaline-charged jobs, but also carrying the regret from having hurt people in the past, and having influenced others to live a life of crime.<sup>165</sup>

From the information that can be gathered from this newspaper account, it would seem that Pickett and Robinson were not ignorant of the basic norms required in a honest living – they would have learned them in their early years. Rather, they consciously disregarded them. Their conversion involves thus a new or renewed interest in leading a honest life. But while their understanding of *what* constitutes a honest life has not changed, in this case there seems to have been a change in their way of understanding the *good* of living a honest life – e.g. as freedom from the hazards and weariness of a life of crime – and this change in their understanding may have been instrumental in their attitudinal change. Summing up his experience, for example, Robinson says, “The air

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<sup>165</sup> The article also quotes a police officer, Sheila McFarland of the Harrison District, attesting that “the once-notorious Chip and Tony have shown they've changed their ways. ‘They've done some things in the past that we wouldn't be proud of, but in the same sense they've turned over a new leaf,’ she said. ‘I believe their experience out on the streets and interacting with gangs at one time has given them the ability to go out and communicate with current gang members. They're taking these people under their wings.’” (Ibid.) This testimony provides further evidence to assess the permanence of their conversion.

smells different. The sun seems brighter. Things aren't so bleak all the time."<sup>166</sup> His new attitude and his new understanding of life seem to go together. This is in fact to be expected insofar as a cognitive element is required for conversion, as will be argued later. For it is the thesis of this work that an attitudinal change would not take place without some shift in one's understanding of the matters involved. But more on this later in Chapter 10.

Similar examples of moral conversion regarding attitude, also dealing with rehabilitation of people with a criminal past, can be found in great numbers in the context of "restorative justice" programs. The Restorative Justice program, born in New Zealand and now appearing in other countries (including the U.S.), attempts to revise the contemporary paradigms of criminal justice (which are based, it is claimed, on "retributive justice," or on punishment as deterrent); and which the advocates of restorative justice see as essentially flawed, both in their theoretical basis and in their questionable efficacy.<sup>167</sup> One of the Restorative Justice program's main practices is that of facilitating encounters between victims and offenders. In an abundant number of cases, the encounter has significant transformative effects both in the victim and the offender. The victims have the opportunity to see the offender as a human person, to question him/her about their motives, challenge their actions in the presence of someone harmed by them, and let them know about the specific ways in which the offense affected them.

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Jim Consedine, *Restorative Justice: Healing the Effects of Crime* (Lyttelton, New Zealand: Ploughshares Publications, 1999); Jim Consedine and Helen Bowen, *Restorative Justice: Contemporary Themes and Practice* (Lyttelton, New Zealand: Ploughshares Publications, 1999). Consedine's work constitutes at this point the essential literature on the subject.

Sometimes the victims also use the opportunity to forgive the offense, and even aid in the offender's reinsertion into society. The offenders, for their part, frequently experience a sort of existential shock when they see that their victims have faces, that their actions have harmed concrete people. Quite often too they express this shock, and the experience seems to aid greatly in important, positive changes in their lives, which the restorative justice movement summarizes as their rehabilitation.<sup>168</sup>

A paradigmatic example of *moral conversion regarding attitude* in this context is that of Jackie Katounas, reported to have spent 12 years in prison over a 25 year period ("clocking up" 138 convictions!), having gone into her first maximum security unit at the age of 12 (case #24).<sup>169</sup> Her restorative justice experience was in this case of an informal kind, when she received "some stolen goods" and discovered that she could identify the owner, a person she knew personally. "In all that time," Katounas reports, "I was never aware I was hurting anyone. I never gave consideration or a thought to the victims."<sup>170</sup> In this occasion, however, she felt deeply ashamed, and she phoned the victim to explain her involvement. After returning the stolen goods to the victim, Jackie ceased "offending" altogether. "It was a powerful turning point because I began thinking of other people than myself," Jackie reports.<sup>171</sup> The move away from her life of crime was difficult, among other things because she needed to learn to communicate with people who were not criminals. Some time later she heard of the Restorative Justice program, where she now

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<sup>168</sup> Victim/offender encounters are not meant to have an effect on the offender's sentence; the offender's reaction should thus not be read as motivated by a desire to get a shorter sentence (or somehow cheat the system).

<sup>169</sup> *Te Ara Whakatika: Newsletter of the Court-Referred restorative justice project*, September 2001.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

works actively as a facilitator, even running some new initiatives for the project. As in the case of Tony Pickett and Chip Robinson, her previous experience has been useful in building a rapport with the prisoners/offenders.<sup>172</sup> But the point here is that, with the help of some new data (the harm done to the victims, their possible suffering) Jackie changed her attitude towards stealing, and regarding how to live her life generally.<sup>173</sup>

These examples both provide evidence for and specify in clearer terms what is meant by this class of moral conversion, *regarding attitude about right/wrong*. The distinction between classes of conversion, to repeat, is not meant to be understood as circumscribing the different classes in clearly separated groups; rather, it is meant to take into account the fact that the weight of a concrete moral conversion may fall on one of these three aspects, while involving transformations or struggles relevant to the other aspects too. The distinction is nevertheless very useful, for without it we would be forced to struggle with a phenomenon too varied, too multiform to consider under a single structure without being excessively vague.

#### Narratives of the opposite process: “counter-conversion” as disintegration

The opposite process, it has been proposed, is often less a matter of resolution or determination (a positive process by which the agent reaches some form of higher integration) and more a process of disintegration or dissolution, of losing control over

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid. An article in the August 2004 issue, written by Katounas herself, indicates a concomitant religious conversion at work. “This intimate knowledge of what it is like to be an “inmate” reminded me of how far the Lord has brought me by his grace. . . . When I witness these miracles happening is it any wonder I’m so passionate about my work? I feel privileged and honoured to be an instrument as God administers his wonderful Grace.” (Jackie Katounas, *Te Ara Whakatika: Newsletter of the court-referred restorative justice project*, August 2004.)

<sup>173</sup> Other examples from the restorative justice context are mentioned in the Appendix (cases #23, 25 and 26).

where one's actions are leading, either because one has lost the capacity to objectively evaluate them, or because one has become too entangled in compromises and does not see a way out. This is suggested, for example, by the story of Patrick K., a fast-track operator who got gradually involved in a scheme with corrupt elements of his state's government. Eventually the scheme was discovered; Patrick managed to escape with his family and became an international fugitive; but eventually the stress of this fugitive life became too much and he turned himself in (case #11).<sup>174</sup> The story is now told by Patrick himself, who gives talks as part of community service duty. In his account, rationalization was a very important factor in his downfall – he spent a great deal of time devising ways to convince his wife and parents that what he was doing was ethical - and so was a feeling of invulnerability or arrogance fostered by his success. Interestingly enough, his body seemed to be more aware than his conscious mind of the trouble he was getting into; according to K., his body responded with constant ulcers and hair loss. In this story, the dissolution seems to be gradual, and does not seem marked by a turning towards anything. Rather, the story illustrates what Lonergan called “the flight from insight,” a half-conscious attempt to avoid looking at the issue or understanding it adequately. For these reasons, it seems appropriate to withhold the term “conversion” from this type of change.

The same conclusion is supported by the story of Robert Cooley, a Chicago attorney who worked for the mob (the “outfit”) and then later put his life continuously on

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<sup>174</sup> Patrick K., in a talk given on March 2005.

the line to bring them to prison (case #19).<sup>175</sup> As a young policeman, Cooley performed a number of heroic deeds, and refused to take part in a number of small corruption schemes he came across; but after becoming a successful criminal attorney, he gradually became entangled in the designs of some mob bosses. While a certain amount of unethical behavior was common in lawyers living in those times, it was the bosses' pressure to "fix" a case – and Cooley's reluctant acquiescence with the scheme - that eventually sealed his entanglement; after that, the more the bosses trusted him, the more dangerous it became for him to quit working for them. According to his account, however, his "core values" (crystallized in the image of his father, a honest policeman who had suffered from his unwillingness to compromise with the widespread corruption) survived: Cooley put his life on the line more than once to save a client or a friend from the mob, or to support an honest judge in his resolve to prosecute corrupt elements. These deep-set values – pushed down by fear, rationalization and convenience – eventually made their way to the surface again.<sup>176</sup>

The type of "downfall" we see in Cooley's descent into the life of the mob seems to have been the result of discrete, sometimes half-conscious decisions that progressively led him to lose moral control over his life. This kind of story is a favorite topic of fictional narratives too, from crime epics such as Mario Puzzo's *The Godfather* to fantastical allegories such as Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or Charles Williams' *Descent into Hell*, to the social criticism of Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*. It

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<sup>175</sup> Robert Cooley and Hillel Levin, *When Corruption Was King: How I Helped the Mob Rule Chicago, Then Brought the Whole Outfit Down* (New York: Carrol & Graf Publishers, 2004).

<sup>176</sup> Cooley's conversion will be discussed further in the following section, as an instance of "conversion regarding coherence."



is also the stuff classic tragedies are made of, from Creon in *Antigone* to Macbeth – a progressive loss of control, originated in dubious or bad decisions, that eventually ends in corrupting the character’s originally good (even outstanding) moral character.<sup>177</sup>

### C. Conversion regarding behavioral coherence in right/wrong<sup>178</sup>

It is fairly common – possibly, indeed, a universal point in human moral experience – that even people who take morality seriously, or have an ingrained concern for doing what is moral, do not always act accordingly. “I cannot even understand my own actions,” says St. Paul, “for I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate.”<sup>179</sup> These occurrences, viewed by the actor as contrary to their best intentions of right behavior can sometimes be explained, when they occur occasionally, as accidents – due to fatigue, to strong emotions provoked by an external situation (fear, anger, anxiety), to distraction, to being in a hurry, etc. That is, even though one may know what is the right action to take, it may be hard at times to do it because doing so requires an energy or concentration not readily available, or perhaps a certain amount of sacrifice that seems, in the situation, more than the agent can muster. Overall, these faults can be and are commonly attributed

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<sup>177</sup> William James, considering the matter of “counter-conversions,” relates as an example the story of a man “instantly converted to avarice.” (James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 149.) On a closer examination, however, James’ judgment in calling this a counter-conversion may not be entirely adequate. The person of the story, after wasting his fortune in “profligate revels,” reacts by focusing his energy with extreme intensity to the task of recovering, through “indefatigable industry” and extreme, obsessive thrift, the money he had lost, eventually dying “an inveterate miser,” but having accumulated a good fortune. What makes the term “counter-conversion” dubious in this case is the fact that the man was reacting from a previous morally unsound position – the vice of “prodigality” -, which arguably makes his new attitude morally sounder – though by carrying to its extremes, it eventually would turn into, in Aristotelian terms, its opposite vice.

<sup>178</sup> The reader may be aware of current theological discussions relative to whether the kind of conversion described in this section is or is not possible without a special – or even “normal,” if there is such a thing – infusion of supernatural, divine grace. I will bypass these discussions for obvious methodological reasons – namely, that this is a philosophical work.

<sup>179</sup> Romans 7, 15.

to “human weakness.” By this expression it is generally meant that we human beings do not operate perfectly according to the ideal, and that in the concrete existential situation we sometimes operate even further from the ideal than what we consider an acceptable standard. Faults of this kind are commonly distinguished, however, from those that have become a habit, i.e. patterns of behavior through which we recurrently diverge from the standard: bad habits, vices, specific weaknesses, what is sometimes called the “dominant defect” by those presenting the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, etc.<sup>180</sup>

Regarding the occasional faults in one's behavior, it is not unreasonable to believe - as traditional virtue theory maintains - that it is possible to become to some extent more proficient at getting them under control, as the person develops self-control or a more sustained attention to the conditions that make those faults more probable. In the language of virtue theory, virtues such as courage, temperance, equanimity, patience allow the agent to increase control over the influence of external and emotional factors in their decisions. Together with these, intellectual virtues that are accessory to prudence improve the agent's awareness of cognitive factors that are relevant to decisions. This process of gradually building up virtues, however, does not seem to fit the notion of conversion (though such a process may be required to consolidate the new patterns of behavior that are seen as desirable or morally required, after conversion takes place).<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> It should be noted that in the case of such patterns of recurrent faults, there is a constant tension between these being regarded as faults, and the opposing tendency to change one's way of thinking about them so that our conscience ceases to bother us about them (i.e. it begins to view them as acceptable). This is the reverse, darker side of what Lonergan called “the drive for consistency.”

<sup>181</sup> The distinction between “conversion” and “development” will be considered in adequate detail in Chapter 8.

But if the process of consolidating good habits is not itself conversion, it may be possible to identify, at the beginning of a person's sustained efforts to “grow in virtue,” a relatively conscious shift towards a *more complete* commitment to one's moral standards. The process may be described in this manner: the person realizes that his/her commitment to his/her own moral standards is weak, because of an apparent lack of coherence between the actions and the contents of the moral standards; there is a lack of reliability, or a proneness to be swayed towards behavior that is deemed unethical or imperfect. But faced with this realization, the person then judges this low degree of commitment to be unacceptable, and commits in earnest to certain moral standards, and accordingly begins acting more coherently. This kind of shift corresponds to the class of *moral conversion regarding attitude/commitment about right/wrong*, which was described in the previous section.

Habitual flaws, however, can coexist also with an earnest commitment to moral ideals; even a very moral person may be constantly tortured with anxiety for a recurrent flaw of character that appears to be impossible to correct. There is no direct logical correlation between a person's commitment to moral ideals and that person's capacity for self-control: a person that experiences a strong desire to be more moral may indeed be very poor at self-control. A change *towards greater coherence between moral standards and actual behavior* – the third class of moral conversion - has to be, for this reason, distinguished from a change in one's degree of commitment to moral standards (the second class of moral conversion). A close relationship between them might be expected (a high degree of commitment would make it harder for a person to live incoherently with

such standards); but this third class of conversion is distinct enough to need separate examination.

The possibility for this class of conversion is of particular importance for the person that has maintained a high level of commitment for a long while, but has not achieved the desired degree of behavioral coherence. A person that has recently arrived to a high degree of commitment to moral standards (that is, one who has recently undergone a *moral conversion regarding attitude/commitment*) has little experiential reasons to doubt that as he/she becomes familiar with a new way of life – the kind of life now demanded by moral standards - a greater coherence will spontaneously follow. But if such conversion took place a long time ago, or if the person has, as long as he/she can remember, adhered to these ideals with the same conviction, then one's habitual flaws may weigh very differently. The person may then be living in a perpetual situation of partial resignation or despair, convinced that these flaws are unconquerable, or, alternatively, may have become nearly blind to them, finally ignoring them, or perhaps living with a certain amount of Sartrean "bad faith."

Yet it still may happen that at a certain point in life the person that had given up now encounters a source of hope, and so engages with the conviction that *it is possible to change*. Or the person that became used to living with his/her habitual flaws, or is nearly blind to them, is suddenly vividly awakened to them. On the wings of renewed strength and/or awareness, the person may rise to meet the challenge and conquer these flaws, finally beginning to move at a steady, determined pace – sometimes at a very fast pace - towards the much desired, better habits. What is achieved at the end of this transition is a

more complete coherence between one's moral standards and one's patterns of behavior. The key moment, however, seems to be the original moment in which the person's resolve is made (not just when it is formulated, but when it somehow "clicks" and transforms the whole disposition of the person towards his/her habitual flaws). Such is the third class of moral conversion. It is not a change in the contents of what is believed to be right/wrong, or on the criteria for such moral judgments, nor of the degree to which the person is committed to moral ideals or standards, but of the habitual coherence between ideal standards and real practice.

#### Narrative evidence for this class of conversion

Examples of this instance of conversion abound in literature regarding alcoholism recovery: cases of alcoholics that have given up hope of ever getting rid of their addiction, that in one way or another – sometimes rather unexpectedly – find a source of strength, hope or motivation, religious or otherwise, and put themselves in a successful path of recovery. Common in these cases is the fact that the subjects do not consider their addiction a good thing, but – to varying degrees – a destructive one. Many suffer greatly from knowing this; they even feel they have practically excluded themselves from humanity. The task of classifying these cases as instances of *moral conversion regarding coherence*, however, requires some qualifying comments. Depending on the cases, it is possible to "jump back" and find that the conversion process began as a conversion regarding attitude: some of the subjects express not having particularly cared about the direction their lives were going; and it is a change in this respect – i.e. a change towards caring about their destructive situation - that develops eventually into a desire to reform

their conduct. Once this desire coalesces, overcoming the addiction necessitates a struggle towards coherence (between the desire/commitment to stay sober and the person's actual behavior), and there seems to be in stories of this kind a close relation between the strength of the desire/commitment and the ability to achieve coherence. But because of the nature of addictions, it is not rare to find cases in which the awareness of the destructiveness of one's addiction, and the desire to overcome it, have been stalled by the subject's sense of inability to do so. The subject's desire in this case turns into an abstract kind of desire, i.e. without direct operative consequences, so that its frustration adds an additional element of suffering for the subject. When this is the situation, it seems justified to classify a subject's initiating a push to change their behavior (if the push is grounded in the same desire that was previously ineffectual) as a *moral conversion regarding coherence*.

In the collection of cases in Leuba's study of conversion – a study that, as was mentioned, focused almost exclusively on cases of alcoholic recovery – it is possible to find examples of the three classes of conversion; and it may be of use to bring up also examples of the first and second classes to provide a clarifying contrast. The detailed account of Leuba's "Subject E" (case #12) seems to fit the description of a *conversion regarding content*, in the sense of a new understanding by the subject of the wrongness of his habits. "In all this period," the subject reports,

I never had a desire to reform on religious grounds, but all my pangs were due to some terrible remorse I used to feel after a heavy carousal, the remorse taking the shape of regret after my folly in wasting my life in such a way - a man of superior talents and education. I was not much alarmed about the future world; I did not believe it to exist, at any rate.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," 373-376.

Yet one day a friend asked him for an opinion regarding a book, Professor Drummond's *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*. Here the subject met with the biblical phrase "He that has the Son has life eternal," and could not proceed further, all the while feeling there was another being in his bedroom. "It was unquestionably shown to me, in one second of time, that I had never touched the Eternal, that is, God, and that if I died then, I must inevitably be lost. I was undone." After this experience, he told his family about his experience, although only his older sister understood it. He came home drunk once more (he had not promised to abstain from drink) but having met his sister on his way back, prayed for the first time in twenty years, and had an experience of self-surrender, after which, he claims, "from that hour drink has had no terrors for me; I never touch it, never want it."<sup>183</sup>

By contrast, the story of John B. Gough, a "famous temperance orator" (case #17) seems to fit the description of a *conversion regarding attitude*.<sup>184</sup> "It is practically the conversion of an atheist," Leuba says;

neither God nor Jesus Christ is mentioned. The sense of his degradation and worthlessness does not involve in his mind responsibility for his sin to other; he is absorbed in his own self. He battles against himself, poor slave and outlaw, to conquer, if possible, the place he has lost in society.<sup>185</sup>

But when a stranger speaks to him on the street, "kindness, sympathy, the proof that all bonds between him and mankind were not cut of, and that men still had confidence in his

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.: 343-344.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

manhood, lighted up the redeeming flame of Faith.”<sup>186</sup> Leuba quotes from Gough's

*Autobiography*:

It was the first touch of kindness which I had known for months; as simple and trifling as the circumstances may appear to many, it went right to my heart, and like the wing of the angel, troubled the waters in that stagnant pool of affection.<sup>187</sup>

This spiritual/psychic renewal at the heart of his reform suggests this to be of the *conversion regarding attitude* class.

But other cases mentioned by Leuba seem to focus more on the subjects losing the struggle at the level of behavioral coherence, and thus in these scenarios the conversion that takes place is a *conversion regarding behavioral coherence*. The story of “Subject G” (case #15)<sup>188</sup> tells about a man who became an alcoholic at the age of twenty-one, losing his business and two jobs because of this. The subject reports having signed “enough abstinence pledges to cover the wall of the room,” which indicates a relatively active desire/attitude towards recovery over the preceding years. But then, finding himself without money, without friends and without a home, and practically wishing to die,

a lady showed him sympathy and invited him to a mission. Her kindness made him look within. For years no one had ever cared about him; this unwonted kindly interest went to his heart.<sup>189</sup>

Going to this meeting, he was invited to “give himself to the Lord Jesus Christ with the assurance that He would save him.” He accepted the offer of a bed and tried to read the material given to him; he was too disturbed, but finally experienced peace after asking God to take him as he was.

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.: 343.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.: 376-377.



The anguish of the night had passed, and he found himself calm and peaceful. That very morning he told a companion that he was converted, that he had given his heart to God. Terrible were the temptations that day as he passed before the saloon doors; but he was kept. They recurred day after day for more than a week. The lady's continued sympathy was a great comfort to him.<sup>190</sup>

Three months after this conversion, at age forty, the subject was not only still “sober,” but he opened and begun managing a mission himself.

“Subject H” (case #16)<sup>191</sup> also describes a *moral conversion regarding behavioral coherence*, with a similar leading event:

While he was seated in Central Park, N.Y., a young man entered into conversation with him, and invited him to go in his company to a religious meeting. The kindness of the stranger moved him deeply; he did not understand why a well-dressed stranger should care for him and be willing to walk with a raggedly clad fellow like himself.<sup>192</sup>

In a very different context, Robert Cooley’s conversion (case #19)<sup>193</sup> also seems to fit the *conversion regarding coherence* class. According to his biography, Cooley seemed to be constantly disgusted with the way his life had become entangled, and the fact that he was betraying the values modeled by his father – and working for the very people his father fought against, some of which might have been involved in the murder of his grandfather – did not leave him alone.<sup>194</sup> Some of his behaviors in certain areas – especially his busy night-life and his gambling habits – had the consequence of fooling his mob clients into thinking that he had no principles. Yet in many cases he did go dangerously out of his way to warn a potential victim, or to provide some moral support to an honest judge wavering in his resolve. At one point, some words his father said in his

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.: 377. See also the case of subject “M” (case #18 in the Appendix).

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Cooley and Levin, *When Corruption Was King*.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 164-165.

deathbed made him examine his current life - it is not, therefore, out of the question that this instance may fit a *conversion regarding attitude* class as well. But Cooley lived for a relatively long period of time carrying these contradictions within himself. Eventually, the turning event of his moral conversion took place almost without his making a conscious decision – or perhaps as he tried to *shield* his decision from conscious thought, given the risks involved:

When Saturday rolled around, ten days after the Colella trial, I was still in turmoil, just boiling inside [from an ongoing quarrel with one of the bosses regarding that case]. That morning, for a little fun, I went downtown to play gin with my old lawyer pals at 100 North LaSalle. The group included Allan Ackerman, the first attorney I had shared an office with. We had our laughs, and it was like the good old days again. I totally forgot my troubles. We finished up early in the afternoon, and I wanted to grab some lunch before I went home. My favorite deli, the Dill Pickle, was only a few blocks away, so I decided to take a stroll. Getting a corned beef sandwich was my only purpose in life. When I turned the corner onto Dearborn Avenue, I happened to pass the Federal Building. It seemed to draw me like a magnet. Suddenly I thought, “Maybe I should see who's up in the Strike Force office.”<sup>195</sup>

Arriving there, he communicated to the FBI Strike Force his intention of bringing down the First Ward – after which there would be no turning back. Eventually Cooley succeeded in bringing many of the mob bosses to prison, even though this implied that he would have to go into hiding permanently.<sup>196</sup> In Cooley’s case, the apparent accident of walking past the Federal Building did not impact his attitude or what was understood (content). But it somehow enabled or facilitated a radical shift in behavior so that Cooley’s actions thereafter cohered with his attitude against collaborating with the mob bosses (and with his conviction that collaborating with the bosses was wrong).

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>196</sup> The FBI had to investigate carefully the motives that Cooley had to denounce the “Outfit” (as that particular organized crime group was known): if it was discovered that debts or any other significant motive was behind his intention, that might have invalidated their efforts in court. This fact adds an extra level of credibility to his account, particularly when it comes to assessing whether this was actually a conversion, or whether he had other motives behind his actions.

Thérèse of Lisieux also records in her autobiography a moral conversion that took place in her teenage years, which may also be an example of this class of conversion. In this case, however, the facts locate the story on the borderline with the *conversion regarding attitude* class. She tells in her book how, at the age of four, with her mother's death, she had lost her liveliness and had fallen into the habit of crying over everything:

I, who had been so lively, so communicative, was now a shy and quiet little girl, and over-sensitive. Merely to be looked at made me burst into tears.<sup>197</sup>

This habit went on even until she was fourteen years old.

Really, my touchiness in those days was quite unbearable. If I'd given some slight annoyance to anyone I was fond of, without in the least meaning to, it was obvious that crying about it only made things worse, but could I control myself? No, I wept like the Magdalene herself; and as soon as I had begun to cheer up about what I'd done, I started crying about having cried over it. Arguments were unavailing; nothing would cure me of this unpleasant habit.<sup>198</sup>

The incident leading to her moral conversion is almost trivial: on the occasion of Christmas, Thérèse overheard her tired father saying that that would be the last time she would find presents in her slipper. Thérèse tells us that her sister, Celine, realized that Thérèse had overheard this, and was bracing herself for the inevitable deluge of tears that would follow. Yet something changed inside Thérèse. She swallowed her tears and acted as if nothing painful or distressing had happened.

Celine thought she must be dreaming. But no, it was a sublime reality; baby Thérèse had recovered the strength of mind which she'd lost at four and a half and recovered it for good. With this night of illumination, the third period of my life begins, the best of all, the richest in heavenly graces. In a single instant, our Lord brought about the change which I'd vainly tried to achieve these ten years past; I'd tried, and that was enough for him.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux: The Complete and Authorized Text of "L'histoire D'une Ame"*, trans. Ronald Cox (New York: P.J. Kennedy & Sons, 1958), 57.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128.

Thérèse tells that this sudden change in her conduct – and arguably in the disposition behind it – was permanent, providing important evidence that significant changes can take place in a very short period of time; almost instantly, by Thérèse’s account.

This change was sweeping; it seems to have taken place also with regard to her relations towards other people, and to her general disposition about the meaning of her life.

He [our Lord] did more; he made me “a fisher of men.” I felt a great desire to work for the conversion of sinners: a desire which had never before been so vividly present to me; to put it quite simply, charity had found its way into my heart, calling on me to forget myself and simply do what was wanted of me; and since then I’ve been as happy as the day is long.<sup>200</sup>

In this respect, Thérèse’s conversion may thus be read as an instance also of conversion not only of how she understood/valued/acted in relation to right/wrong, but also as an instance of *conversion in regard to happiness, eudaemonia and the meaning of life* (i.e. a conversion in regard to morality understood in the classical sense); which will be the subject of Section 3.

### Conclusion to Section Two

It has been shown that it is possible to identify three subcategories (“classes”) of moral conversion, where “moral” is understood in terms of right/wrong. Moral conversion in this sense can then refer, first, to *a shift in content* regarding right/wrong. This can occur in a number of ways: as a shift in a person’s understanding of what specific actions are morally right/wrong (though instances in which changes of this kind

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 128.

are sweeping enough to be called “conversion” are infrequent); as a deeper shift in a person’s criteria for judging about right and wrong; and, if accompanied by an intellectual conversion, as what Conn calls a “critical moral conversion,” in which a person’s understanding of themselves as moral agents is also changed. Moral conversion can refer, in second place, to *a change in the moral agent's attitude or degree of commitment* to doing what is (understood to be) morally right/wrong. In third place, moral conversion can occur as *a change in a person’s patterns of behavior*, so that the person’s actions become consistent or coherent with their judgments about right/wrong in a stable way.

As was mentioned, these three classes are not mutually exclusive. Thus, for example, an attitudinal change and a move towards behavioral coherence often occur not only in the same person, but sometimes almost simultaneously with each other. But these blending areas do not evidence a flaw in the threefold framework for classifying moral conversions; they indicate rather that the process of moral conversion is very dynamic, and in concrete, real-life cases the three classes are often interwoven in complex ways. Nevertheless the distinction between the three classes of moral conversion is a distinction that corresponds to real events, as evidenced in the narrative evidence; and this distinction should be by now clear enough to guide us through the rest of this project.

### **3. The classical notion of morality: the question for happiness, eudaemonia or “the meaning of life”**

The three classes mentioned above would be sufficient to circumscribe the notion of moral conversion, if choosing or doing what is right/avoiding what is wrong were the only relevant elements of moral experience. The focus on right/wrong, however, that has been described as characteristic of the modern/contemporary notion of morality, leaves out many aspects of moral life that can be considered essential to it. These are aspects that were regularly taken into account in what may be called, at least for the purposes of contrast, the “classical” notion of morality. This way of looking at morality will lead us to an alternative, expanded set of scenarios that are also instances of moral conversion.<sup>201</sup>

That the focus on right/wrong is too narrow to be considered exhaustive is argued by Servais Pinckaers in *The Sources of Christian Ethics*.<sup>202</sup> Pinckaers denounces in this work a shift he detects in modern ethical theory towards *obligation* as the central category of ethics,<sup>203</sup> i.e. to what has been characterized in this work as the focus on right/wrong. Pinckaers contrasts this focus on right/wrong with the focus on *happiness*

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<sup>201</sup> In calling this notion of morality “classical,” I subscribe to Pinckaers’ denomination out of convenience; for it may be argued that the expanded notion of “what is a matter of moral concern” is not specific of “classical” (i.e. Western, ancient and medieval) philosophy, but using Pinckaers’ denomination greatly simplifies the exposition.

<sup>202</sup> Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble from the 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

<sup>203</sup> Pinckaers does not specify what he means by “modern”; but it may be inferred that he refers to a tendency that had its roots in some Renaissance thinkers and culminated in the Enlightenment, its paradigmatic expression being Kant’s moral treatises. This focus on obligation was carried on, mostly unchallenged, into twentieth century ethical theories; for this reason it may better be called “modern/contemporary.” In any case, the notion of morality expounded in the previous section in terms of right/wrong corresponds to the approach to morality that Pinckaers calls “modern.”

which is, according to Pinckaers, the keystone of ancient and medieval moral thought (as well as of the moral message of the Scriptures).

To illustrate this shift, Pinckaers offers a quotation from A. Janssen, who is reviewing a work from J. Tonneau. In his review, Janssen states that

Thomists do not fail to note that their master does not give, at least apparently, such importance to the idea of obligation, and that he is singularly laconic on the subject. Father Tonneau takes this as his starting point. He wants to know how St. Thomas could, *inadvertently as it were, deny the primary role of obligation in morality.*<sup>204</sup>

As Pinckaers points out, this quotation is revealing of an assumption that is made by both Janssen and Tonneau (and apparently unquestioned) regarding the “primary role of obligation” in morality, i.e. a primary focus on right/wrong. This assumption is evident in the surprise expressed by Janssen at the fact that a great thinker such as Aquinas has “inadvertently” denied such primacy. For Pinckaers, Janssen and Tonneau can be considered as illustrative of what is extensively the modern/contemporary approach to ethical theory, with its right/wrong focus.

What Pinckaers argues is that denying a primacy to right/wrong is no oversight on the part of Aquinas. Just perusing the structure of the second part of the *Summa*, says Pinckaers, is enough to reveal that happiness, and not obligation, is at the heart of morality: Thomas’ treatise opens with five questions on happiness – what it is, what is required for its attainment –; and these chapters are no mere preamble, but “the keystone of the whole moral edifice; it [the question on happiness] determines its [Aquinas’s whole moral theory] ultimate goal and general orientation.”<sup>205</sup> True, Thomas does deal

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<sup>204</sup> A. Janssen, review of J. Tonneau’s book, *Absolu et Obligation en Morale*, in *Ephem. Theol. Louvain* 41 (1965):617. Quoted from Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 17 (emphasis mine).

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

with laws and their precepts, but we must remember that in Aquinas law is defined as “an ordinance of reason for the common good.”<sup>206</sup> “For him law is, by its very nature, closer to the mind than to the will. In determining the morality of actions, law does not play the same role as it does for modern moralists.”<sup>207</sup> Pinckaers also provides evidence that this focus on happiness is similarly true of Augustine, Aristotle, Plato; true of the ancients in general, Christian and Pagan alike.<sup>208</sup>

After distinguishing in this way what he calls the classical and modern views of morality, Pinckaers mentions some detrimental consequences of the moderns’ exclusive focus on obligation. The most important for this dissertation is that some traditional topics of ethics, closely linked to the matter of happiness - friendship, love, suffering, the meaning of life - are rarely considered, because they do not quite fit into the categories of obligation.<sup>209</sup> Or alternatively, they are forced in a somewhat Procrustean manner to fit into the obligation-based framework. Pinckaers illustrates this latter tendency by offering examples from modern and contemporary manuals of moral theology that ask, for example, questions such as “how many explicit acts of charity is a Christian obliged to do in a lifetime?” or “how often we should pray?”<sup>210</sup> Pinckaers sees a similar “forcing” of these topics into a right/wrong framework in modern and contemporary philosophical moralists as well.

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<sup>206</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 90 a. 4.

<sup>207</sup> Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 17.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 16. The examples are taken from the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, vol. 2, cols. 2255-2256, and *ibid.*, vol.13, col. 212.



In a similar Procrustean way, modern/contemporary moral thought tries to deal with some of these themes, says Pinckaers, by distinguishing the “erogatory” from the “supererogatory,” i.e. what is strictly morally due from what goes beyond the call of moral duty. Formulating this issues in terms of this distinction, however, involves addressing the matter from the viewpoint of right/wrong. From that perspective, in fact, a substantial part of ancient and medieval moral thinking will seem to be seriously defective, appearing to offer little more than a self-centered search for happiness, and leaving many important questions about a person’s obligation unanswered, especially obligations that demand from the individual a measure of self-sacrifice. Furthermore, the very idea of a focus on happiness is misunderstood by attempting to cast it into modern/contemporary terms. Thinking about the search for happiness as a quasi-obligation, for example, is a mistake; it should not be cast into such terms as, for example, an imperative to make one’s talents grow. The foremost reason for lending ear to what ethics has to say, from the classical perspective, is *not* that ethics can tell us what is right/wrong, but that the drive for happiness is the innermost desire of the soul, and as such must be paid attention.

In short, according to Pinckaers, there is a wide range of human experience that is relevant to moral life in the classical sense - i.e. as reflection on how to achieve “happiness,” *eudaemonia*, “the good life,” fulfillment, growth – and, one may expect, also very important to moral life in general; but that is not considered to be important to moral life under the modern/contemporary focus on right/wrong, and is overlooked accordingly.

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to weigh the adequacy of Pinckaers' historical distinction (i.e. "classical" and "modern"), or to address the adequacy or relative importance of these two models of the moral life. But the present analysis of the notion of moral conversion must not foreclose in advance the possibility that this other aspect of moral life, although arguably not often considered seriously in modern and contemporary moral theory, might prove important for a full understanding of the notion of moral conversion.<sup>211</sup>

Consider for example the many "change of heart" stories that populate the big and the small screen: cynical pennycounter becomes warm-hearted boss; workaholic dad realizes he has a family and opts for a less frantic lifestyle; fast-paced broker becomes small-league trainer; odd couples become lifelong friends; fashion-focused teen leaves her exclusive clique and opens up to systematically excluded potential friendships, and so forth. These stories have been told so many times that the main challenge the scriptwriter faces is to avoid their becoming clichés. They are all about conversion – not religious or intellectual, but *moral*. Yet analyzing them in terms of right/wrong – e.g. "the main character finally did what he/she ought to do, fulfilled his/her duty as a parent, friend, human being" - would be missing the most important point. Only in a few cases are these stories centrally about *obligation*.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Note that the literature of psychology of moral development displays a similar division, between authors whose research is focused on themes such as the development of rule-abeyance, the notions of right and wrong, guilt and responsibility, etc. (Piaget, Kohlberg), and authors that focus on questions regarding happiness and the "meaning-of-life" (Erikson, Fowler, Frankl, etc.)

<sup>212</sup> Note, however, that it may be possible to cast the characters' options in terms of "right and wrong" (e.g. "in quitting his job and moving to a farm in the countryside she did the right thing"), But this only insofar as right/wrong is understood in terms wider than "what ought or ought not to be done." In this observation, the expression right/wrong appears to have a wider meaning than "ought" or "obligation," at least in ordinary speech. For practical purposes, though, as has been already mentioned, the expression "right/

What seems to be the case then is that the concern for *happiness* or *eudaemonia* that characterizes classical ethical theory is not only alive and present in ordinary people's moral lives, but also constitutes a recurrent theme in many stories of moral conversion. This is true to such an extent in fact that the theme of happiness merits its own exposition in relation to the three classes of moral conversion, discussed in Section Two in terms of morality as right/wrong. This will be done presently; but before this task is addressed, a few general remarks are in order.

The first one is that – adamant claims of critics like Pinckaers aside - an analysis of moral conversion from the point of view of happiness or *eudaemonia* should not be taken to replace but rather to complete or complement the considerations of moral conversion from the point of view of obligation or right/wrong. Whether both points of view will eventually be reunited or reconciled in some manner, or whether one of them could eventually be absorbed by the other, is not a question for the present discussion; for both focuses are essential to a careful discussion of moral conversion. This means that to the three classes of moral conversion discussed in the previous section will now be added three classes similar in structure, but focused on happiness or *eudaemonia* instead.

The second remark regards the terminology available to designate this kind of conversion. As with the expression “right/wrong,” it is necessary to conventionally choose an expression that designates this focus. The term “happiness” has been used so far, along with the more technical Greek term *eudaemonia*. The term “happiness,”

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wrong” will continue to be used to designate the modern/contemporary focus. But it is to be noted that this fact, in its own way, supports the present claim that an adequate account of moral conversion cannot limit moral life (or the meaning of the word “moral,” in “moral concerns”) only to matters of obligation.

however, is not in all cases the most adequate. For one thing, it evokes contingency or luck, something that “happens” to a person, often due more to external circumstances than something prompted or caused by a convert’s new understanding, attitude or conduct. More importantly, the term is often used to refer in ordinary speech to a superficial satisfaction of desires rather than the deeper sort of fulfillment intended in classical and medieval discussion.<sup>213</sup>

The Greek term *eudaemonia* is more specific, and in certain contexts, more adequate. The notion, as found for example in Aristotle, refers to a deeper sort of fulfillment associated with a structure of concatenated goals aiming in turn at higher ends, i.e. ends that are distinctively human (e.g. knowledge, moral conduct, friendship, justice, etc.) Aristotle’s initial observations regarding the general meaning of the term, in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, bring together characteristics that people are generally looking for when they ask about happiness: true *eudaemonia* is pleasurable (we want the experience of it to continue rather than to end); it is stable (meaning that it is not accompanied by inordinate fear or anxiety about the possibility of losing it); and it is self-sufficient (meaning that when attained, one is not longing for something else). These characteristics make *eudaemonia* a more precise expression than the ordinary uses of “happiness.”

It must be acknowledged, though, that further along Aristotle’s analysis, as Aristotle develops in more specific details what he means by *eudaemonia*, the notion

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<sup>213</sup> The possibility of confusion that arises from having the same term designating both a shallow and a deep understanding of “happiness” is less present in the Spanish language, which possesses different terms to designate each: “contento” (experiencing a temporary sort of “contentment”) and “feliz” (experiencing a peaceful sort of fulfillment).

becomes a potential source for disagreement. *Eudaemonia* according to Aristotle is achieved in the activity of the highest part of the soul, in a life in conformity with virtue, and in a life not strongly marked by suffering or hardship. If one inquires further what this special kind of activity is, Aristotle's answer is "theoretical knowledge." This characterization, while valuable and challenging, does not enjoy sufficient consensus among students of human fulfillment to accept it for granted. However, defending Aristotle's notion of *eudaemonia* is not one of the goals of this dissertation. For this reason, in the course of this work the term will designate only a general notion of *eudaemonia*, i.e. as found in *Nicomachean Ethics* up to the first half of Chapter 7, book I.

But neither "happiness" nor *eudaemonia* are adequate to convey the full meaning of a more contemporary, very popular expression; namely, "the meaning of life." This expression – which comes up frequently in narratives of moral conversion – aims at identifying something *specific* as the meaning of life: thus the expression is frequently used in the question: "*what is the meaning of life?*" Possibly this expression points to a distinctively contemporary need – the need of *choosing* one's social role, one's profession, long-term goals, even what "the meaning of it all" is – in an age in which choice has become a normative activity of humans, and a characteristic source of anxiety.<sup>214</sup>

The three expressions thus have their uses. Accordingly – choosing, for present purposes, inclusiveness over precision – each of the three expressions will be employed

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<sup>214</sup> The expression "the meaning of life" is also more open-ended than *eudaemonia*; it can transcend the eudaemonistic context to include a life focused on duty of obligation (i.e. right/wrong) instead.

when its use is appropriate to the context. The reader should thus keep in mind that the intention here is to be inclusive, and that alternative expressions are not meant to designate clearly distinct categories of moral conversion.

### Classes of moral conversion in relation to happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning

When discussing the classes of conversion related to right/wrong, the three classes were described as:

1.A: A change in *content* regarding (in some cases) what is judged to be morally right/wrong, or (more commonly) a change in the *criteria* by which right/wrong are judged.

1.B: A shift regarding the moral agent's attitude toward or commitment to the morality of his/her actions – or lack thereof. (E.g. from frivolity to seriousness, from ignoring the issues to actively engaging them, etc.)

1.C: A change in behavioral patterns or habits, through which the agent achieves a more persistent coherence between his/her actions and his/her moral convictions.

Applying this framework again,<sup>215</sup> the three classes of moral conversion in terms of happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning can be characterized as:

2.A: Moral conversion as a change in *content*, here meaning what the person believes that will bring them – or produce in them – *eudaemonia* or happiness.

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<sup>215</sup> I will not attempt to produce an exact parallel between the sub-types found under each class or the right/wrong type and each class of the happiness/*eudaemonia* type, but rather adapt the exposition as relevant thematic differences appear.

2.B: Moral conversion as a change in *attitude*: a move towards more actively (more “seriously”) formulating the question, or more actively seeking the answer to the question, of what brings meaning or *eudaemonia*.

2.C: Moral conversion as a change towards more coherence in one’s behavioral patterns, i.e. the agent begins to attempt to conform his/her behavioral patterns to the behaviors that seem to be required in order to achieve *eudaemonia*.

#### A. Conversion regarding content about happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning

Take as a starting point a common form of the question about *eudaemonia*, “what would make me truly happy?” or perhaps “what would bring me true *happiness*?” What is commonly sought with this question, even if the word *eudaemonia* is not commonly used these days, is something very much akin to what Aristotle identified in his own times with that term (and to which the term *eudaemonia* will refer to in this dissertation): a stable, deeply fulfilling form of happiness. Insofar as the question is taken with a certain degree of seriousness, a change in the habitually given answer (or even the *suspicion* that the answer given habitually to this question, perhaps unreflectively, is wrong) can precipitate existential life-changes, i.e. moral conversion.

The most common form of conversion within this class occurs when a person shifts from looking for happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning in one “category of goals” to looking for it in a very different category. Possible “categories of goals” are, of course, tremendously varied. Here are for example some categories in which the answer to the question about *eudaemonia* has been sought:

- in possessions that increase status
- in possessions for leisure
- in entertaining, leisurely activities
- in “hobbies” – leisurely activities that require a certain focus and specialization
- in external achievements, job- or career-related
- in external achievements unrelated to one’s career – in hobbies, sports, creative activities
- in experiencing varied sights and sounds – traveling, attending cultural events
- in artistic or creative expression
- in understanding things
- in acquiring knowledge for its own sake
- in sharing knowledge
- in experiencing intense physical pleasure
- in giving way to, and shaping one’s life around an overriding “passion” (revenge, hatred, envy, resentment, an obsessive attachment to someone)
- in minimizing an overriding, persistent pain or suffering, physical, psychological or moral
- in exciting, adrenaline-ridden activities that involve some danger
- in solving particular challenges
- in social activities that emphasize communication among peers (social meetings, internet chat)



- in being respected or looked up by determinate groups of people (because of one's success, dependability, "coolness," celebrity status...)
- in exercising power over other people
- in friendships and relationships "based on virtue" in the Aristotelian sense
- in experiencing the self-assurance of being loved
- in being depended upon
- in spontaneously helping others
- in helping others in organized ways, alone or as part of a community
- in serving an ideal, or an idealized institution
- in promoting a "cause," deemed important and "bigger than oneself"
- in "virtue," understood as internal self-possession
- in conducting one's life or affairs according to the expectations of the community
- in conducting one's life or affairs according to the regulations or commandments of one's religion
- in worship, understood as offering oneself partially or totally to the Divine, particularly within the practices of a religion
- in mysticism, understood as close intellectual/affective communing with the Divine, that yields out-of-the-ordinary experiences.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> This is a long list that could be expanded still further, I have tried here also to spell out what is meant by some of the common responses to the question, such as "the meaning of life is family," "relationships," "love," "helping others." At the same time I have tried to leave them appropriately general, and to avoid including theories about the underlying source or need for such "goals" merely trying to enumerate them as illustrative of the wide range of answers given to the question about the "content" of *eudaemonia*.

Commonly these goals will be found not alone but grouped together – someone may regard an activity such as surfing as meaning-giving because of the challenge, the excitement, the traveling, and perhaps the partying afterwards.<sup>217</sup>

Much as specific changes in judgments of right/wrong are rarely considered to be instances of moral conversion, a person seeking happiness or *eudaemonia* who changed his/her preferences from one object to another *within the same category* would rarely be spoken of as undergoing moral conversion. A person, for example, who looking for happiness in “material possessions” begins looking for another thing to acquire when the latest acquisition failed to provide the desired fulfillment, would not be characterized as having undergone a moral conversion. A way to explain this is by saying that such a change does not seem to be structurally significant; that is, when a person changes one “object of affection” for another belonging to the same category, the structural elements supporting such interest or affection – structures of desire, expectations, organization of priorities, material resources devoted to its attainment, etc. – seem to remain essentially the same. So, although there may be exceptions, the person’s life will remain essentially the same in the ways that seem most important from the perspective of *eudaemonia*.<sup>218</sup> In fact, moving from one object to another in the same category may very well be an important part of a life that is already well-oriented towards *eudaemonia*: a person with a

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<sup>217</sup> These categories are obviously relative; for a person that is crazy about car mechanics, lumping “cars” in the “possessions” category, together with “yachts” and “home-theater hardware” might be regarded as an abomination.

<sup>218</sup> The most common exception that comes to mind is perhaps falling in love with one person, then falling out of love or falling instead for a third. The existential commotion in such a situation can be similar to that of conversion. But in this kind of love the particularities of the other person, his/her individuality is of such relevance to the relation that talking about “different objects in the same category” may not be entirely adequate.

passion for books will finish one book and go to the next; a musician will learn different songs and even try new styles, and so on. But just as these are not reasons to assume that such persons are not already finding *eudaemonia* in their activities, so changes of this sort are not generally evidence of moral conversion.<sup>219</sup>

Changes from one “category of goals” to another, instead, are more often considered instances of moral conversion; but for such changes to be instances of moral conversion a second condition must be also taken into account. That which is changed for something else must have been something that *habitually constituted a “central focus” in the life of that person*. In other words, it must be in that specific good or category of goals that the hopes for *eudaemonia* are placed.<sup>220</sup> A person may in fact have a variety of interests that can be dropped and taken up again without any substantial moral restructuring of his/her life. It is when the “central focus” shifts – particularly if it shifts towards a category very dissimilar to the original one – that one can expect changes deep and overhauling enough to merit the name “conversion.” These changes may entail a substantial rescheduling of the person’s resources, time commitments, etc.; but of more significance to our work is the restructuring of priorities and values that may follow from the person changing his/her outlook on what counts as – and therefore, how to attain – happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning.

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<sup>219</sup> It may be a matter for concern, though, when moving from an object to others of the same category appears to happen too frequently with respect to normal patterns. Frequent changes of that kind could be interpreted as symptomatic of unhappiness or dissatisfaction with life – a sign, perhaps, that the person is looking for *eudaemonia* in the wrong category of goods.

<sup>220</sup> Speaking of religious conversion, William James refers to “the habitual center of a person’s energy.” “To say that a man is ‘converted’ means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy.” (James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 162).

### Narrative evidence for this class of conversion

Examples of this kind of conversion abound. Some of the narratives considered previously in other classes of moral conversion have sufficient elements of this type of conversion to be revisited here. Gandhi's story, for example (case #8): his decision not to shrug off the abuses of institutional racism but to actively combat it would lead him into an extraordinary kind of life, very different from the regular life of a barrister that he had previously envisioned (though he may not have suspected this would happen at the time of his decision to commit to fight racism). What is relevant to the present topic is that he changed his priorities and life goals quite sharply, as the result of what he saw as a personal moral imperative. In a similar fashion, some of the converted alcoholics described by Leuba found a meaning-giving function as a result of their conversion regarding right/wrong: "Subject G," who founded and managed a mission, and John B. Gough, who became a "temperance orator" (cases #15 and 17). Similarly, Jackie Katounas (#24) became a restorative justice activist and facilitator; and "Chip" and "Lil' Tony" (#20 and 21) became CeaseFire workers. This pattern is quite significant; it suggests, among other things, a strong link between moral conversion regarding right/wrong, and an openness to finding meaning for life in responding to one's community's needs and ailments.

This connection does not always need to be present, however. Robert Bellah, for example, has documented (with the intention of documenting the pervasiveness of individualistic thinking in different social strata in the U.S.) a few instances of moral conversion with a focus on the question about happiness/eudaemonia/meaning. The case

of Brian Palmer (case #1), for example, is used by Bellah to illustrate the categories of “utilitarian individualism” and “expressive individualism,”<sup>221</sup> showing how Palmer’s moral views moved from the former to the latter. In the interview, Palmer recalls “a considerable devotion to making money” that was at the root of his “utilitarian individualism.” He married at twenty-four, and “shouldering [financially] the adult responsibilities of marriage and children became the guiding purpose of his life for the next few years.”

Whether or not Brian felt his life was satisfying, he was deeply committed to succeeding at his career and family responsibilities. He held two full-time jobs to support his family, accepting apparently without complaint the loss of a youth in which, he himself reports, “the vast majority of my time ... was devoted to giving myself pleasure of one sort of another.”<sup>222</sup>

Palmer put extremely long hours at work, averaging 60 to 65 hours a week, not questioning his commitment, which just “seemed like the thing to do at the time.” But while he provided for his family, he neglected sharing his time with his wife and children. He compensated by saying, “I have this nice car, this nice house, joined the Country Club. Now you have a place you can go, sit on your butt, drink, go into the pool. I’ll pay the bills and I’ll do my thing at work.”<sup>223</sup> Eventually, however, his wife divorced him. This came as a surprise, and led Palmer “to reassess his life in fundamental ways and to explore the limits of the kind of success he had been pursuing.” In this process of reassessment, he reencountered such pleasures as reading and listening to music. The children chose to stay with him, which also forced him to shift his sense of himself and

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<sup>221</sup> Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart*, 3-8. Bellah’s work is an analysis of how individualism has permeated U.S. mores.

<sup>222</sup> Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart*, 3.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

his priorities. A “compulsive problem solver” by his own definition, Brian reexamined “where the thing broke down” and found that he was

operating as if a certain value was of the utmost importance to me. Perhaps it was success. Perhaps it was fear of failure, but I was extremely success-oriented, to the point where everything would be sacrificed for the job, the career, the company. I said bullshit. That ain't the way it should be.<sup>224</sup>

With this new outlook about the content of what should be striven for, Brian married a divorcee his age, with four children herself, and discovered by his own account “a new sense of himself” and of “what love can be,” “almost a psychologically buoyant feeling of being able to be so much more involved and sharing.”<sup>225</sup> He also found out that he could “get a lot of personal reward from being involved in the lives of my children.”<sup>226</sup>

In Bellah’s assessment, “the revolution in Brian's thinking came from a reexamination of the true sources of joy and satisfaction in his life.” But he also mentions some reasons for skepticism regarding the philosophical grounding of this reassessment: Palmer’s new goals seem to Bellah “as arbitrary and unexamined as his earlier pursuit of material success,” and both are justified as idiosyncratic preference rather than as representing a larger sense of the purpose of life. Devotion to his own self-interest seems to be the guiding force all along. Nevertheless, despite Bellah’s criticism – which is partly aimed at a perceived deficiency in the conceptual and linguistic tools allowed by a culturally omnipresent individualism – it is clear that there has been a significant change with respect to what “goals” are regarded as meaning- or happiness-giving – a change that can also be perceived in the practical dispositions of Brian Palmer’s life – while the

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 6.

operative question remains: what is an adequate source of joy and satisfaction in life? The question, if one follows Bellah's analysis, is answered alternatively in terms of a "utilitarian individualism," narrowly focused on the individual's career, acquisitions, status, and of an "expressive individualism" that shifts focus to relationships and to less materially-based forms of joy and satisfaction.

An instance of moral conversion that is less dramatic, but perhaps more surprising overall, is found in the story of Russ Fee, a lawyer that voluntarily gave up his law practice to work as a primary school teacher (case #22).<sup>227</sup> After dedicating 27 years to the practice of law, Fee felt that this activity was no longer giving him "a sense of accomplishment."

I had become too brittle, too competitive, too self-absorbed. I was involved in the adversarial system and became disillusioned with what I had accomplished as a lawyer. I wasn't achieving what I had intended. I was racing through life instead of strolling.<sup>228</sup>

With the support of his wife and his three adult children, Fee began winding down his practice, and as time became more available, began working as a substitute teacher. Though already qualified to teach in high school, he took the necessary courses for certification at the elementary level. While doing an assignment that involved observing children in public places, three boys approached to ask what he was doing, and when he told them he was studying to be a teacher, they "recruited" him, asking him to apply at their school. He did, and was hired as full time. His biggest challenge, he claims, is "answering questions from parents and others who wonder how I could give up law to teach third grade." He even turned his experiences into a book of poems.

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<sup>227</sup> Hilary Anderson, "New Teacher Lays Down the Law... and Picks up the Books," *The Catholic New World*, January 22-February 4 2006, 23.

Unfortunately, the article does not provide sufficient information regarding Fee's previous motivations to judge the depth of the change in his motivations and his sense of happiness and meaning. The fact that he was a civil rights attorney suggests that his motivations might have been "altruistic" or community-oriented from the beginning; therefore, we may be in the presence not so much of a deep change in a person's moral structures, but rather of the discovery of a more appropriate way of channeling his original ideals and motivations. Fee himself uses the expression "about-face" once during the interview, thus characterizing it as a form of conversion (though the expression "career change" is favored by the article). His case is peculiar in that the change was very gradual and carefully discerned; and as such it can be presented as evidence that not all conversions have to be sudden and dramatic. Fee counsels to others in a similar situation to go slowly and see out "what has values that are important to them and try it out. Changing careers is not necessarily a panacea for what's wrong in one's life. It has to be a decision of the heart and mind."<sup>229</sup> The enthusiasm with which he compares his present situation with his past career ("I feel better about what happens in a single day in the classroom than I ever did during my years in law") is also suggestive of the renewal that often accompanies conversion.

These are but a few of the kinds of narratives that are available. Moral conversion regarding the content of a person's search for happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning of life can clearly take immensely varied forms. Career changes usually involve this class of conversion, when a rethinking of one's life's goals is involved. Religious conversion

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.



often also involves this class of conversion, both in terms of the life-meaning that a religion can give, and in the more specific terms of the vocational calling that often accompanies a strong religious experience. A person's turning from a life of addiction or crime may also involve it, perhaps because the newly acquired sense of freedom demands of the person an expansive development in the new direction. In these and other cases mentioned, what is common is that a significantly different answer to the question about happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning is given, while the question remains the same. But another possibility must be mentioned.

Moral conversion as a shift in the *question* about happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning

While most instances within this class of moral conversion will fall under the subclass of *a change in the category of goals* in which happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning is sought, there is the possibility of a perhaps deeper kind of conversion within this class: this is a change not in the answer given to the question about *eudaemonia*, but *in the question itself*.

At the beginning of this section, for example, the question that was used as a starting point was "what would make me truly happy?" This question, it was said, could find varying formulations (such as "what would bring me true happiness?") Whatever answer is given to this question, even if it is such a selfless answer as "helping others," would never completely dispel the originally individualistic focus of the question: "what would make *me* truly happy?" But one might consider instead the possibility that the question is wrongly formulated, if it is presented in such terms – in a similar way in which Pinckaers proposes that morality is not just the question about right/wrong. It

could be argued, for example, that an excessive focus on what makes “*me*” happy (what Bellah calls, in *Habits of the Heart*, the “therapeutic attitude”)<sup>230</sup> will only yield dissatisfaction or disappointment. Assuming that is the case, then one would need to face the paradox that the only way to find an answer to the question about *eudaemonia* is by abandoning that formulation of the question, and asking something else.

Furthermore, it is even possible that the question about happiness may be entirely pushed out of the way by the existential situation. Thus, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo tells Gandalf, speaking about the oppressive evil that is extending to every corner of the world,

'I wish it need not have happened in my time.'

'So do I,' said Gandalf, 'and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.'<sup>231</sup>

Here, a matter of duty has risen that displaces or takes priority over questions of personal happiness. Frodo’s adventure is going to be of a very different kind than his predecessor Bilbo’s “adventuring for its own sake.”

This is actually the strongest reason for incorporating the term “meaning” (of life) in the expression that designates this class of moral conversion. As was anticipated in the terminological discussion above, there are conceivable ways of addressing the question of human goals that are not really considered in the Aristotelian treatment of the matter, and for which the Aristotelian treatment becomes insufficient. Every distinctive formulation of the question can generate a very distinctive approach. For this reason, the more

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<sup>230</sup> Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart*, 98.

<sup>231</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 76.

contemporary expression “the question about the meaning of life” is in some cases preferable to formulations in terms of either happiness or *eudaemonia*; while still indicating a teleological theme, the expression is more inclusive and may replace both, and even accommodate *duty* as the meaning-giving focus of a person’s life.<sup>232</sup>

Narrative evidence for this sub-class is harder to find than for the previous sub-class (i.e. a change in the categories of goals that would answer the question about happiness), perhaps indicating that changes in the formulation of the question are more rare than changes in the answer, but probably also due to the need for a subtler observer in order to identify a change in the question itself. For the purpose of illustrating this sub-class, two well-known stories of conversion will be proposed, one of them corresponding to the previous sub-class but presented for sake of contrast. Both narratives have a religious context, and are generally brought up to illustrate *religious conversion*; but the elements of *eudaemonia*/meaning are clear enough.

One of them, presented for the sake of contrast, is the story of the conversion of Ignatius of Loyola. A military man and nobleman, Ignatius’ life goals were focused in “gaining for himself a great name” through a military career and a life in court.<sup>233</sup> He fought bravely in many battles, but was wounded during the defense of Pamplona, under siege by the French army. Because of his bravery, the French regarded him with

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<sup>232</sup> Perhaps the different forms of the question regarding the meaning of life could be grouped into “eudaemonic” and “duty-oriented” questions. For reasons of space I only mention the possibility here. One reader has suggested the related possibility of identifying a “seventh” class of conversion – moving from a life guided by the question about *eudaemonia* to a life in which the predominant focus is on duty, or vice versa. This is indeed a possibility, but for the sake of simplicity I will include such shifts within this class, understood widely as shifts regarding the content of the meaning of life.

<sup>233</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius*, trans. J. F. X. O’Connor S.J (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1900), 19.

admiration and he was brought to his family's house to recover. As he convalesced, Ignatius asked for some "romances" to pass the time, but in his family's house there were no books of that kind; he was given, instead, *The Life of the Christ* by Rudolf the Carthusian and the *Flowers of the Saints*. The stories of such saints as St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic filled him with the desire to do the same heroic things they had done, and these ideals began to alternate in his imagination with those of more worldly glory. Slowly he began paying attention also to the feelings that accompanied his daydreaming:

When he thought of worldly things it gave him great pleasure, but afterward he found himself dry and sad. But when he thought of journeying to Jerusalem, and of living only on herbs, and practicing austerities, he found pleasure not only while thinking of them, but also when he had ceased.

This difference he did not notice or value, until one day the eyes of his soul were opened and he began to inquire the reason of the difference. He learned by experience that one train of thought left him sad, the other joyful. This was his first reasoning on spiritual matters.<sup>234</sup>

The result of this process was that Ignatius eventually replaced his desire for "worldly glory" with significantly different life-goals, at first articulated in no more definite ways than "to promise with the help of divine grace that what they [the saintly men he wanted to imitate] had done he would also do."<sup>235</sup> He became a pilgrim and a beggar, and eventually became a priest and the founder of the Society of Jesus.

What is interesting about Ignatius' story for our present purposes is that, despite significant differences between his life-goals before and after his conversion, there are great similarities in the *structure* or the orientation of the question regarding his life goals. He still thinks very much in terms of performing heroic deeds; and it is a

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 26-27. This observation became the basis of his method of "discernment of spirits." (Ibid.)

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 27.

significant detail that, if he renounced to the desire of attaining “worldly glory,” the motto of the Society of Jesus is precisely *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*. Ignatius’ life-goal is still articulated in terms of “gaining glory,” except that now this is intended for God and not, as it previously was, for some anonymous “illustrious lady,”<sup>236</sup> and that he now considers that there is a kind of “glory-gaining activity” much more worthy of his efforts than the life of a military man or a courtesan, i.e. the life of a saint.

As widely known as Ignatius’ conversion story is that of his friend and companion Francis Xavier. The younger son of a noble family, he was preparing to take up an ecclesiastical career, on the hopes of becoming a canon in the cathedral of Pamplona. To this purpose he traveled to Paris to study, and in that city he met Ignatius – sixteen years older than him, preparing for the priesthood. Francis’ life-goals at the time could be characterized as mundane – enjoying the fun and diversion that Paris offered at the time, and professional success in future years. Ignatius, however, with persistent cunning, gained the young man’s friendship while repeatedly inciting him to question his own life-goals, using for this purpose selected phrases from the Scriptures; most famously the phrase from St. Matthew, “What does it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”<sup>237</sup> Eventually Francis abandoned his former plans and decided instead to become a priest and join Ignatius and his friends in what would become the Company of Jesus, devoting his extraordinary energy to missionary work in places as

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>237</sup> Matthew 16:26.

remote as Goa and Japan.<sup>238</sup> In this narrative, again, there is a significant change in the content of life-goals that drive a person; but among the factors that prompt this change there is specific mention of *a question*, one that, if addressed in seriousness, would make Francis' world of desires, plans and goals practically turn up on its head – as in fact it did.

What this story lacks in historiographic detail, it gains in iconic power. It illustrates like few others the effect that a well-placed, new question may have in the restructuring of a person's content in terms of happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning.

The presence of the class of moral conversion described in this section, *conversion regarding content about happiness/eudaemonia/meaning*, implies that the person is, with some degree of awareness, already involved in some kind of meaning-seeking process. The following section will consider a class of moral conversion that can take place when a meaning-seeking process is not actively operative: moral conversion as the process through which a person is “awakened” to meaning and becomes involved in a meaning-seeking process.

### B. Conversion regarding attitude towards happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning

The shifts considered in the previous section regarded the content of happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning, i.e. what kind of goals or goods are considered by the person as worth seeking, to such an extent that a person's life may be said to be focalized on the achievement of such goals. This section will consider instead what changes may take

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<sup>238</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume VI (New York: Robert Appleton, 1909); Technical Unit of the Department of Design and Development of School Texts, *Xavier's World: A View of the XVI Century through the Life of Francis Xavier*, tr. George Buchan (Government of Navarre, Department of Education, 2004) ([http://www.pnte.cfnavarra.es/elmundodejavier/C3/contenido\\_uk.htm#01](http://www.pnte.cfnavarra.es/elmundodejavier/C3/contenido_uk.htm#01)).

place regarding the attitude with which the effort to achieve happiness/*eudaemonia*/ meaning is (or is not) undertaken. The attitude may range from deep involvement (both in the effort to clarify the content of these goals, and to attain them), to utter indifference to the problem, and even to denying that there is a question.

Similarly to what was discussed when considering *moral conversion regarding attitude about right/wrong* (in section 2.B above), there are reasons to argue that there is a proper direction in which this conversion should proceed in order to be considered such, and not its opposite, i.e. “counter-conversion,” degradation, “fall” or some form of moral disintegration (this will be considered below). The direction that is commonly regarded as normative declares the ideal to be the person who applies his/her conscious faculties explicitly to discerning the content of happiness/*eudaemonia*/ meaning, in general terms perhaps, but mostly as it applies specifically to their own lives. The well-known phrase attributed to Socrates, “the unexamined life is not worth living,” declares this well enough. On the opposite side of the spectrum it is possible to find a variety of scenarios. A very common one seems to be that of the person who has always taken for granted that certain actions have to be performed and/or certain desires have to be satisfied, without ever reflecting on their relation to an overarching, ultimate goal, such as happiness, *eudaemonia* or ultimate meaning. (Lonegarians sometimes use the expression “living uncritically” to designate this). In its extreme expression, a person may so lack reflective awareness that the difference between the person and a machine resides mostly on the person’s potentialities; in such cases, one may be tempted to ask whether such a life can be called “moral” (or “immoral”) at all.

An important part of the “gadfly” task of philosophers has been in fact to regularly denounce when the social environment favors such a situation. Josef Pieper, for example, denounced as a contemporary tendency the creation of a “world of labor,” by which he meant an existence absolutely oriented towards production, without the possibility of escape, since even resting periods are supposed to be for the sake of production.<sup>239</sup> The individual's presence in the world becomes “bare facticity” (in de Beauvoir’s phrase), since from the viewpoint of production the individual may be without difficulty replaced by another worker, a cog with another cog.

A criticism of this unreflective life can also be found in what Simone de Beauvoir has characterized as the “sub-men,” those who facing the risk of freedom draw back from it.<sup>240</sup> Their fundamental characteristic is a tepidity or apathy that derives, in de Beauvoir’s view, from a fear to confront the anguish of freedom. The sub-man’s acts are never positive, only flights. The poverty of his project makes him discover around him only an insignificant and dull world, not different perhaps from the world of animality.

Lonergan too has addressed this possibility in the figure of the “drifter.”<sup>241</sup> In Conn’s words,

In contrast to the open-eyed, deliberate subject, there is the drifter. In Lonergan’s description, the drifter has not yet found himself. He has not yet discovered his own deed or his own will or his own mind, and so he is content to do, choose, and think what everybody else is doing, choosing and thinking. The point is not that drifters are evil. As with Kierkegaard’s aesthetes, the problem with drifters is not that they go about deliberately doing evil; the problem is more that they do nothing very deliberately. Either they have never discovered the meaning of human authenticity in themselves, or, if they have, they

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<sup>239</sup> Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, trans. Gerald Malsbary (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 1998), 39-48. Originally published as *Was heisst Philosophieren?* (Kösel-Verlag, 1948).

<sup>240</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 42.

<sup>241</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Collection* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 242.



have never summoned the courage to opt for it – to choose themselves as free and responsible.<sup>242</sup>

Instances of actual people living an “unexamined life,” of “drifting” without reflecting on the content of happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning, seem to be rather common. If it is true, however, that human beings are at their core directed towards happiness, *eudaemonia*, or meaning, and if such a quality has not been permanently expunged or drowned by habit, then the question for “what’s the meaning of it all” may yet be reawakened in such persons. When this happens – when a person changes his/her attitude so that the content of happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning becomes a pressing question, and its specific achievement is at the center of that person’s efforts and energy, we are in the presence of a moral conversion regarding attitude towards happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning.

The modalities in which this shift can take place are very varied. Simone de Beauvoir's analysis in *Ethics of Ambiguity* can be used to illustrate some: she talks about the “serious person,” who becomes concerned by meaning in absolute terms, subordinating his life and freedom to this meaning.<sup>243</sup> There is the “Adventurer,” that rejects seriousness and absolute values, but manages to keep alive his taste and delight for living; this carefree position, says de Beauvoir, can only be held until the Adventurer meets other people, for then he must choose whether to respect their freedom as some sort of absolute or become their oppressor (a connection the right/wrong theme is suggested by the need to make an option at this point).<sup>244</sup> There is the “passionate

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<sup>242</sup> Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 115.

<sup>243</sup> De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 45.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

person,” who sets up some object as an absolute, but only insofar as it is disclosed to his/her subjectivity.<sup>245</sup> There is finally the “free person,” a sort of existentialist moral ideal that regains a form of legitimate seriousness, by committing to the exercise of his/her freedom (and to respecting others' freedom) as a chosen absolute.<sup>246</sup> Such a list could be expanded, or amended if there is disagreement with de Beauvoir's typology. The point for the present purpose is to illustrate that a variety of attitudes towards happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning are possible, and not one but many possible attitudes may be adopted. Optimistic acceptance, joyful awakening, grateful relief, blind obsession, even an anguished struggle to fend off despair, to escape nihilism, these are some possible forms into which this class of moral conversion may develop. When a person's attitude in this regard is stable enough to be considered habitual, a shift that establishes a significantly different attitude as habitual (e.g. an “adventurer” becoming “serious,” and so forth) can be considered as a form of moral conversion belonging to this class.

More detailed descriptions of some of the modalities this class of conversion may adopt can be found by looking at the narrative evidence for this class of conversion.

#### Narrative evidence for this class of conversion

Ira Byock is a doctor who has specialized in palliative medicine, and is active in the Hospice movement, which has asked what the goals of medicine should be during the last stages of a person's life when sickness or old age make death an impending reality. Byock has written a book on his experiences of hospice care, *Dying Well: Peace and*

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 61.

*Possibilities at the End of Life.*<sup>247</sup> Some of the “possibilities” Byock mentions in the title are in fact useful examples of moral conversion regarding attitude about happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning.

The story of Marie Allen (case #3) is representative.<sup>248</sup> Marie is a middle-aged woman who has been dealt many bad hands, and learnt to receive them with an acid sense of humor. Among the worst was finding out that her sister, Kathy, had an affair with her husband, after which Marie divorced him and broke relations with her sister. Marie then remarried her ex-husband after fifteen years of separation; but her husband died briefly after their second marriage. Shortly after this, Marie learned from her doctor that she had colon cancer in its terminal stages and a very short time to live.

While this revelation could have been an occasion for despair, Marie overcame her initial shock quickly and pragmatically and contacted her sister, who had been trying for some time to reconcile with her; and the bad news became an opportunity to heal their relationship. Kathy and her husband, Roger, received Marie openly in their house and cared for her lovingly during her last year, adapting their lives to the schedules and material needs of Marie’s palliative treatment. Marie’s relation with Kathy continued to be a little stiff for a while, until Marie found out from Kathy that her late husband had actually been two-timing both sisters, and this discovery caused the last ties of resentment to dissolve in shared laughter. At this time Marie’s estranged daughter Cindy was about to get married, and Marie’s goal became to endure as best as she could, with the help of the Hospice staff, until Cindy’s wedding. Her daughter also drew closer to Marie then,

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<sup>247</sup> Ira Byock, *Dying Well: Peace and Possibilities at the End of Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997).

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-57. The names have been changed by the author, i.e. Byock.

though she had to overcome a certain degree of denial regarding Marie's sickness. Shortly after a year of being diagnosed, Marie died, without pain, and in the care and company of her family.

A surprising thing about Marie's story is just how quickly and pragmatically Marie's life changed after her diagnosis. A detail that is very representative of the changes that took place was the change in Marie's tendency to collect and accumulate things that she would buy at Target and other places, including a very large collection of shoes. Once she learnt of her disease and decided to move to Kathy's, she gave away all her stuff, arguing motives of space, and without giving it much of a second thought. Wounds were quickly healed too, as has been mentioned, also with characteristic, matter-of-fact pragmatism: when, for example, Kathy offered to take care of Marie, a brief discussion ensued regarding Marie's worries of becoming a nuisance (mostly, she expressed worries about "smelling"); but once these concerns were put aside, even the painful matter of Marie's late husband became soon water under the bridge.

A good amount of psychological healing took place also, and some re-evaluation of goals. But above all, this narrative seems to fit well the category of a conversion regarding attitude towards happiness. There seems to be in Marie, before the diagnosis, a general lack of authentic purpose: she lives in resentment, estranged from her loved ones, and seems to fill these gaps in her life by treating herself to material trinkets. There does not seem to be an examined choice here. By contrast, once she finds out that she has little time left, she quickly takes the matter into her hands, gives away those things that are not really important to her, and focuses, with a very practical mindset, on her goal of making

of her last moments a time for healing and cultivating her relations with her loved ones. There is a general and rather swift change, first, in her attitude towards happiness in general: rather than lingering in her resentment and adding to it negative feelings provoked by this last revelation, she puts her energy in cultivating positive, loving relations. Second – with some help from the hospice staff – she examined and articulated her concrete goals (for example, enduring until her daughter’s wedding), a move that implies some degree of examination of what she considered meaningful to her life at that stage. In short, Marie converted from an attitude of acid pessimism and lingering resentment to life in general, to an attitude of cherishing life, letting go of grudges and actively seeking “happiness,” which for her meant dying in peace after having reconstructed loving relations with the remaining members of her family.

Brian Palmer’s story (case #1) has been considered in the previous subsection, and categorized as an example of *moral conversion regarding content about happiness/eudaemonia/meaning* – more specifically, following Bellah, as a shift from “utilitarian individualism” to “expressive individualism.”<sup>249</sup> But this case is also interesting in terms of attitudinal changes. Palmer’s previous “utilitarian individualism” seems to have been espoused, to a great degree, unreflectively. Not *entirely* without examination: Palmer seems to have had some clarity as to his day-to-day, short-term goals, and was even able to articulate them in a generalization (“I have this nice car, this nice house, joined the Country Club. Now you have a place you can go, sit on your butt, drink, go into the pool. I’ll pay the bills and I’ll do my thing at work,” is how he articulates his relation with his

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<sup>249</sup> Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart*, 3-8.

wife and his goals at that time in his life.)<sup>250</sup> But he also articulates the reasons for his commitment to working many jobs and focusing mainly on making money saying that “[it] seemed like the thing to do at the time.”<sup>251</sup> In other words, though Palmer seems aware of what his goals are, this awareness seems limited, lacking the necessary degree of examination to knowingly conclude that such goals may or may not be satisfactory in terms of happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning. There is something paradoxical perhaps, but not uncommon, in the way in which this energetic, goal-driven “problem solver” lived for a long period of time devoid of authentic purpose, i.e. a purpose sufficiently examined and knowingly embraced. The very energy and focus with which he committed to these eventually unsatisfying goals may have kept him away from the reflection needed to infuse more authentic purpose in his life. The shock and forlornness that followed his divorce provided the setting and the motivation for a conscious examination of his life goals. From Palmer’s narrative, however, it would seem that he not only changed his goals, but that he also adopted a different attitude towards happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning, as something that deserves explicit examination.

This connection between a shift in content and a shift in attitude is in fact something to be expected. Insofar as nothing has been found wrong with the content of one’s orientation towards happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning, no attention may be drawn to the question about the content itself - certainly not with practical urgency. That one is on the right path towards happiness will be often taken for granted in this case, much as we take for granted the appropriateness of our dietary habits if no health problems arise. But if it

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 3.

is found at least once that one's orientation towards meaning, or one's life plans are somehow flawed or unsatisfactory, a person will naturally stay on their guard, incorporate perhaps the habit of examining whether he/she is on the right track or not. In short, there is potentially a causal relation between having to examine (and perhaps change) the content of one's life goals, and becoming more consciously reflective with regard to such goals. Thus, it is possible that when classes of conversion overlap (as seems to be the case in the narrative of Brian Palmer), the overlapping may be due not to merely accidental juxtaposition but to causal connection.

The variety of potential meaning-giving goals and activities is so large that it can extend to examples that might be found almost ludicrous. The story of Julia Galvin's conversion through "bog snorkeling" is a nice example. "Bog snorkeling" is an idiosyncratic competition that was conceived late one night in a Welsh pub, and consists of competitors completing two consecutive lengths of a 60-yard water-filled trench, cut through a peat bog, in the shortest time possible. Competitors must wear snorkels and flippers, and complete the course without using conventional swimming strokes. The water, of course, is icy, murky, weedy and malevolent; and despite the existence of an annual World Bog Snorkeling Championship, the fact that this "sport" looks rather like a dare that got out of hand does not seem lost on the contestants. And yet this unlikely competition became a meaning-giving (and practically a life-saving) activity for Julia Galvin, an Irish teacher who had become almost paralyzed by severe scoliosis. As told by Greg Rubinson,

A biology teacher from Listowel, Ireland, Julia was in the hospital for a severe form of adult-onset scoliosis just seven years ago. She was taking 16 different pain and anti-inflammatory medications and needed an operation. She and her doctors feared she might

never be able to walk again. By chance she picked up a copy of the Guinness Book of World Records and therein first read about the bog snorkeling championship.

“It was my epiphany,” she says.

Bog snorkeling? An epiphany?

She assures me she isn’t kidding. “I can honestly say that bog snorkeling and Gordon Green [one of the creators of the competition] saved my life,” she says. “My future held nothing for me.”

Bog snorkeling became her reason to go on, even though she had never learned to swim. Fighting against incredible pain, Julia took swimming lessons for six weeks and eventually was able to swim the length of a pool. Her pain receded. She ditched her medications and applied herself to training. Then, at the 1999 World Bog Snorkeling Championship, she came in second place in the women’s division. For a woman who just a few months earlier couldn’t walk, this was indeed a grand accomplishment. “I do this because I can,” she tells me. “There was a time when I couldn’t.”<sup>252</sup>

One is reminded of Viktor Frankl’s claim that

there is nothing in the world. . . that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one’s life. . . ‘He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*.’<sup>253</sup>

Certainly Julia Galvin’s story could be used as powerful evidence for Frankl’s thesis.

More to the point at hand, Galvin’s narrative provides further evidence as an instance of *moral conversions regarding attitude towards happiness/eudaemonia/meaning*. The article provides too little information to speculate on the details of the mental process that led Julia to give bog snorkeling such a meaning-giving place in her life: perhaps it was some sort of spontaneously felt attraction, or perhaps a part of her personality was at that point desperately looking for a goal (even a half-serious one) that would give her a reason to live and train and fight against the spiraling decline of her health. Even if the latter was the case, however, at the level of conscious awareness it seems that she was experiencing something closer to despair in terms of happiness/eudaemonia/meaning. That she was able to initially overcome her despair simply by a chance finding in a book of records is

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<sup>252</sup> Greg Rubinson, "Getting Bugged Down," *Hemispheres*, July 2006, 100-101.

<sup>253</sup> Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985), 126.



the kind of surprise that one often encounters when researching moral conversion. The phrase she uses to describe this finding is “my epiphany,” a word that has for synonyms “insight”<sup>254</sup> and “illumination,” and that seems to describe in many cases a key moment in the process of moral conversion - a practical sort of illumination, a powerfully operative insight, powerful enough to bring a person out of a destitute state and into a process of recovery and hope.

These examples will hopefully be sufficient to establish the reality of this class of conversion. For the sake of brevity, only a few examples have been explored; more examples can be found in the Appendix,<sup>255</sup> and the reader may want to reexamine some of the cases presented in the previous section (moral conversion regarding content about happiness/meaning), which as was proposed, may often involve to some degree an element of attitudinal change too.

The question about the possibility of counter-conversions regarding attitude about happiness/eudaemonia/meaning

Before moving on to the next (and last) class of moral conversion, it is worth examining the question about whether changes that go in an opposite direction to what was just described - i.e. a change in attitude that moves a person away from an interest in happiness/eudaemonia/meaning, and from expending energy in attaining them – could be considered legitimately as instances of moral conversion. The answer proposed here is

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<sup>254</sup> Epiphany: “A sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience.” *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Retrieved September 15, 2007, from Dictionary.com website:

<sup>255</sup> Potential candidates are cases #2, 6, 15, 16, 20, 21, 24.

negative; but the process of reaching that answer throws additional light on the nature of conversion.

A process opposite to what has just been described and illustrated is conceivable at least: it could be characterized as a shift from a life illuminated by meaning to one in which any awareness of meaning (or the lack of it) in one's life is extinguished, so that one comes to live in "mere facticity." It is difficult, however, to picture such a process as the consequence of an *active attempt* on the part of the moral agent to become devoid of meaning; and yet an active endeavor on the part of the moral agent seems to be one of the defining aspects of the notion of conversion explored here.

The idea of actively seeking an unexamined/uncritical/merely factual life seems also to involve an important paradox: only exceptionally active "seekers" would be capable of undergoing the moral and psychological effort required to adopt such a self-annihilating posture; yet it is hard to imagine an individual with such a capacity for meaning-seeking (implying also a strong, underlying drive for meaning) being actually able to annihilate him/herself in such a way. The Sartre that wrote *Nausea* (or even the later, humorously self-deprecating *The Words*) is a good example of this paradox: much as he toiled to live consistently in acceptance of the reality of a meaningless existence, he only succeeded in making such a struggle his life's meaning-giving quest – why else write a novel (and an autobiographical essay, and many plays) about it?<sup>256</sup> This paradox makes it difficult to concede the possibility of a "conversion" that consisted in actively seeking "sub-humanity," or the suspicious bliss of an unexamined life.

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<sup>256</sup> I have discussed this apparent contradiction in my paper "Trapped in a Paradox: Sartre's Quest for the Justification of Existence" (2003).

There is, perhaps, an exception to this rule: the view that considers this whole “meaning-seeking” enterprise to be misguided, and that human beings would be essentially happier if they reverted to a more “animal” type of existence, with less questioning and, in some versions of the argument, giving free rein to our “repressed animality.” According to this view, it has been our insistent and aberrant questioning what has made human civilization a breeding ground for anxiety and unhappiness. It is possible to read some of Nietzsche’s texts in this way - Jacinto Choza, for example, has done it with extensive attention to detail in his *Conciencia y Afectividad* (Consciousness and Affectivity).<sup>257</sup> Ray Bradbury’s story (from *The Martian Chronicles*) “And the Moon be Still as Bright” illustrates this point too: in the story, by taking hold of a human’s consciousness, the last Martian tells the recently arrived astronauts of a happier era:

The Martians discovered the secret of life among animals. The animal does not question life. It lives. Its very reason for living *is* life; it enjoys and relishes life. . . .<sup>258</sup>

It is very doubtful that such an ideal could ever be consistently applied by a human being; but this view is presented here only as an example of a way in which the endeavor to actively abandon the quest for meaning has been rationally articulated – an intellectual scenario in which the normative direction of this class of moral conversions would run the opposite way, i.e. away from examining, identifying and articulating the content of happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning. But apart from views of this kind – that seem to be rare and that almost in all cases lack concrete application - the shift towards an attitude of

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<sup>257</sup> Jacinto Choza, *Conciencia Y Afectividad : Aristoteles, Nietzsche, Freud*, 2nd ed. (Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, 1991).

<sup>258</sup> Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1950), 68-69. Eventually civilization triumphs and the Martian (who had killed some of the brutish crew members) is shot down.

indifference, inattention or insensibility to the question of happiness/*eudaemonia*/ meaning often seems to be due rather to obstinacy and/or disintegration. Obstinacy in the sense of a refusal to move forward in the search for meaning; disintegration in the sense of a dissipation of forces, or a self-destructive abandonment. For an example of such a shift away from meaning-seeking, consider for example the person that, as the consequence of a great loss, attempts to drown his/her sorrows in drinking, drifting further and further away from an active interest in happiness or despairing from the possibility of finding meaning. The term “conversion,” however, sounds very inappropriate to designate this process. Conversion implies struggle and activity, and this kind of abandonment of hope appears to be a refusal to struggle and an option for inactivity; in fact, insofar as it has an element of deliberateness, “desertion” might be a more appropriate term for this kind of change.<sup>259</sup>

There is also the possibility of shifting away from an attitude of actively seeking meaning/*eudaemonia*, merely by drifting into a routine in which meaning is never a concern. In fairness, it must be said that such a shift may not be a bad thing in all cases: some people may enjoy routine, at least if it is not of a dehumanizing kind, and some people, who suffer from actually being too reflective, may benefit from it. But whether this move can be considered a positive thing or a negative one, insofar as it involves a mindless, unintentional drifting it is not properly described by the term “conversion,”

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<sup>259</sup> The type of the “Nihilist,” presented by de Beauvoir (along with the types examined above) as the person who, having found the answer to be negative, ends in despair, denying or attempting to annihilate the world or him/herself, seems to correspond to this description; it can be illustrated for example by the case just mentioned of a person that in great sorrow “annihilates” her moral agency by getting persistently drunk. See De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 58.

which, again, implies some active endeavor on the part of the moral agent, and not merely the absence of directedness of “drifting.”

For these reasons (though they depend here on a limited set of examples), it does not seem appropriate to use the expression “moral conversion” to designate a shift from an attitude of active search for happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning to one in which the quest for a goal such as happiness, *eudaemonia*, or for ultimate meaning for one’s actions has disappeared from one’s active concerns. As such, this type of shift will not be the object of direct consideration during the course of this work.

### C. Conversion regarding coherence in the search for *eudaemonia*

Finally, there is the possibility of a third class of moral conversion regarding happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning that corresponds structurally to the third class previously described regarding right/wrong. It was noted above, (in Section 2.C), when describing *moral conversion regarding behavioral coherence about right/wrong*, that the fact that a person holds certain moral criteria and principles does not guarantee that a person's actions will conform to such principles, particularly when they clash with the immediateness of short-term satisfaction. Similarly, even though a person may clearly appreciate that a certain course of action would be beneficial with respect to his/her quest for *eudaemonia* (implying, as it was said, a stable, satisfying, profound form of happiness, possibly in the long term), or more in tune with what is regarded by this person as meaning-giving, the person may still choose to follow a different course of action; or alternatively, the person may perceive him/herself as powerless to choose or

engage in the course of action that is a prerequisite to what he/she understand as the more appropriate to achieve happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning.

Classical sources interpret such failures to act for happiness as the result of an internal division with respect to the person's operative principles. Plato, for example, has described this internal division with the vivid image of a many-headed beast, in which all heads seek at the same time to be fed by a sometimes strong, sometimes weak human head, representative of reason.<sup>260</sup> If the human head is strong and shepherds the heads according to reason, the person is just and virtuous; if not, the whole person is enslaved by the conflicting desires of the many heads or appetites, and the person becomes unjust. Aristotle has also given this phenomenon a detailed treatment in book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Here Aristotle talks about "moral strength" and "moral weakness"; in the latter there is a disconnection between what the person regards as the rational way to act, and that person's actions.

A man who is morally strong tends to abide by the results of his calculation, and a morally weak man tends to abandon them.<sup>261</sup>

Aristotle explains moral weakness as sometimes the effect of a disconnection between different types of knowledge (i.e., we may know the general rule, and not apply it to the concrete situation at hand), and sometimes as the effect of the person's knowledge being rendered ineffective by reason of the person being in the grip of his/her emotions – a condition compared to those of being asleep, mad or drunk.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> *Republic*, book IX, 588b-592.

<sup>261</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1 (1145b).

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 3 (1146b-1147a).

The list of authors that subscribe to this idea of an internal division includes most Christian medieval authors, and a number of contemporary authors who have explored the issue with the aid of notions from modern psychology. There is some variety in the different formulations regarding the principles set in opposition, though often this variety seems more the result of variation in emphasis than in the explanatory principles themselves. At times cognitive dissociation is emphasized; mechanisms such as bad faith, rationalization, denial, or the Aristotelian disconnection between the principles and the concrete case are then used to explain the incoherence between actions and knowledge. At times it is the role of emotions that obfuscate the person's judgment that is emphasized. At times it is the immediacy of the attraction of pleasure: in Aristotle, for example, the "self-indulgent" person would be normally swayed by pleasure, lacking the related virtue of self-control.<sup>263</sup> Other conflicting operative principles (e.g. will versus intellect) may be also invoked. These views can be summed up by saying that, according to these authors, there is in the human person the potential for an internal division/disconnection, and that this in turn makes it possible for a person to act in dissonance with his/her best judgments regarding happiness or *eudaemonia*,

Sporadic acts of "moral weakness" can then be considered a normal or part of human life; in such moments, a person may engage in actions that go against what they habitually perceive as adequate behavior for the attainment of happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning. But it may happen that these inconsistencies that undermine one's progression towards happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning become habitual. Furthermore, they may become so resistant to change, and recurrent in their occurrences, that overcoming them

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid. VII, 3; II, 7.

in a stable and definitive way comes to be perceived by the person as being beyond their capacities and resources. There may be clarity in the person's mind with regard to the content of happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning, but there is also the perception that such content is essentially unattainable to them, not because of external conditions that make it beyond their reach, but because of their own weaknesses or insufficiency. The result is a loss of hope, despair, defeat; the person often gives up trying.

This is the setting for the third class of conversion. Conversion at this point appears as an infusion of new strength, new enthusiasm, new *operative* hope, on the wings of which the person is able to overcome effectively the obstacles and contrary habits that weighed him/her down, and engage in – and eventually consolidate – patterns of behavior that are consistent with what is regarded as the proper direction towards happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning.<sup>264-265</sup>

#### Narrative evidence for this class of conversion

Some of Leuba's cases of converted alcoholics may also be used as evidence of this class of conversion. In one such case ("Subject E", case #12), the subject declares

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<sup>264</sup> It should be mentioned that this class of conversion (both when it regards happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning and right/wrong) appears to be the least cognitively accessible – or most mysterious - of conversion classes. A possible reason is that changes of this class seem to depend on cognitively more obscure emotional, "motivational" factors. Hopefully the next chapters will be able to throw some light on these factors.

<sup>265</sup> Is there a "reverse form" of this class of conversion, a "conversion" that attempts to achieve a lesser degree of coherence? It seems unlikely; a conversion towards "having less coherence" with what is deemed as preferable does not make much sense at all. If by such is meant that the person actively engages in achieving a less rigid compliance with certain rules or demands, this means probably that the person has actually shifted his/her content or criteria regarding happiness or right/wrong. This would be the case, for example, if the person came to see (in a conversion regarding content) that their commitment to rules or principles were excessive, and as a result attempted to achieve a more relaxed attitude regarding moral matters.



. . . all my pangs were due to some terrible remorse I used to feel after a heavy carousal, *the remorse taking the shape of regret after my folly in wasting my life in such a way* - a man of superior talents and education. I was not much alarmed about the future world.<sup>266</sup>

Of the case of John B. Gough (case #17), already cited, Leuba says,

The sense of his degradation and worthlessness does not involve in his mind responsibility for his sin to other; he is absorbed in his own self. He battles against himself, poor slave and outlaw, to conquer, if possible, the place he has lost in society.<sup>267</sup>

In these two texts the theme of happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning appears clearly.

More recent narratives of a similar same sort can be found in the collection of stories that Alcoholics Anonymous publishes in its “Big Book” (as the *Alcoholics Anonymous* informational book has been nicknamed). The book is currently in its fourth edition, the first having appeared in 1939; in each new edition some of the earlier stories are kept, while new ones are added “to represent the current membership of Alcoholics Anonymous more accurately, and thereby to reach more alcoholics.”<sup>268</sup> One of its earliest narratives is that of “Doctor Bob,” one of A.A. cofounders (the birth of the society is dated from “his first day of permanent sobriety,” in June 1935).<sup>269</sup> To the day of his death, in 1950, he had helped more than 5,000 alcoholics, men and women, giving them also medical assistance without charging them. Doctor Bob got into drinking during his college years, drinking as much as his money permitted. By the time he took up medicine, he was drinking enough to have morning “jitters.” His addiction was already compromising his capacity to go to class; he would not dare assist to class if he had those

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<sup>266</sup> Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," 373-376. (Emphasis mine).

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*: 343.

<sup>268</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism (Online Edition)*, 4th ed. (New York City: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001), Preface.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

jitters, and in the Sophomore year he almost quit school. He had to convince the faculty to let him take his exams (he had turned many examination books empty because he could not hold a pencil), then passed them, then got into drinking again, eventually pulled himself dry, graduated, and remained sober during a couple years of residency during which he was too busy to leave the hospital frequently. After this, however, once he got his own practice, he fell into drinking again; he even developed a phobia to running out of liquor.<sup>270</sup> He had to manage his addiction carefully – he needed to be sober enough in the morning to practice medicine, in order to have money for liquor in the evening. He also developed tremendous cunning for acquiring and keeping alcohol at home, even during the times of prohibition and living with a vigilant wife.

It is significant that, in Bob's narrative, drinking itself is never specifically censured in terms of right/wrong, whether from a religious or a social point of view. Rather, drinking is mentioned as a continuous obstacle to his fulfilling his aspirations, the cause of many miserable moments and of living under the constant threat of downfall and shame. (Doctor Bob seems to have somewhat gotten used to the constant exertions that providing for his addiction demanded, and that took most of his waking life; and mentions the greater blunders matter-of-factly.) This focus also places this narrative within the happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning theme.

Indeed, it is a focus on happiness – here emphasizing the aspect of “living a free life” – that reignites in Doctor Bob a strong desire to recover; a moral conversion regarding attitude, according to our classification, but one that does not become

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 176.

immediately effective, and thus requires a conversion regarding coherence as an additional step, in order to reach fulfillment. Says Doctor Bob

About the time of the beer experiment [a catastrophic attempt to replace stronger drinks with beer] I was thrown in with a crowd of people who attracted me because of their seeming poise, health and happiness. They spoke with great freedom from embarrassment, which I could never do, and they seemed very much at ease on all occasions and appeared very healthy. More than these attributes, *they seemed to be happy*. I was self conscious and ill at ease most of the time, my health was at the breaking point, and I was thoroughly miserable. I sensed they had something I did not have, from which I might readily profit. I learned that it was something of a spiritual nature, which did not appeal to me very much, but I thought it could do no harm. I gave the matter much time and study for the next two and a half years, but I still got tight [i.e. drunk] every night nevertheless. I read everything I could find, and talked to everyone who I thought knew anything about it.<sup>271</sup>

It was about this time that a woman called Bob's wife, and recommended that Bob talk to a friend of hers. This man – unnamed in the story – managed, after many hours of talking, to get Bob to remain sober for a few weeks. After this, however, in the course of going to a conference, Bob drunk severely for many days and woke up at a friend's house without remembering much. The unnamed man then took care of Bob again, and the following morning Doctor Bob was able to cease drinking permanently. He was able then to regain both his health and self-respect, and the respect of his colleagues. Bob asks himself the question, what did this man do or say that was different from what others had done or said? In his opinion, a key factor seems to be the fact that this man had been an alcoholic too, and had had "most of all the drunkard's experiences known to man, but had been cured by the very means I had been trying to employ, that is to say the spiritual approach."<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 180.

The current edition of the Alcoholics Anonymous book features a section with forty-two selected stories of recovered alcoholics. Many of these have similarities to the story of Dr. Bob above. If it is granted that this story is an appropriate example of moral conversion regarding coherence about happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning, the reality of this class of conversion can be established as a fact. The success of the Alcoholics Anonymous “12-step method” also suggests that the possibility of this type of conversion taking place (despite the difficulties involved) is not extremely remote or rare: a mere four years after the first Alcoholics Anonymous began meeting, they counted over 100 ex-alcoholics who had recovered using their 12-step, collective method; and 100,000 worldwide in 1950 – that is, eleven years afterwards. Today A.A. claims over 2 million members worldwide, at different stages of recovery.<sup>273</sup>

For present purposes, i.e. providing evidence for this class of conversion, this small selection of narratives should be sufficient. It will be noticed that they have been taken from the context of life- and happiness-threatening addictions – specifically, alcohol addiction (though many of the stories in the “Big Book” make also reference to medication addiction, especially sedatives). It has turned out to be relatively easy to find stories appropriate to this class of conversion in the context of addictions (and relatively difficult to find proper narratives from other contexts). A possible explanation for this is not hard to find: once a person has a definite orientation towards a certain goal (as happiness- or meaning-giving), one would expect the person to direct their efforts to such goal, unless significant obstacles are met on the way, either external or internal. The

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<sup>273</sup> A.A. *Fact File*, Prepared by General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services Inc., 1998), 16-17.

presence of external obstacles is not relevant to the theme of conversion. Among the strongest internal obstacles, on the other hand, are addictions, which seem to effectively divide a person against him/herself, forcing them to expend most of the energy they could aim at attaining happiness/*eudaemonia* in attempting to counterbalance the destructive pull of their addiction.<sup>274</sup>

The fact that addictions are now considered to be a type of disease with an organic component should not be considered a reason to exclude their consideration from the realm of moral conversion. On the contrary, the path to healing and recovery as reported in these narratives involves, a cognitive appraisal of moral and morally-related issues: an appraisal of one's situation and the ways in which one's addiction is affecting one's chances for happiness, a realization of how the addiction is harming loved ones, an appreciation of the loving support of other human beings, a shifting of one's sources of hope towards the group or a loving God, etc. Furthermore, in many narratives there is even the suggestion that medical interventions focused on the organic are ineffective for anything more than a temporary recovery.<sup>275</sup> These cognitive factors, it is claimed here, are possibly involved in the dynamism of the other classes as well. But it is not yet the place to argue for these claims, which will be done in Chapter 10. The purpose of this subsection has been primarily to demonstrate that there is substantial narrative evidence to support the existence of moral conversions of this class.

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<sup>274</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 547-548.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-175.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The present chapter has offered a tripartite classification of instances of moral conversion, a classification that applies to moral conversion understood both in terms of right/wrong and in terms of happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning of life. For each class of conversion, a number of narratives have been presented, with the double purpose of constituting evidence that such a class of conversion actually takes place, and illustrating with examples what is meant by each class of conversion. The fact that some narratives may be used as examples of more than one class of moral conversion has been noted, and has been explained as a consequence of the process of moral conversion having different, interrelated aspects (corresponding to each of the classes outlined), that are involved in it.

On the basis of the foregoing considerations, a general notion of moral conversion can now be offered. Moral conversion is a *process* in which a *person* changes in *existential* ways related to their *understanding* of, their *attitude* towards and/or their *behavioral habits* regarding right/wrong and/or happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning of life.

The term “existential” is here especially important as denoting the *importance* of the change, that it is change involving human *persons* (though by analogy it may also apply to groups), and that it is *real, concrete* change, involving a great degree of *contingency*, both because of its concreteness and because of its apparent connection to human freedom.

Before addressing the philosophical implications of moral conversion (in chapters 8-10), there remain two tasks: to clarify the notion of moral conversion in comparison with (and as distinguished from) the related notions of religious conversion, and the sometimes overlapping realm of psychological (therapeutic) healing.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN MORAL AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

The previous chapter presented a general notion of moral conversion, which was arrived at after presenting two complementary views on what is the central matter at stake in philosophical discussions of the moral life, and analyzing the different ways in which moral life is affected by conversion in relation to these two views. In order to adequately delimit the notion of moral conversion, however, there remains the need to differentiate it from two forms of conversion that are often connected with it: *religious conversion* and *psychological conversion*. The present chapter will discuss in further detail the distinction between moral conversion and religious conversion, and will consider to what extent the distinction between them is relevant to this project.

#### **1. A threefold notion of religious conversion**

Authors who attempt to define religious conversion encounter a difficulty similar to that already encountered when attempting to define moral conversion: the notion is not univocal. Three meanings, related but distinct, appear repeatedly in the literature on religious conversion, and are given varying emphasis according to the context.



Interestingly, this threefold notion of religious conversion coincides with the threefold notion of moral conversion described in the previous chapter.<sup>276</sup>

1) The first meaning of “conversion” in the religious context sees it as *intellectual assent to truths that are considered of divine origin*.<sup>277</sup> The most common name for this assent is “faith.” (The term “faith” itself, however, is not univocal: it can be used in reference to the other two notions of conversion as well, and for this reason it will not be further employed in this chapter). People are said (in this first sense) to convert to a certain religion or denomination or set of religious beliefs when they give assent to the relevant corpus of truths.<sup>278</sup> In addition, a conversion from atheism to some form of belief in God (i.e. that there is a God, or some similar truth claim) would also be included under this meaning.<sup>279</sup> This first category of religious conversion corresponds closely with what was characterized in moral conversion as “conversion regarding content.”

Frequently, truths assented to in this sense are considered to be of divine origin in such a way that these truths could not be known by, nor demonstrated by *natural reason* alone (i.e. without the aid of revelation or the like); but this is not always the case: in some theological traditions, some religious truths are considered to be also knowable by

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<sup>276</sup> The threefold distinction in the previous chapter is my own construction, formulated before the research for this chapter was done. But it is heartening to find that scholars have identified a parallel pattern in regard to religious conversion.

<sup>277</sup> I am using the term “truths” out of respect, since “belief” used in this context seems to be somewhat pejorative; but I do not imply that the content here is always “true,” or “demonstrable” in an epistemological sense.

<sup>278</sup> Obviously such assent must be given with genuine conviction (even if weak or still doubting); “exterior” assent, from the mouth only, would only mean that the person is posing as a convert.

<sup>279</sup> Commonly, autobiographical accounts of conversion serving an apologetic purpose (such as Griffin’s, in Chapter 4) focus primarily on this first type of conversion. On the other hand, treatises on spirituality, even if structured around an autobiographical account (such as Thérèse of Lisieux’s), more often focus on the second meaning of conversion, describing what will be called here a “conversion of the heart.”

natural reason, their revelation being provided for human assistance or convenience.<sup>280</sup>

This matter presents somewhat of a methodological difficulty peculiar to religious conversion: the ruling criterion for characterizing a truth as “religious” will not be *the nature of the content* of the truth itself, but rather its *origin*, i.e. as revealed by God, and/or as assented to by an act of faith in the divinity, or an act of trust in the religious authority, etc. Looking at the nature of the content may in many situations – most, perhaps – help identify a truth as religious, and consequently, to identify cases of conversion regarding content as instances of religious conversion. This may be the case when the content refers to themes such as God and the relation of God to human beings. But in other cases the content of truths that, according to the criterion of origin, should be characterized as religious, may refer to moral themes (e.g. religiously sanctioned moral prescriptions), or to metaphysical views (the term “metaphysical” is here used very broadly) that have direct moral implications, particularly regarding happiness or ultimate meaning. In these cases the matter would overlap with that which has been identified as characteristic of moral conversion.

This possibility raises a methodological issue: should such instances be considered *also* as instances of moral conversion? Could they, consequently, be used as evidence (as

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<sup>280</sup> In Aquinas’ analysis, for example, some of the revealed truths are actually truths that “natural reason” could have recognized, but that are revealed for in order to assist us: “Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation. Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors.” (*Summa Theologiae* I, q.1 a.1.)

will be done in Chapter 10) of an internalist view of morality? This issue will be discussed in the following section.

2) The second sense of religious conversion corresponds fairly closely with what was characterized above as moral conversion regarding *commitment* or *attitude*. The expression that most adequately conveys this kind of religious conversion is “conversion of the heart.”<sup>281</sup> It is usually presented in contrast to an assent to religious truths that remains chiefly in the intellectual but does not inform the person’s affective sphere and/or the orientation of their active life. It involves the awakening of commitment to the meaning and practical demands of religious truths assented to previously, often for a significant amount of time before conversion takes place, but assented to with indifference at the affective and/or practical level.<sup>282</sup> Alternatively, this form of conversion may be formulated without any reference to such contrast (i.e. between the “chiefly intellectual” and the affective and/or practical), and may be thus formulated simply as a significant change in the person’s affective and volitional relation to the Divine. (Quite often this conversion takes place in the form of a submission or surrender of the person to God, intended by the person to be full and complete.)

Within the Judeo-Christian writings this “change of heart” has traditionally involved a two-phased turning: there is first a turning away from alienation from God and

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<sup>281</sup> The image of the “change of heart” is used explicitly in the Old Testament; as for example in Ezekiel 11:19: “I will take from them their heart of stone, and will give them a heart of flesh.”

<sup>282</sup> Some differences of emphasis will be found between religious thinkers and groups that emphasize the importance of the *content* of faith – in which cases the change in content will be emphasized as being the *cause* for this further transformation. In a different context -, and thinkers or groups that emphasize the negative consequences of a “purely abstract” assent to truth that does not otherwise transform the person or his/her actions, while giving them an (in their view) false sense of being justified, saved, etc. by the mere virtue of assenting to that content.

from sin (a phase ordinarily called “repentance” or *metanoia*), and secondly there is a turning toward God and the related affective and volitional states (a phase sometimes called “enlightenment” or *epistrophe*,<sup>283</sup> and sometimes simply “faith”).<sup>284</sup>

3) A third sense of religious conversion is that of *a transformation of the convert's practical life*. This corresponds to the third category described above in regard to moral conversion, namely conversion regarding *coherence*. From what has been expounded in the previous chapter about conversion regarding behavioral coherence, this category can be readily understood. But it should be noted that some controversy may be found in some theological contexts as to whether this conversion regarding coherence should not rather be interpreted as a signal/sign (or, perhaps, as the touchstone) of a conversion of the heart (i.e. the second category of religious conversion), than as a distinct kind of religious conversion. In other words, proponents of collapsing the third into the second category might say that, if conversion does reach the heart, it is supposed to transform a person's life. Therefore, if no discernible changes in the person's life appear over a period

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<sup>283</sup> Richard Fragomeni, "Conversion," in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, Maine: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 231.

<sup>284</sup> The two notions of religious conversion just expounded are found, in less or more detail, in practically every dictionary of Christian theology that contains the term “conversion.” See Donald Attwater, ed., *A Catholic Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958); Louis Bouyer, *Dictionary of Theology*, trans. Charles Underhill Quinn (New York: Desclee Co., Inc., 1965); Robert C. Broderick, ed., *The Catholic Encyclopedia - Revised and Updated Edition* (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986); Mark Miller, "Conversion," in *The Harper Collins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, ed. Richard P. McBrien (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995); F. J. Moloney, "Conversion, I (in the Bible)," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Detroit, MI; Washington, D.C.: Thomson/Gale Group; Catholic University of America, 2003); T. H. L. Parker, "Conversion," in *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969); Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*, ed. O.P. Ernst, Cornelius, trans. Richard Strackan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965); S.J. Walsh, J.P.M., "Conversion," in *The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Michael Glazier and Monika Hellwig (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1994). About half of these sources make explicit reference to the distinction between the phases of *repentance* and “turning toward,” expressed in these sources most often as *faith* (Bouyer, *Dictionary of Theology*; Moloney, "Conversion, I (in the Bible)"; Parker, "Conversion"; Walsh, "Conversion").

of time – particularly, if a person persists in habits that are defective by the relevant religious standards – this should be considered a sign that there has not been a true conversion. On the other hand, it is also possible to find in a different theological context the view that *the principal point* of religious conversion consists in a change in *how one lives*, and that conversions of the previous categories are not too different from mere precursors of the “genuine” conversion, i.e. of practical, behavioral habits. For the present purposes, however (and keeping in mind that an analog threefold distinction was argued for in the previous chapter), it will be clearer to consider this as a category of conversion of its own, distinct from assenting to certain truths or from a change in one’s feelings, values, volitions, *attitude*.<sup>285</sup>

## **2. A methodological problem: When the religious and moral aspects of a conversion are blended**

In all three types of religious conversion, it has been argued, there is a dependence of the convert’s change of life on revelation - its content, its ability to move the heart, and its ability to motivate practical changes in behavioral patterns - that distinguishes them from their corresponding classes of moral conversion. This dependence has been

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<sup>285</sup> This third sense of religious conversion is not as frequently mentioned in explicit terms in the relevant literature as the first two are (see previous note). If this one is explicitly mentioned, the expression commonly used is “conversion of life” or similar. (Broderick, ed., *The Catholic Encyclopedia - Revised and Updated Edition*; Miller, “Conversion.”) Also note that, in this presentation of three senses of religious conversion, I have steered away from Lonergan’s definition of religious conversion, which focuses not on *faith* but on *love*, which for Lonergan is a change at the center of a person's drives and motivations. Though Lonergan's notion, quite original and profound in its own right, deserves further study, it is not so close to the common understanding of religious conversion as to be immediately intuitive; tallying it up with the notion of moral conversion presented here would require an significant detour from the topic at hand.

identified as the chief criterion for distinguishing religious from moral conversion. On the other hand, the criteria provided to identify moral conversion focuses on the nature of its content/matter, i.e. as dealing with right/wrong and happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning. The fact that different sets of criteria are used allows for the possibility of the content of religious conversion overlapping with the content of moral conversion. How should the relation between the two categories (whether as inclusive, exclusive, complementary, overlapping) be articulated?

As was mentioned, concrete instances of conversion are complex processes in which the whole person is involved. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge the possibility of overlapping categories, i.e. that in the same narratives one may find both a religious and a moral conversion. Most authors that have considered the subject do in fact consider this not only to be a possibility, but in fact a normal occurrence, and some have explained this as the result of some form of structural relation between the different categories of conversion (such as, for example, “sublation”<sup>286</sup>).

The fact, however, that some of the narratives presented in the following chapters as evidence for an internalist view of morality *do* contain religious elements – not just in terms of content, but in terms of the origin of the assent given to them – does raise a methodological issue. In general terms (a more detailed definition will be developed in later chapters) an internalist view of morality claims that a person’s understanding of the

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<sup>286</sup> Thus, in Lonergan: “I would use this notion in Karl Rahner's sense rather than Hegel's to mean that what sublates goes beyond what is sublated, introduces something new and distinct, puts everything on a new basis, yet so far from interfering with the sublated or destroying it, on the contrary needs it, includes it, preserves all its proper features and properties, and carries them forward to a fuller realization within a richer context” (Lonergan, *Method*, 241). Also see Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 117; Rende, *Lonergan on Conversion*, 192.

content of a moral rule or principle, and the related judgment on the reasonability of such rule or principle, are operative factors in that person's assenting to such content, and/or adopting a certain, practically oriented attitude towards such content.<sup>287</sup> A somewhat popular view of religiously motivated assent, however, regards this assent as essentially disconnected from the need to somewhat thoroughly understand the content and its implications, and to judge accordingly about its reasonableness. In other words, according to this view, assent based on religious faith (including assent to matters of moral concern) is supposed to replace or even suppress the need for a judgment of reasonableness; assent to such content would be given on the basis of "blind faith" or of "faith alone," or even (a bit like Kierkegaard's description of Abraham as a "man of faith") of faith defying understanding and reasonableness altogether.

Described in such terms, religiously motivated assent to moral matters seems closer to an externalist than to an internalist dynamism: the content becomes irrelevant, and it is the mechanism "behind" assent (e.g. the fact that a certain norm has been legitimated by a source of authority acknowledged as such by the person) that "produces" assent. But if such were the case in *all* instances of religious conversion, this would make it necessary

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<sup>287</sup> As will be argued later, to demonstrate the truth of an internalist view of morality it is enough to show that internalist processes take place at least once – or a handful of times -, because the claim of internalism is not that *all* processes of moral development, and of moral decision/action take place in the way internalism describes them. To demonstrate the truth of externalism, instead, it is necessary that *no* internalist processes take place, because its claim is exclusionary: in logical terms, externalism is a universal-negative statement that can be contradicted by a particular affirmative. Thus, the methodology involved in demonstrating internalism does not require to take into account "as many narratives of conversion as can be found" and produce some form of numerical comparison between those that indicate internalist processes and those that do not. Rather, it is enough to provide substantial examples that internalist processes *do take place*, and those narratives that do not provide such evidence do not need to be considered. There is no circularity involved, in other words, in selecting only those narratives that provide evidence of internalist processes.

to exclude from consideration any narrative in which religious faith seemed to be an *operative factor* (since what is looked for are narratives that can serve as evidence for an internalist process). And given that, at least from what can be gathered from the collection of narratives examined during the preparation of this work, a majority of narratives do include religious elements and even some form of religious conversion, such exclusionary process would leave very little material to work with.

What is claimed here is that it is not necessary to understand the relation faith-reason in such terms, i.e. as excluding each other. (In fact it may be that this exclusionary view is justified only in a narrow range of instances, though that claim cannot be sustained here.) It is possible instead to understand faith and reason as related in “friendlier” terms, as is understood for example in the principle that states that *fides quaerens intellectum*, that faith seeks understanding. This is a view that enjoys the support of a very rich philosophical and theological tradition.

#### Faith and reason in non-exclusionary terms: The example of Aquinas

An example of this view, that regards faith and reason in non-exclusionary terms, can be found in Thomas Aquinas’ treatment of the distinction and relation between “natural reason” and “reason aided by Revelation.” This distinction was deemed necessary in order to make possible a dialogue with non-Christians (the aim, for example, of Aquinas’ *Summa Contra Gentiles*). It was also considered helpful for apologetic reasons: the distinction would help identify what was generally called the *preambula fidei*, arguments that would help a non-believer get intellectually closer to the acceptance



of the Christian faith. Thus Aquinas discussed explicitly which truths that composed the Christian theological doctrinal *corpus* could be and which could not be reached, at least theoretically, without using the Christian revelation as a source of authority, as it had historically been used – which among these truths, in other words, could be defended philosophically.

One way of applying the distinction between natural reason and reason aided by Revelation consisted in figuring out what truths could be argued for in the hypothetical situation of not having had the Christian revelation. Theoretically these truths could also be agreed upon by a reasonable person that did not share the Christian faith. Examples of this kind of truth would be in Aquinas' view the moral rules contained in the Ten Commandments,<sup>288</sup> or the existence of God;<sup>289</sup> examples of truths that could not be reached without the aid of Revelation were in his view the Trinitarian constitution of God<sup>290</sup> and, as Aquinas explains in a lengthy, somewhat esoteric discussion, the fact that the universe began at a certain point in time and did not exist eternally.<sup>291</sup> Note that this exercise was not supposed to be one of historically tracing back ideas to their point of origin, whether it be religion, myth, or the recorded contribution of a particular thinker. What was attempted was to gauge, so to speak, the viability of certain ideas in terms of their reasonableness, i.e. of the possibility of arriving at them and defending them through philosophical argumentation, without having recourse to Revelation. Given his calm confidence in the truth of the Christian faith, Aquinas (and other scholars who

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<sup>288</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 99 a.2 ad 2.

<sup>289</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2 a. 2.

<sup>290</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 32 a.1; I-II, q. 99 a.2 ad 2.

pursued the project) had the optimistic expectation that whatever knowledge were gained through natural reason would not contradict this faith-based truth, but rather would possibly support it, and might even further the understanding of faith-based truth.

From these reflections, it was possible to establish a distinction between a) “strictly religious” truths, i.e. truths that can only be considered or defended as such if supported by the authority of revelation; b) “mixed” truths, i.e. that may be defended as “natural” truths, but are also argued for from a religious point of view, by “reason aided by revelation,” in the Scholastic phrase; and c) “strictly natural” truths, in the case that revelation seems to have no opinion on the subject; such might be the case, for example, of Catholic doctrine regarding which form of government may be the best for human life. (The terminology here, though not the distinction, is my own.)<sup>292</sup> But in Aquinas (and not just in Aquinas but in the general spirit of medieval theology), even in the case of “strictly religious” truths reason still played a part, because a faith that understood its object (to some extent at least) was considered more perfect than a faith that gave assent without understanding anything about it at all – even if the latter case could be said to have something meritorious about it in terms of the virtue of obedience to authority. Thus, though acknowledging its limitations, Aquinas tried to give account of the “strictly religious” Christian doctrine of the Trinitarian God by referring to an analogy with the mental acts as they were understood by Aristotle.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 46 a.2.

<sup>292</sup> The terminology used in this distinction is my own; its basis in Aquinas can be found in *Summa Theologiae* I, q.1 a.1; I-II q. 91, a. 3 and I-II q. 95 a.2.

<sup>293</sup> See for example Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

These various reflections call attention to the fact that religiously motivated assent is related to understanding and judgments of reasonability in much more complex ways than what is claimed by the view that considers all religious assent as *per se* constituted through the rejection of the demands for understanding and reasonability. The possibility of a person needing at a certain point in his/her life to assent without understanding – or even against what appears for them to be reasonable - is not rejected by Aquinas,<sup>294</sup> but this kind of assent seems to go essentially against the human natural drive to understand and to act reasonably, and as such appears in Aquinas as a temporary, somewhat exceptional situation, that demands to be resolved eventually by the person growing towards an understanding of the object of the act of faith.<sup>295</sup>

In short, the fact that narratives of moral conversion often include, as an important factor in the development of the conversion process, references to revelation, religious faith or religious expressions of some kind or other, should not be taken *a priori* as a reason to consider that in such narratives an internalist dynamism will not be found. (The view just presented, for example, using Aquinas' reflections as illustrative, is representative of at least a significant portion of Catholic thought, current and past, on the nature of the relation between faith and reason; and in this view, the human need to understand, judge and act reasonably – what will be considered, in Chapter 10, as the constitutive elements in an internalist dynamism – are operative also *during religious*

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<sup>294</sup> *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 4, a. 8 ad 2.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*

*assent*.) Thus if, for example, one finds in the narrative of Antonio Pickett, the gangster turned CeaseFire worker (case #20), the statement

Through it all, Tony's mother, Shirley Pickett, a loving but stern evangelical minister, had never stopped praying for him, *and the faith she always preached finally took hold.*<sup>296</sup>

one needs not conclude that Tony's moral conversion was the result exclusively of some (externalist-conceived) "blind" assent to religious notions about right/wrong. For one thing, this narrative indicates a variety of factors at play, many of which can support an internalist reading (e.g. Tony's growing awareness that this was a miserable sort of life, and that it was probably only going to become worse). For another, there is no reason to a priori conceive "his [Tony's] mother's faith," and in particular the moral notions related to this faith, as a set of notions ungrounded in understanding and reasonability, assented to by Tony in a "blind" manner.

To put the matter differently: assent given by faith does not conform to some canons of certainty, particularly to those of empiricism; but this fact does not support the conclusion that assent given by faith is therefore unintelligent or unreasonable. This conclusion would only be supported if one were willing to grant the truth of empiricism. Empiricism, however, has been sufficiently criticized as a view too narrow to properly explain human knowledge, and to normatively qualify it accordingly, and thus this claim needs not be considered here.

To conclude this chapter: It is possible to find narratives of conversion in which religious and moral conversions appear to be "blended" to such an extent that it becomes very difficult to determine what would be the most appropriate categorization for such

narratives. This happens when a narrative indicates changes with regard to moral matters, but also indicates assent to revelation, or supported by religious faith, as a potentially significant factor in the changes. There seem to be, however, no substantial reasons to consider this fact a methodological problem, given that it was not claimed at any point that categories of conversion have to be considered in exclusive terms. Rather, the potential for overlapping was acknowledged early during the course of this dissertation, as well as the explanatory convenience, argued by some, of considering conversion alternatively as a process that affects the whole person at different levels.

In second place, and with regard specifically to the proposed use of narratives of moral conversion as evidence for an internalist view of morality: the presence of factors that would allow a narrative to be characterized as an instance of *both* religious and moral conversion is not in and of itself sufficient reason to assume beforehand that, in the process described by that narrative, the elements of understanding/judgment of reasonability will not be present *because* they are precluded somehow by the religious/faith based character of the conversion. Such an assumption can only be based in a very narrow – and in some cases, rather shallow – understanding of the nature of religious assent, that, in considering essential to religious assent the rejection of understanding and reasonability as relevant to that assent, would be disregarding important areas of philosophical and theological thought on the matter.

On the other hand, the possibility that assent be given to moral content in a purely externalist manner is always present, even within an internalist view of morality;

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<sup>296</sup> Huppke, "Four Who Watch over the City."

therefore, it may be possible to find among narratives of both religious and moral conversion particular cases in which assent to moral truths will be given on the basis of “blind faith,” and disregarding to a great extent the demands of understanding and reasonability. The presence of these cases does not constitute in itself a problem for internalist views of morality, nor is there a methodological need to examine such narratives for the purposes of this dissertation.

With these considerations in mind, it is legitimate to incorporate into the project, and without misgivings, an analysis of narratives that contain rich moral elements, but which have been identified as markedly religious (such as those of Augustine, Merton and Thérèse of Lisieux), and also narratives that, while markedly moral, contain explicit religious elements too (such as those of the CeaseFire worker Antonio Pickett, Jackie Katounas, and most of the selected narratives concerning recovery from alcoholism).

## CHAPTER 7

### THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN MORAL CONVERSION AND THE GOALS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THERAPY

#### **1. *Three points of contact***

There are three points at which this analysis of moral conversion connects in important ways with the field of psychology. The first point of contact concerns the discussion, in the final chapter of this dissertation, regarding moral conversion as evidence for an internalist view of morality. This connection may be stated in simple terms by saying that psychological research is at present a very important source of methodically collected empirical data for the philosophical discussion about internalist and externalist theories of morality (and other related discussions).

But the connection between philosophy and psychology is more complex than this. Some areas of psychological research are so richly permeated by philosophical considerations, that what is psychology cannot be fully distinguished from what is philosophy; and this symbiotic state of affairs must be taken as it is by those who study in these areas. More relevant to this project is the fact that many regions of psychological research – even those that conform most rigorously to the canons of empirical research -

remain deeply influenced by a philosophical/anthropological standpoint that is indebted in most part to a positivist/physicalist model in the construction of psychological theories and in the interpretation of data. In turn, in a sort of reverse osmosis, this model has flooded philosophical method and philosophical theory in those areas that are studied by both disciplines. This positivist/physicalist model is to a great extent hostile to internalist views of morality. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 10.

A second point of contact concerns the growing field of psychological research known as the psychology of moral development. The varied developmental theories formulated within this field aim to describe the regularities displayed by human beings as they change their views and attitudes regarding morality. This research clearly has points in common with the present efforts to describe moral conversion. Thus, the relation between moral development as studied by psychological theories, and the notion of moral conversion examined in this work must be addressed. This will be done in Chapter 8.

A third point of contact concerns the relation between moral conversion and the field of psychological therapy. Psychological therapy attempts to accomplish something that is similar, at least in a first look, to moral conversion; for its aim is an important, hopefully lasting transformation of a person that will affect positively the person's attitudes and behavior. It is therefore important to distinguish or at least establish the relation between the topic of this philosophical project – moral conversion - and psychological therapy. This is the aim of this chapter.



## 2. *The notion of mental health*

One way of approaching this topic is by looking at the aim of psychological therapy. To clarify this, it is most useful to look first at the psychological profession's definition of "mental health." This is of particular importance because popular notions about the aims of psychological therapy are quite often colored conceptually with an undifferentiated mixture of notions from both psychology and moral conversion.<sup>297</sup>

A common pattern in psychology's reference literature defines "mental health" in terms of the removal of obstacles, i.e. a negative way of constructing the definition: what is looked for is that the person be able to live and interact with others, with a reasonable degree of freedom from paralyzing obstacles due to psychic or mental disorders. The *American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology*, for example, defines "mental health" as

a state of mind characterized by emotional well-being, good behavioral adjustment, relative freedom from anxiety and disabling symptoms, and capacity to establish constructive relationships and cope with the ordinary demands and stresses of life.<sup>298</sup>

In this definition of mental health, even some elements that appear to be positive reveal an implicit negative formulation upon closer examination: "freedom from anxiety and

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<sup>297</sup> Popular narratives about psychological therapy, such as the ones found in movies and television shows, often emphasize the moment of the "breakthrough" in which, due to a significant insight of some sort on the part of the patient, problems are resolved with a certain finality. While it is not impossible that this may happen (some classical examples of the effectiveness of psychoanalysis, for example, are described in such terms in the field's technical literature), it is significant that the notion of "breakthrough" is rarely used in psychological texts. A search for the term "breakthrough" in the dictionaries and encyclopedias of psychology only yielded one short entry in the APA Dictionary of Psychology, lending no support to the popular view that the "breakthrough" is an important moment in therapy.

<sup>298</sup> Gary R. VandenBos, ed., *A.P.A. Dictionary of Psychology* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007).

disabling symptoms”; “good behavioral adjustment” (“adjustment” meaning here the absence of conflict). The definition is in most part constructed by excluding the elements that identify a mental disease or mental disorder. “Mental disorder,” in turn, is defined as

A disorder characterized by psychological symptoms, abnormal behaviors, impaired functioning, or any combination of these. Such disorders may cause clinically significant distress and impairment in a variety of domains of functioning and may be due to organic, social, genetic, chemical or psychological factors.<sup>299</sup>

In the same source’s definition of “normality,” the negative character of the definition is even clearer:

Although there are no absolutes and there is considerable cultural variation, some flexible psychological and behavioral criteria can be suggested: (a) freedom from incapacitating internal conflicts; (b) the capacity to think and act in an organized and reasonably effective manner; (c) the ability to cope with the ordinary demands and problems of life; (d) freedom from extreme emotional distress, such as anxiety, despondency, and persistent upset; and (e) the absence of clear-cut symptoms of mental disorder, such as obsessions, phobias, confusion and disorientation.<sup>300</sup>

A review of some of the standard psychological reference literature confirms this as the typical approach to the field’s understanding of mental health. The *Concise Encyclopedia of Psychology*, for example, states in fact that there is in systematic psychology a striking absence of an explicit theory of healthy personality.<sup>301</sup> This is explained partly because research on health seems less useful than research on disorders, since “people who function constructively and productively do not jeopardize civilization”;<sup>302</sup> and partly as an effect of the fact that it is easier to identify the

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Raymond J. Corsini and Alan J. Auerbach, eds., *Concise Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2nd ed., abridged ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998). S.v. “Healthy Personality.” In fact, in some of the references consulted, not only the expression “mental health” but also its alternative formulations were completely absent.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

phenomena of abnormality and bring them under the control of the investigator (and possibly the therapist). The result is that “theories of healthy personality are mostly derived by implication from theories of disordered personality.”<sup>303</sup> Nevertheless, a few positive traits are sometimes named; for example:

Healthy people continuously expand their consciousness of themselves, other people, and the world; increase their competence to fulfill basic needs; grow in response to threat; and develop realistic and satisfying roles and interpersonal relationships.<sup>304</sup>

The positive traits that are identified – that is, those that go beyond a “neutral” sort of equilibrium, such as “stability,” “adjustment,” or “conformity” - seem to coalesce into two general categories; either integration and harmony, or “flourishing” and the actualization of one’s potential and capacities.<sup>305</sup> Even the latter, though, may be partially cast in terms of an absence of paralyzing disorder, as in the A.P.A.’s definition of “flourishing”:

a condition denoting good mental and physical health: the state of being free from illness and distress but, more important, of being filled with vitality and functioning well in one’s personal and social life.<sup>306</sup>

The A.P.A.’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) also lacks an explicit theory of healthy personality, though this is to be expected given the

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> VandenBos, ed., *A.P.A. Dictionary of Psychology*. A slightly different approach can be found in D. W. Peters and J. D. Carter, "Healthy Personality," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling*, ed. David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999). In what could be characterized as representative of a Christian approach to psychology (an approach that surfaces with some frequency in the area of personality theory), a number of positive factors are mentioned as representative of a healthy personality, which sometimes coincide with, sometimes add to those already mentioned. Such factors are listed in summary form as “having a realistic view of oneself and others, accepting oneself and others, living in the present but being informed by the past and the future, possessing guiding values, and developing one’s abilities and interests so as to cope with the task of living” (Ibid., 547).

Manual's explicit focus on categorizing and diagnosis of mental disorders. The Manual does elaborate a bit on the definition of mental disorder, emphasizing what could be called the need for a "contextual" diagnosis: in order to be categorized as a disorder, the syndrome or pattern identified must be associated with present distress or disability, or with a significant risk of death, pain, disability or loss of freedom;<sup>307</sup> in addition, the actual or potential distress must not be "merely an expectable and culturally sanctioned response to a particular event, for example, the death of a loved one."<sup>308</sup> Finally, it must be considered "a manifestation of a behavioral, psychological, or biological dysfunction in the individual."<sup>309</sup> The Manual also establishes criteria for clinical significance, insisting that there be clinically significant impairment or distress, so that the symptomatic presentation by itself is not considered "inherently pathological, and may be encountered in individuals for whom a diagnosis of 'mental disorder' would be inappropriate."<sup>310</sup>

Accordingly, the Manual does not provide any attempt to define mental health or a healthy personality. There is, however, operative in the Manual, an implicit notion of "health," as adequate functioning and the absence of clinically significant destructive tendencies. This can be gathered from its "Global Assessment of Functioning" (GAF) scale, which establishes grading criteria that range from (at the lowest end) persistent danger of severely hurting self or others and inability to maintain minimal personal

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<sup>307</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), xxi.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. To highlight the importance of this criterion, it is usually included specifically in the individual description for each disorder.

hygiene, to serious or moderate impairment in social, occupational or school functioning, to (at the highest end) absent or minimal symptoms, good or superior functioning in a wide range of activities, social effectiveness, general satisfaction with life, “no more than everyday problems of concerns,” or even the fact that “life’s problems never seem to get out of hand.”<sup>311</sup>

### **3. *Therapeutic psychology and moral conversion***

#### **A. The focus on happiness**

This brief survey yields a notion of mental health, as the aim of psychological therapy, that can now be compared to what a person arrives at through the process of moral conversion. (The operative assumption here, of course, is that the general reference literature is truly representative of the way in which psychologists and psychotherapists see their own discipline and the function of therapy. In practice their methods and goals may vary, and may incorporate elements that might be more appropriately regarded as belonging to moral, or possibly intellectual conversion. A more detailed exploration of psychology’s and psychotherapy’s understandings in this regard would involve extensive study beyond the scope of this dissertation.)

How does this notion of mental health as the goal of therapy compare with moral conversion? The notion of “moral” that focuses on happiness and the meaning of life will be discussed first. A general way of formulating the relation between happiness and the goals of therapeutic psychology is that psychologists attempt to help the person establish

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 32.

some of the *necessary conditions* for happiness. In other words, therapeutic psychology normally focuses on *means*, on developing “mental health” as a chief requisite for achieving happiness. In this sense, the therapeutic setting can be considered a privileged environment for the occurrence of moral conversion regarding happiness, but the normal focus of the therapy itself is on developing the healthy mental dispositions that make happiness possible.

A comparison with Aristotle’s treatment of *eudaemonia* offers some help in understanding the relation between the two spheres. Aristotle defined *eudaemonia* (his term for happiness) as an “activity of the soul,” especially the activity of the “highest part” of the soul.<sup>312</sup> This activity, according to Aristotle, depends on a number of conditions – some degree of health, wealth, friends, leisure time, etc. – but these do not constitute happiness: they make possible the type of activities that bring happiness, and in their absence, happiness becomes impossible, or at least quite hard to achieve. In a similar manner, therapeutic psychology seems to take the view that mental health – or, in its alternative formulation, a “healthy personality” – makes it possible for the person to identify and engage in whatever it is that may bring happiness. Or in a negative formulation, mental health implies the absence of obstacles and hindrances that oppose the possibility of identifying and participating in or achieving happiness, such as paralyzing anxiety, lack of confidence, or the inability to interact normally with other human beings. These are clearly grounds for a potentially close relation between

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<sup>312</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 7.

therapeutic psychological practice and moral conversion regarding happiness.<sup>313</sup>

As has been discussed in Chapter 5, moral conversion can be understood in one (or more) of three ways concerning the person's orientation towards happiness: as a shift in content, a shift in attitude, or a shift in the person's coherence between convictions/attitude and actual behavior. In terms of *content*, the general standard of practice (consistent with the characteristics indicated above, when discussing definitions of mental health) is for psychologists to keep their distance from explicit statements on *content* with regard to happiness and the meaning of life. Thus, even a psychologist like Viktor Frankl, who has given a central place in his therapeutic model to explicit reflection on the meaning of life, emphatically states that it is not the place of the psychologist to make concrete declarations in this respect, i.e. about *content* regarding the meaning of life. Instead,

The logotherapist's role consists in widening and broadening the visual field of the patient so that the whole spectrum of potential meaning becomes conscious and visible to him.<sup>314</sup>

But while psychologists may methodologically restrict themselves from suggesting or imposing specific content to the patient, they may deem it necessary to prompt in the patient a revision of current content. Some models of therapeutic practice, for example (Frankl's "logotherapy" is one), consider a deficit or a vacuum with regard to existential meaning (or some comparable content) as the root or cause of symptoms that express themselves in the form of anxiety, neurosis and other conditions that are properly within

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<sup>313</sup> Aristotle's specific account of what are the activities of the soul and which are "highest" is often in contrast with the typically more open-ended account of therapeutic psychology; but that contrast is less informative for present purposes than Aristotle's focus on ends as contrasted with psychology's more instrumental focus, i.e. on the means needed to attain happiness.

<sup>314</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 132-133.

the realm of psychological therapy. The more a psychological theory incorporates these considerations, the more frequently the therapeutic setting will become an environment for the revision of notions related to happiness and the meaning of life, and possibly therefore an environment for moral conversion. It is clear, however, that not all forms of therapeutic psychology have this focus, and having it is not a necessary feature of professional therapeutic practice. So the distinction between therapeutic psychology and moral conversion remains unchallenged by these examples.

Similar reflections arise when therapeutic psychology is compared to moral conversion regarding happiness/*eudaemonia*/meaning in terms of attitude or behavioral coherence (the second and third classes). Successful therapy may *remove obstacles* that impede normal function (e.g. self-deprecating or self-destructive tendencies, unjustified guilt, etc.), and as a consequence, the person may be freed to revise his or her attitude regarding the question of happiness and the meaning of life, or may be freed from conditions that impede achieving a deeper level of coherence between conviction and action. Conversely, situations such as a deficient focus on meaning and happiness or a pronounced dichotomy between convictions and behavior (e.g. believing that happiness lies on a certain path, but being forced by a life situation to do something different) have been identified as significant factors in the development of some mental disorders.<sup>315</sup> As a consequence, the therapeutic setting would naturally become a privileged space for revising attitude or behavioral coherence with regard to happiness and the meaning of

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<sup>315</sup> See for example Eugenio Fizzoti, *De Freud a Frankl* (Madrid: EUNSA, 1977); Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 145-157.



life. This said, however, the emphasis in therapeutic psychology remains on these factors as *means* to happiness and on the removal of obstacles to the achievement of happiness. Instead, the focus of moral conversion, the direct object of the process of moral conversion, is in attaining *eudaemonia* or happiness itself. The convert typically does not achieve it wholly in one jump, but the initial steps, from the perspective of moral conversion, are the first experience of the end, that is, are not experienced as merely creating conditions for its achievement.

### B. The focus on right/wrong

A similar reflection can be advanced regarding the relation between mental health as the goal of psychological therapy, and moral conversion in its focus on right/wrong. It is generally regarded as good therapeutic practice that the psychologist methodically abstain from judgments regarding the content of right/wrong, and in this sense, psychological therapy is neither directly concerned with moral practice, nor with moral conversion in particular.

Nevertheless, some connections can be identified between the content of convictions regarding right/wrong, a person's attitude towards moral obligation, and/or coherence on the one hand, and the emergence of mental disorders that are the proper object of psychological therapy on the other. The problem of guilt, for example, a fundamentally moral emotion, has a central place in the history and development of modern psychological therapy and science, particularly in psychoanalysis. As a consequence, it is to be expected that the content of moral notions, the person's attitude

towards moral obligation, and specific issues of (in)coherence between convictions and behavior will be a matter of concern for the therapist to prompt reflection on, and so are bound to arise in the therapeutic environment. Therefore also in this sense, i.e. right/wrong, there is the potentiality in psychological therapy for enhancing the probability of moral conversion.

In no case, however, are the goals of psychological therapy formulated in terms of making people “morally better,” in the right/wrong sense. Psychological therapists do not attempt to make their patients more honest, responsible, or better at fulfilling their obligations on such grounds, i.e. that it is the goal of their profession to make people “behave better.” If any such negative dispositions are addressed, it will be on the grounds that such dispositions interfere with the development of mental health, create undue conflict in the psyche, or generally function as an obstacle to the patient’s happiness. The distinction between moral conversion regarding right/wrong and the goals of psychological therapy is in this sense even more clear than that between the goals of therapy and moral conversion regarding happiness.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> The distinction between the goals of psychological therapy and moral conversion regarding right/wrong may be made clearer, perhaps, by considering the contrast between therapy and the Christian sacrament of confession, as traditionally practiced. In the latter, the penitent addresses explicitly their actions in terms of right/wrong, how the recurrence of such actions indicate negative dispositions or habits, and must express, as one of the operative requisites, the resolution to amend such habits. Moral conversion in terms of right/wrong is not the main purpose of confession thus conceived – the main purpose is the absolution of the penitent’s sins – but it is directly intended, especially as a potential effect of the frequent practice of this sacrament.

## Conclusion

To sum up, psychological therapy aimed at mental health and psychological research about it are potentially useful to the process of moral conversion (and there is also the possibility of benefit in the other direction, though there has been no need to stress this point here). For the therapeutic environment can become a privileged space for moral reflection that can launch or foster a process of moral conversion. But such contingent practical links between therapeutic psychology and moral conversion do not indicate their equivalence conceptually, which is the key point for present purposes, nor do they indicate that these processes are identical practically either.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Lonergan scholars have studied in particular detail the relation between moral conversion and what they call “affective (also ‘psychological’) conversion” (see Chapter 3, above). Though some of these scholars have explicitly employed this category for an analysis of the goals and results of psychological therapy, the consensus seems to be that the category of affective conversion is not limited exclusively to the environment of mental therapy, but rather, that it is a broader category, of useful application for the purposes of understanding the goals of psychological therapy.

CHAPTER 8

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN MORAL CONVERSION  
AND NORMAL MORAL DEVELOPMENT:  
MORAL CONVERSION AS AN EXISTENTIAL EVENT

**1. Introduction**

As was explained in the previous chapter, the process of moral conversion cannot be understood properly without placing it within the context of recent discoveries and achievements in the field of developmental psychology. A variety of theoretical models have been put forward that distinguish different stages of moral development, regarding different but overlapping aspects of a person's moral life. Many of these models have been corroborated to some extent by progressively more sophisticated empirical research, sufficiently so in fact that it now seems safe to say, as a standing achievement of psychological research, that human beings do not remain the same during their whole life – not even during their whole *adult* life - with respect to their structures of moral reasoning and moral judgment, their structures of value, and other areas related to moral development. Findings in some of these areas have been remarkably consistent across the

field, even when empirical research has been based on widely different theoretical models, keeping in mind that, partly because of the newness of this branch of psychology and of psychology in general and partly because of the complex methodology that the relevant tests involve, the empirical base has generally been small and not very diverse. Nevertheless there has been a considerable consensus across the work of numerous researchers.<sup>318</sup>

Clearly, the notion of moral conversion as a relatively rare, even extraordinary event must be confronted with the discovery that important structural changes in a person's moral life, including their moral reasoning, are common, and not only common but cross-cultural, as Kohlbergian research suggests,<sup>319</sup> and therefore to be expected in a person's normal development. The task then is to articulate and distinguish the concepts of *moral development* and *moral conversion*. This will be done by looking at the best known of these theories, Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which structures moral reasoning into a six-stage progression.

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<sup>318</sup> While the focus of the first part of this chapter will be on Kohlberg's theory of moral development, it should be noted that a cursory look at alternative theories of moral development - such as those of Durkheim, Havighurst, Erikson, William Perry and others - shows substantial agreement that human beings progress through different stages of moral life in more or less predictable patterns. The differences between these theories can be in most cases attributed to differences in their focus of research rather than to disagreement on this basic fact. See, for example, John Martin Rich and Joseph L. DeVitis, *Theories of Moral Development* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1985).

<sup>319</sup> Ronald E. Galbraith and Thomas M. Jones, *Moral Reasoning: A Teaching Handbook for Adapting Kohlberg to the Classroom* (Minneapolis: Greenhaven Press, 1976), 32; James Rest, "Background: Theory and Research," in *Moral Development in the Professions*, ed. James Rest and Darcia Narváez (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Assocs., 1994).

## 2. Kohlberg's stages of moral development

Kohlberg's theory is chosen for this comparison with moral conversion because it is currently by far the most developed and intensely researched among psychological theories of moral development.<sup>320</sup> In addition, Kohlberg's theory is also the theory focused on when scholars specifically compare moral development and conversion, as will be considered in the proper place. Kohlberg's theory is not without its critics (most famously Carol Gilligan, but also many others),<sup>321</sup> challenging both his theoretical structure and his empirical methodology; but because of the very lively state of Kohlbergian studies a good number of these criticisms have been met or have been incorporated into more recent formulations of Kohlberg's theory.

Kohlberg's standard methodology consists in presenting his research subject with a number of moral dilemmas, about which the subject has to resolve what ought to be done. This is followed by an interview, in which the reasoning behind the subject's decisions is

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<sup>320</sup> Practically every author that considers Kohlberg has to present at a certain point an outline of his stage theory. Kohlberg himself discusses it in Lawrence Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought: How to Commit the Naturalistic Fallacy and Get Away with It in the Study of Moral Development," in *Cognitive Development and Epistemology*, ed. T. Mischel (New York: 1971); Lawrence Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Growth," in *Values and Moral Development*, ed. Thomas C. Hennessy (New York: Paulist Press, 1976). Other useful sources are Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 43; Galbraith and Jones, *Moral Reasoning*, 32; Thomas Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Behavior* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), 197; Rest, "Background: Theory and Research," 4-9; Rich and DeVitis, *Theories of Moral Development*, 87; Thomas E. Wren, *Caring About Morality: Philosophical Perspectives in Moral Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 141-143. The precise interpretation of the meaning of these stages is often developed and phrased in subtly varying ways from author to author, which may be explained as the result of this theory being itself at an early stage of development, and also, perhaps, as a natural consequence of the explanatory richness of Kohlberg's articulation of the stages, which allows for his theory to be developed in many directions.

<sup>321</sup> John Gibbs summarizes some of these criticisms in this way: Kohlberg's stage theory is "ethnocentric (Simpson, 1974), ideological (Sullivan, 1977), elitist (Frankel, 1978), restrictively abstract (Aron, 1977a, 1977b; Gilligan, 1977), and perniciously individualistic (Hogan, 1975; Reid and Yanarella, 1977)." (John C. Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Moral Stage Theory: A Piagetian Revision," *Human Development*, no. 22 [1979]: 90). Gibbs himself is sympathetic to Kohlberg's theory, arguing that "although Kohlberg's theory is in fact ailing from these excesses, it will be fine once its proportions return to those of its proper constitutional frame." (Ibid.)

elicited. The decisions themselves are not the real focus of the analysis, but rather the reasoning processes that led to them, as far as they can be elucidated in the interview. The subject is also interviewed on various further occasions over time, enabling the researchers to periodically track changes in the subject's moral reasoning. Using this method, Kohlberg and his colleagues have formulated a theory of moral reasoning, charting and categorizing it into six stages that are grouped by pairs into three "levels" of moral reasoning.

Perhaps more important than the categorization made possible by this research is the consistent finding that the stages seem to progress following an invariant sequence; that is, stages are not skipped (one does not progress from stage 2 to stage 4 without having gone through stage 3), and the progression proceeds in one direction only (a subject that reaches a certain stage does not return to numerically lower stages). Cross-cultural studies have found this sequence repeated consistently up to stage 4 in a variety of countries and cultures. However, cross-cultural studies have not been able to establish with the same consistency the presence of stages 5 and 6 (the "postconventional" or third level of moral reasoning).<sup>322</sup> This absence has important implications that are examined below.

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<sup>322</sup> John C. Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development: A Constructive Critique," *Harvard Educational Review* 47, no. 1 (1977): 50; James Rest, "Morality," in *Handbook of Child Psychology*, ed. John H. Flavell and Ellen M. Markman (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1983), 583; Rest, "Background: Theory and Research," 18-20; Rich and DeVitis, *Theories of Moral Development*, 87-89.

### Placing Kohlberg's research in context

It should be mentioned that it is clearly acknowledged among Kohlbergians that Kohlberg's empirical research only reaches a particular aspect of moral life.<sup>323</sup> James Rest, for example, has expressed interest in identifying other aspects of moral life that may in due time receive similar treatment (that is, that models may be formulated that allow for an empirical analysis of those aspects, possibly leading to the formulation of developmental stage-structures for that specific aspect of moral life). Thus Rest identifies four "psychological components of moral behavior":<sup>324</sup>

Moral sensitivity: the awareness of how our actions affect other people; awareness of the moral issues being at stake in a certain situation.

Moral judgment (also "moral reasoning"): once the situation is assessed, judging which line of action is just, or right.

Moral motivation: as Rest formulates it, this is the problem of how values are prioritized – particularly, of how or why those actions regarded as morally required are prioritized over those that are not, or why the opposite takes place.

Moral character: the problem of why, even if moral values are regarded as a priority, the person may fail to act accordingly (or consistently act accordingly).<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Rest, "Morality," 563-569; Rest, "Background: Theory and Research," 22.

<sup>324</sup> Rest, "Background: Theory and Research," 22-25.

<sup>325</sup> Rest's classification shows interesting correlations with the three classes of moral conversion identified in Chapter 5. The first class, *moral conversion regarding content*, can be correlated to Rest's first and second components of moral life, *moral sensitivity* and *moral judgment/reasoning*: shifts both in criteria for reasoning and in awareness to specific moral issues would fall under this class. The second class, *conversion regarding attitude towards right/wrong and the meaning of life* can be correlated to Rest's third component of moral life, *moral motivation*. This component, though essentially outside the focus of the Kohlbergian model, has been approached by Kohlberg, who talks about the problem of *akrasia*, the gap between knowledge of what is right/wrong and taking action (Haste, "Moral Responsibility and Moral



The second component, that Rest identifies as “moral judgment,” and only *this* component, is the developmental element on which Kohlberg’s research has focused, the component of moral life that is assessed by his method. It should be clear that Kohlberg’s stage structure is presented here only as a specific example of psychological empirical research on moral development, and not as all that there is to know about psychology of moral development. Kohlberg’s model is clearly not intended as a comprehensive framework. But for present purposes it works as a very accessible illustration of a developmental stage-structure, against which to contrast what will be called “an existential event,” i.e. moral conversion.

### A description of Kohlberg’s stages of moral reasoning

Kohlberg identifies six stages that are grouped into three levels of two stages each. The three levels are called *preconventional*, *conventional* and *postconventional*.

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Commitment," 326); and Kohlbergians, as in McNamee’s famous study that established a correlation between stages of moral reasoning and actual response to a person in distress (Sharie McNamee, "Moral Behaviour, Moral Development and Motivation," *Journal of Moral Education* 7, no. 1 [1978]). Finally, the third class of moral conversion, *conversion regarding coherence between convictions and behavior*, can be correlated with Rest’s fourth component, *moral character*. In this area researchers from various schools have explored categories such as resistance to distraction, “ego strength,” assertiveness, expertise in the task at hand, empathic capacity, etc., attempting to find correlations between the development of these factors and an increased incidence of behavior matching moral convictions. The limited conclusion that these studies warrant at this point seems to be that an increased degree of behavioral coherence may be achieved indirectly by fostering developmentally a diversity of personality factors. See P.F. Grim, Lawrence Kohlberg and S. H. White, “Some Relationships between Conscience and Attentional Processes,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* no.8 (1968), 239-252; R. L. Krebs, “Some Relations Between Moral Judgment, Attention, and Resistance to Temptation.” Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1967; D. E. Barret and M. R. Yarrow, “Prosocial Behavior, Social Inferential Ability, and Assertiveness in Children,” *Child Development*, no. 48 (1977), 475-481; Ted Huston and Chuck Korte, "The Responsive Bystander: Why He Helps," in *Moral Development and Behavior*, ed. Thomas Lickona (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976).

### Level I: The preconventional level of moral reasoning

At the preconventional level, the person (at this level, usually a child)

is responsive to cultural rules and labels of good and bad, right or wrong, but interprets these labels either in terms of the physical or the hedonistic consequences of action (punishment, reward, exchange of favors) or in terms of the physical power of those who enunciate the rules and labels.<sup>326</sup>

Within the preconventional level, two stages can be distinguished: Stage 1

(“Heteronomous morality,” or “punishment-and-obedience orientation”)<sup>327</sup> and Stage 2

(“Individualism, instrumental purpose and exchange”)<sup>328</sup>

At Stage 1, the goodness and badness of an action is principally determined by its physical consequences, apart from the meaning or value of these consequences.<sup>329</sup> The reasons for doing what is right are to avoid physical damage to persons and property, and the understanding of “right-ness” is tied to “avoidance of punishment, and the superior power of authorities.” The agent’s point of view is characterized as fundamentally egocentric: the point of view of others – as centers of their own egocentric demands - is seldom considered, and there is even confusion between the interests of others and the agent’s, and between the authority’s point of view and the agent’s own.<sup>330</sup> If the agent actually has views – undifferentiated as these may be – about others’ interests, these are

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<sup>326</sup> Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Growth," 2-3.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 197; Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Behavior*. The names given to the six stages – unlike the names given to the three levels – is not absolutely consistent throughout the relevant literature, due to successive attempts, by Kohlberg and others, to tinker with the description of the stages entailed by the titles. Gibbs, for example, gives the stages extended names: “Justifying moral prescriptions or evaluations by appeal to the physical consequences and literal features of an action” for Stage 1, and so forth (Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," 45).

<sup>328</sup> Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Behavior*, 197.

<sup>329</sup> Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Growth."

<sup>330</sup> Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Behavior*, 197.

generally conceived as operating in terms as narrow as the agent's. Furthermore, this stage seems to be characterized by attention to the concrete or literal aspects of an act ("he was caught stealing, so he has to go to jail") rather than to the intentions of the agent<sup>331</sup> - a fact that in children may be explainable by the child's inability to grasp different personal perspectives at his/her present cognitive level.<sup>332</sup>

At Stage 2 there is a developing awareness that others have their own points of view and their particular interests.<sup>333</sup> "Right action" at this stage is what instrumentally satisfies the agent's own needs (and occasionally the needs of others)<sup>334</sup>; moral prescriptions or evaluations are justified by appeal to pragmatic needs and instrumental intentions ("lying doesn't get you anywhere, it leads to more lies"; "you will get caught anyway").<sup>335</sup> The agent's immediate interest is primary, although elements of fairness and reciprocity can also begin to enter into consideration (marking a development from the egocentrism characteristic of Stage 1). Thus "right" is understood as "what is fair"; but "what is fair" is understood to a great extent in terms of the agent's concrete interests. However, there is a developing recognition that others have their own interests too, and a progressive understanding of "what is fair" as what lets others meet their own interests too.

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<sup>331</sup> Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," 45.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Behavior*, 197.

<sup>334</sup> Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Growth."

<sup>335</sup> Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," 46.

## Level II: The conventional level of moral reasoning

Level II (stages 3 and 4) is called the conventional level: at this level the agent regards him/herself as part of the community and its social order.

Maintaining the expectations of the individual's family, group, or nation is perceived as valuable in its own right, regardless of immediate and obvious consequences. The attitude is not only one of *conformity* to personal expectations and social order, but of loyalty to it, of actively *maintaining*, supporting, and justifying the order, and of identifying with the persons or group involved in it.<sup>336</sup>

Stage 3 is characterized by *mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships and interpersonal conformity*.<sup>337</sup> The individual's perspective has now expanded to attribute a high degree of prominence to relationships with others. The key factor seems to be the need to be a good person in one's own eyes and those of others. This includes living up to what is expected by people close to one, or generally expected of one's roles (good friend, good son, a person that can be trusted, a "nice" neighbor, i.e. pleasant and helpful, etc.) These expectations now frequently take precedence over the individual's interests and instrumental reasons; and moral judgment is therefore extended to good motives and good intentions. Rules and authority are now very important because they identify and support "stereotypical good behavior."<sup>338</sup>

At Stage 3 the agent's perspective, though, is still focused on a fairly closed circle, the "interpersonal," i.e. the people that are known through direct personal interaction; it is not generalized enough to consider with equal prominence more extended social systems. This expanded perspective is achieved in Stage 4 (named, in different places, "social

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<sup>336</sup> Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Growth."

<sup>337</sup> Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Behavior*, 197.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*

system and conscience,”<sup>339</sup> “the law and order orientation,”<sup>340</sup> “appeal to societal requirements and values”<sup>341</sup>). At Stage 4 the agent can differentiate between societal concerns and the narrower, interpersonal considerations, points of view and motives. The agent can now take the point of view of the larger social systems of which individual and narrower interpersonal relations are a part. “Right action” consists in fulfilling social duties and generally supporting society and its institutions. Laws must be upheld “except in extreme cases where they conflict with other fixed social duties”<sup>342</sup>; avoiding the breakdown of the institutions and the social system is prominent among the reasons for acting one way rather than another. The agent may, for example, restrain his/her own interests by considering what would happen at the systemic level “if everyone did the same,” but “everyone” here refers to participants in the actual social systems that include the agent and his/her more direct interpersonal relationships.

### Level III: The postconventional level of moral reasoning

Level III is called the “postconventional,” autonomous, or principled level.

Kohlberg describes it in general terms as follows:

At this level, there is a clear effort to define moral values and principles that have validity and application apart from the authority of the groups or persons holding these principles and apart from the individual’s own identification with these groups.<sup>343</sup>

Here again, two stages (5 and 6 of moral development) may be distinguished within this level. Stage 5 is characterized as the stage of the “social contract,” although Kohlberg

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Growth."

<sup>341</sup> Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," 47.

<sup>342</sup> Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Behavior*, 197.

<sup>343</sup> Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Growth."

attaches utilitarian overtones and considerations of individual rights to it as well. Characteristic to this stage is the awareness that other people may hold very diverse values and opinions from one's own, and of the potential conflicts that may ensue as a consequence. A central aim of social effort at this stage is to reach consensus through procedural rules, with the purpose of integrating conflicting interests. Kohlberg notes that the pragmatic efforts to integrate these conflicting interests and points of view are frequently expressed in utilitarian terms. But aside from what is "democratically" agreed upon, what is "right" is not at this stage a matter of universal values: it is a matter of achieving consensus among personal values and moral opinions.<sup>344</sup> Kohlberg's characterization of the agent at this stage stresses his/her individuality; his/hers it is the perspective "of a rational *individual* aware of values and rights prior to social attachments and contracts."<sup>345</sup>

Stage 6 is characterized as "the universal-ethical-principle orientation."<sup>346</sup>

Kohlberg's general description is:

Right is defined by the decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen *ethical principles* appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Rule, the categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments.<sup>347</sup>

At Stage 6 social arrangements are regarded as deriving from a universal "moral point of view", a perspective that any rational being would theoretically recognize, and, more importantly, *choose*. A (Kantian) element that is sometimes lost in the descriptions

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

<sup>345</sup> Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Behavior*, 197. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>346</sup> Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Growth."

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

of Stage 6 is that these ethical principles, which are moral standards for all rational beings, are “self-chosen.” This element is emphasized when commentators consider the “post-conventional” aspect of this level of development (as opposed to the “conventional” level, in which the agent essentially adopts societal standards with very little inclination to criticize them from a more universalized point of view). Particular laws and social systems and rules are considered to derive their validity from such principles: if a law violated these principles, for example, one should act in accordance with the universal principles rather than the law.<sup>348</sup>

Though the principles that distinguish this stage are formulated by Kohlberg in mainly formal terms, he also attempts to convert these principles to standard moral concepts:

At heart, these are universal principles of *justice*, of the *reciprocity* and *equality* of human *rights*, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as *individual persons*.<sup>349</sup>

As it might be expected, there has been significant philosophical debate about Kohlberg’s description of moral reasoning at stages 5 and 6, and about Kohlberg’s proposal that these are the highest stages of ordinary human moral development. For our present purposes, however, this literature will be discussed only insofar as it contributes to the topics of this dissertation; other kinds of criticisms (or defenses) of Kohlberg’s claims about moral life are outside the scope of this project. However, examining a discussion between Gibbs and Conn about which of Kohlberg’s six stages can be really considered “stages” in the technical sense of the word (i.e. as established by Piaget) will

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<sup>348</sup> Lickona, ed., *Moral Development and Behavior*, 197.

<sup>349</sup> Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Growth."

shed light on whether moral conversion involves a decision that is conscious and, in the terms that will be developed here, *existentialist*.

### **3. The “natural” vs. “existential” distinction**

#### Conn and Gibbs on the Piagetian logic of Kohlberg’s structure

There are not many direct links in the literature between theories of moral development and theories of moral conversion. The best source in this regard is Walter Conn, who has produced a number of articles linking various theories of moral development to the Lonerganian notion of moral conversion.<sup>350</sup> Specifically regarding the possible link between Kohlberg’s theories and moral conversion, Conn discusses the matter at length in his book *Christian Conversion*.<sup>351</sup> A great portion of this discussion involves Conn’s critique of an article by John Gibbs,<sup>352</sup> which is in turn critical of Kohlberg. Understanding the points of dispute between these two scholars will unavoidably take the present discussion along something of a detour; but it will eventually shed important light on the issue of how, if at all, moral conversion can be distinguished from normal moral development.

Two fundamental characteristics of Kohlberg’s stage-structure have already been indicated. Kohlberg holds that the movement through the stages follows a sequence that is invariant (no skipping of stages) and unidirectional (no “falling back” to earlier

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<sup>350</sup> Conn, "Passionate Commitment: The Dynamics of Affective Conversion."; Walter E. Conn, "The Desire for Authenticity: Conscience and Moral Conversion," in *The Desires of the Human Heart*, ed. Vernon Gregson (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).

<sup>351</sup> Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 107-134.

<sup>352</sup> Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Moral Stage Theory: A Piagetian Revision."



stages).<sup>353</sup> It is regularly noted, however, that significant individual differences have been found regarding the *rate* (i.e. at what age) of the subjects' movement through the stages.<sup>354</sup>

Invariability and unidirectionality, however, are only two of five *empirical stage criteria* proposed by Jean Piaget in his original proposals about stage developmental theories.<sup>355</sup> Is Kohlberg's structure consistent with Piaget's original conception of a stage structure? The question is considered by John Gibbs' in his article "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development: A Constructive Critique."<sup>356</sup> Gibbs claims that Piaget's empirical stage criteria establish the standards for corroborating the actual presence of developmental stages, so that the proper empirical corroboration of Kohlberg's stage theory depends on conformity to Piaget's criteria for all stages in the theory. But, claims Gibbs, this is not the case.

Gibbs outlines the five empirical criteria proposed by Piaget as follows:

1. *Underlying generality*: evidence must be found that a given response (characteristic of a certain stage) represents an underlying, more general "thought-organization"<sup>357</sup> That is, responses characteristic of a given stage are not the results of localized stimulus-response learning, but expressions of an underlying structure. In

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<sup>353</sup> Galbraith and Jones, *Moral Reasoning*, 32.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 33. As will be discussed below, there is a significant drop in the ratio of adults reasoning at the post-conventional level (less than 20% according to Galbraith and Jones, *Moral Reasoning*, 33). The significance of this, it will be proposed below, is the possibility that moral conversion may be needed to reach the higher stages of moral development.

<sup>355</sup> Jean Piaget, *Biology and Knowledge: An Essay on the Relations between Organic Regulations and Cognitive Processes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

<sup>356</sup> Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development."

<sup>357</sup> Piaget, *Biology and Knowledge: An Essay on the Relations between Organic Regulations and Cognitive Processes*, 181.

practical terms, the relevant tests should be designed to bring to light the presence of such a structure, and weed out “learned responses” to specific questions.<sup>358</sup>

2. *Upward directionality and stability.* The Piagetian conception of a “stage” is unidirectional. Evidence must be found that movement from a stage to the next has a marked tendency to go in one direction only. In practical terms, for example, tests should be designed to determine that subjects that were in Stage 2 are later found in Stage 3 or higher, and have not reverted indiscriminately to Stage 1.

Note that, according to this criterion, the implication is that persons in a certain stage may be conceived as *dynamically inclined or moving towards the following stage*. This teleologically-oriented conception can be contrasted with (and proposed as explanatorily richer than) the “static” conception of a subject that is every now and then jolted towards the following stage. As a point of empirical corroboration, subjects in Kohlbergian tests are generally found to have characteristics of both lower and higher stages.<sup>359</sup> Galbraith and Jones, for example, have proposed that development occurs because of an attraction to the next higher stage of reasoning:

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<sup>358</sup> In this description of the five criteria, I follow closely Gibbs’ terminology. In my own comments following the description of some of these criteria, I have tried to bring to light the scientific conception underlying the criteria proposed by Piaget/Gibbs, which is in turn in close consonance with the scientific view of the universe proposed by Lonergan’s theory of emergent probability. That is, the view of science implied in the Piaget/Gibbs criteria is defensible within a philosophy of science as developed by Lonergan. See Lonergan, *Insight*, 144; Kenneth R. Melchin, *History, Ethics, and Emergent Probability: Ethics, Society, and History in the Work of Bernard Lonergan* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987).

<sup>359</sup> The relevant literature is covered by Gibbs, “Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development,” 49. See also A. Bandura and F. McDonald, “The Influence of Social Reinforcement and the Behavior of Models in Shaping Children’s Moral Judgments,” *Journal of abnormal and social psychology*, no. 67 (1963); P. A. Cowan and others, “Social Learning and Piaget’s Cognitive Theory of Moral Development,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, no. 11 (1969); James Rest, “The Hierarchical Nature of Moral Judgment: A Study of Patterns of Comprehension and Preference of Moral Stages,” *Journal of personality*, no. 41 (1973); James Rest, E. Turiel, and Lawrence Kohlberg, “Level of Moral Development as a Determinant of Preference and Comprehension of Moral Judgments Made by Others,” *Journal of personality*, no. 37 (1969).

An individual has the capacity to comprehend reasoning presented at the next higher stage of development. Since the reasoning may appear more logical and comprehensive and, therefore, more adequate in the face of a dilemma situation, individuals may be attracted to the next stage of reasoning. This does not mean that the higher stage is always adopted or even verbalized, but that the listener may begin to incorporate elements of the higher stage in future solutions to moral problems.<sup>360</sup>

3. *Rates of stage development increase in an experientially rich environment.* With respect to stages of moral development, this criterion asks about the presence of a “socially rich” environment. Research has indicated, for example, that there is an increased tendency to move to higher stages in the presence of conditions such as a child’s interaction with adults who place themselves “on the child’s own level, and give him a feeling of equality by laying stress on one’s own obligations,”<sup>361</sup> or similar experiences of increased opportunities for role-taking.<sup>362</sup>

Implied in the description of this stage, it should be noted, is Piaget’s conception of learning as being primarily the result of *interaction* with the environment, rather than the result of a one-way transmission of knowledge from “outside,” or of an exclusively “internal” impulse to change.<sup>363</sup>

4. *Upward movement should be gradual and consecutive*, i.e. without skipping stages. The implication, when this is corroborated by the relevant tests, is that the lower stages are necessary for the higher stages to emerge; in other words, higher stages build upon the lower stages.

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<sup>360</sup> Galbraith and Jones, *Moral Reasoning*, 33.

<sup>361</sup> Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 133.

<sup>362</sup> Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," 49.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*: 52.

5. *Species-wide existence of stages*: “the stages should be commonly in evidence among members of the species from birth to maturity.”<sup>364</sup> This last criterion, explicit in Piaget’s stage theory, is only implicitly present in Kohlberg’s writings, according to Gibbs.<sup>365</sup> Galbraith and Jones mention that cross-cultural studies made in the United States, Taiwan, Mexico<sup>366</sup> (involving middle-class urban males), and Turkey<sup>367</sup> and Yucatan (involving lower class peasants), have to some extent corroborated this aspect.<sup>368</sup> Gibbs<sup>369</sup> mentions additional studies with similar results done in Kenya,<sup>370</sup> India<sup>371</sup> and the Bahamas.<sup>372</sup>

This empirical criterion, however, raises a particular difficulty with respect to Kohlberg’s stages 5 and 6, for attempts to corroborate the species-wide presence of these stages have not been successful.<sup>373</sup> In fact, at the time Gibbs’ article was written, the matter was so problematic that Kohlberg himself had noted, “no real data exists on

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<sup>364</sup> Ibid.: 47.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg, "Stage and Sequence: The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Socialization.," in *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research*, ed. D. A. Goslin (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969), 384-385.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Galbraith and Jones, *Moral Reasoning*, 32.

<sup>369</sup> Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," 50.

<sup>370</sup> C. P. Edwards, "Societal Complexity and Moral Development: A Kenyan Study," *Ethos*, no. 3 (1975).

<sup>371</sup> B. S. Parikh, "Moral Judgment and Its Relation to Family Environmental Factors in Indian and American Urban Upper Middle Class Families" (Boston University, 1975).

<sup>372</sup> C. B. White, "Moral Development in Bahamian School Children: Cross-Cultural Examination of Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Reasoning," *Developmental psychology*, no. 11 (1975). This latter study focuses on the first three stages or orientations.

<sup>373</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg, "Continuities in Childhood and Adult Moral Development Revisited," in *Lifespan Developmental Psychology*, ed. P. B. Baltes and L. R. Goulet (New York: Academic Press, 1973); Lawrence Kohlberg and R. Kramer, "Continuities and Discontinuities in Childhood and Adult Moral Development," *Human Development*, no. 12 (1969).

movement to this [the sixth] highest moral stage,”<sup>374</sup> and stage 6 was not even scored in Kohlberg’s then forthcoming *Standard Form Scoring Manual*.<sup>375</sup>

This lack of evidence for stages 5 and 6, concerning this fifth empirical criterion in particular, is what prompts Gibbs to criticize the inclusion of the post-conventional level of moral reasoning (i.e. stages 5 and 6) in Kohlberg’s stage-sequence of moral development.<sup>376</sup> Gibbs proposes to call these by a different term, “orientations,” and to use the term “stages” only for developmental categories that clearly fulfill the Piagetian empirical criteria. This, Gibbs believes, would help dispel some of the confusion produced by considering all of Kohlberg’s categories under the same rubric.

Gibbs, however, does not limit his criticisms to these methodological issues. “Orientations” 5 and 6, he claims, not only do not deserve to be called stages, but actually the transition to orientations 5 and 6 (the “principled” orientations, in Gibbs’ terminology) obeys a different type of dynamism than the one evidenced in stage-transitions from stages 1 to 4. What characterizes the transition in orientations 5 and 6 is described by Gibbs as an “existential theme,” which he contrasts with a “naturalistic theme” in properly called (Piagetian) stage-transitions.<sup>377</sup> Gibbs’ criticism has bearing on an adequate description of moral conversion, and of the difference between moral conversion and “normal” moral development, as will now be explained.

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<sup>374</sup> Kohlberg, "Continuities in Childhood and Adult Moral Development Revisited," 197.

<sup>375</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg and others, *Identifying Moral Stages: A Manual*, Unpublished manuscript. (Available from Harvard University, Center for Moral Education; Cambridge, Mass.: 1976). After failing to find stage 6 subjects in Turkey (a matter that is frequently brought up to criticize the argued universality of that stage), Kohlberg formulated stage 6 for a while as a special instance of stage 5. (Rich and DeVitis, *Theories of Moral Development*, 89.)

<sup>376</sup> Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," 55.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*: 55-58.

### Gibbs and the distinction between “natural” and “existential” orientations

Gibbs explains his concern that Kohlberg unwarrantedly integrated the postconventional orientations (5 and 6) into a stage-developmental structure in which they do not belong in these terms. While stages 1 to 4 follow a “natural” or “spontaneous” dynamism, which is how stage development in the Piagetian sense should be understood, categories 5 and 6 cannot be adequately described without including an “existential” move on the part of the subject (what Gibbs means by “existential” will be discussed shortly). Indeed, for Gibbs, the fact that research subjects in stages 5 and 6 have so rarely been found can be interpreted as an observable result of this problem.

Gibbs’ claim merits investigation here because the distinction proposed by Gibbs is quite consistent with at least a common sense notion of the distinction between “normal” moral development and conversion. *Development*, corresponding to Gibbs’ “natural” or “spontaneous” processes, is considered in common sense reflection to be significantly different from *conversion* precisely because the latter involves something out of the ordinary developmental flow of human life. This out of the ordinary characteristic is expressed by the term “existential” in Gibbs and in this discussion.<sup>378</sup> If the distinction Gibbs proposes between “natural” or “spontaneous” changes and “existential” changes can be established as meaningful, it can contribute to this project’s effort to distinguish conversion from normal moral development.

To argue his point, Gibbs considers Kohlberg’s stages in terms of the Piagetian

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<sup>378</sup> By “common sense notion” what is meant here is the kind of observation that could be expected from a thoughtful person that has not explored the matter with scientific or philosophical precision.

criteria described in the previous section. As was mentioned above, *orientations* 5 and 6 seem to fail the “species-wide” criterion while, on the other hand, extensive research suggests that *stages* 1 to 4 fulfill them. In order to explain the lack of empirical support for the higher stages 5 and 6, Gibbs takes a methodological step back and identifies what he considers to be the four basic features of Piaget’s overall developmental-structuralist theory.<sup>379</sup> These four features are *holism*, *constructivism*, *interactionism* and *naturalism*. According to Gibbs, the “most fundamental” feature of the four is *naturalism*,<sup>380</sup> and the other three build upon this naturalistic theme. But it will be clearer to discuss the other three first.

The *holistic character* of Piaget’s view of world process corresponds to the observation that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and, conversely, that the whole cannot be adequately explained merely by an analysis of its component parts.<sup>381</sup> (The first empirical criterion, “underlying generality,” corresponds to this feature).

The *constructivist* feature complements Piaget’s holism: holistic structures are organized neither arbitrarily, nor by a pre-formed (but static) idea or “gestalt,” but oriented in the direction of “a relational objectivity of increasing efficacy.”<sup>382</sup> Living beings have a characteristic tendency to “extend” themselves beyond mere stability or equilibrium. Mental behavior, in Piaget’s view, consists in “the elaboration of new structures and new lines of conduct in the course of a constantly constructive

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<sup>379</sup> Gibbs, “Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development,” 51.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid.

<sup>382</sup> Jean Piaget, *The Place of the Sciences of Man in the System of Sciences* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 58.

development.”<sup>383</sup> Similarly, human intelligence “extends, but does not reduce to, organic regulatory processes and structures.”<sup>384</sup> (The second empirical criterion, “upward tendency,” corresponds to this theme.)

The feature of *interactionism* can be understood by contrast with the idea of learning as a mere transmission of knowledge. Piaget conceives learning instead (and analog processes of “extension”) as primarily a result of interaction with the environment; it is thus an extension of the *constructive* tendency in life processes.<sup>385</sup>

The perpetual compensations which regulate and control embryonic growth, for example, reflect equilibration as much as the perpetual coordinations entailed in the growth of understanding, discovering and inventing during childhood.<sup>386</sup>

Interaction is, for Piaget, the generative origin of the acquisition of all knowledge.<sup>387</sup> The same may be said of all analog processes, including in the present case moral development. (The third empirical criterion, of “facilitated rates of development in an experientially rich environment” corresponds to this feature).

It can be seen how these features of Piaget’s theory, which articulate a philosophically rich view of human development, play out in Kohlberg’s stage-structure. According to the *constructivism* canon, the movement from one stage to the next is fueled

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<sup>383</sup> Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," 51, citing Piaget, *Biology and Knowledge: An Essay on the Relations between Organic Regulations and Cognitive Processes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*: 52.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.* Connecting this general view of human development with Kohlberg’s conception of stages of moral development, it becomes clear that the latter should not be conceived as “a set of cultural beliefs taught to children,” or a set of “moral maxims which can be taught to children by adults.” Rather, reaching a stage is dependent on the agent’s intellectual maturity, that allows them to raise questions and cope in consistent ways with dilemmas that are presented to them. It involves, so to speak, a complex set of *skills*, not a body of information passively possessed (Galbraith and Jones, *Moral Reasoning*, 34).

<sup>386</sup> Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," 52.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*; Piaget, *Biology and Knowledge: An Essay on the Relations between Organic Regulations and Cognitive Processes*.



by an internal drive: the characteristic tendency of living beings to extend themselves beyond mere stability or equilibrium. According to the *interactionism* canon, this “extension” is fundamentally accomplished by interaction with the environment – not by a passive interaction, not by a simple “being molded” by the environment, but rather by *active* interaction. The organism’s drives actively engage in the achievement of equilibrium in relation to an expanded environment, and then to further expansion. Underlying this process, the canon of *holism* establishes that it is the organism as a whole – the organism with its multiple structural layers, from the biochemical to the behavioral and beyond – that engages in this interaction and develops accordingly.

Among all these features, however, Gibbs considers the “most fundamental” feature to be that of Piaget’s theory to be *naturalism*; but when he tries to explain this feature from which the other three are supposed to flow, he becomes excessively vague. In one paragraph – in one breath, one may say - he describes naturalism as “a philosophic doctrine emanating from early Greek theology, which identified deities with nature and natural processes,” and as being used by Rousseau and other Romantics “as a theory of the good.” Then, in the context of Piaget’s theory, he says it emphasizes “a continuity between the human species and other forms of life. Normative human behavior has a ‘deep biological significance.’”<sup>388</sup> This is all that the reader gets regarding the specific meaning of the feature of *naturalism*; the point might have been clearer in fact if he had just used the word and not attempted to illustrate it at all!

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<sup>388</sup> Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," 53.

But the particular implication Gibbs is aiming to bring forward by using this word eventually becomes clear. “Naturalistic” processes, for Gibbs, are fundamentally unconscious, or at least unreflective. Piaget’s naturalistic orientation, says Gibbs, “leads to an emphasis upon the implicit or unreflective character of ‘theories-in-action’ which direct unconscious behavior.”<sup>389</sup> He quotes Piaget:

In the case of cognitive structures the situation is remarkably comparable: some (but rather limited) consciousness of the result and almost entire (or initially entire) unconsciousness of the intimate mechanism leading to the result.<sup>390</sup>

What this boils down to is the repetition of two empirical criteria, and the introduction of a new one. Gibbs connects the feature of *naturalism* to the criteria, already stated, of gradual development and species-wide findings, and adds to the list of criteria for a valid stage-sequence the criterion that a stage must be “achieved through processes which are spontaneous and essentially unconscious.”<sup>391</sup> This important criterion is added at this point by Gibbs almost surreptitiously to the five originally mentioned, and it is understood by Gibbs to derive directly from (or indeed to be almost identical with) the feature of *naturalism*.

That is, implicit in Gibbs’ previous argument has been the idea that, in properly defined and empirically determinable “stages” of development, development is achieved *by the interaction itself* – with the environment, with other people – and *without the explicit, conscious awareness* of the agent. Even if cognitive processes are involved, it is the dynamism of the processes themselves that produces the development regardless of

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid. The quotation is from Jean Piaget, *The Child and Reality* (New York: Grossman, 1973), 33.

<sup>391</sup> Gibbs, “Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development,” 53.

(and most commonly, without) the agent's awareness of the mechanism involved, and of the fact that the new skills, vision and attitude it leads to have been the result of this mechanism at work.<sup>392</sup>

### Gibbs and the existentialist theme

Gibbs' positing of this "naturalist theme" as central to Piaget's developmental theory is itself a debatable move, and would merit further examination if it were relevant to this dissertation. But even if Gibbs' account of Piaget's naturalistic emphasis is granted, it can be argued that Kohlberg's project goes in a different direction from the narrow Piagetian criteria that Gibbs presents as normative, and therefore, that it is not fundamentally affected by Gibbs' criticism. Thus, according to Walter Conn, it is part of Kohlberg's approach

to account for principled moral reasoning as a distinctively adult reality by reinterpreting the concept of structural stage in a broad enough way to include the existential experiences of personal moral questioning, choice, and responsible action – realities excluded from his earlier view which denied the existence of a *structurally* distinctive adult morality.<sup>393</sup>

According to Conn, it is then inappropriate to judge Kohlberg's stage-structure in the narrow Piagetian terms that Gibbs uses.

Gibbs, however, does this; and his conclusion is that Kohlberg's stages 1 to 4 (pre-conventional and conventional moral thinking) *do* conform to the naturalistic criteria, while "orientations" 5 and 6 (postconventional moral thinking) do not. Orientations 5 and 6, says Gibbs, should therefore not be considered within a stage-sequence, but as

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<sup>392</sup> Note that Gibbs is not denying the possibility of processes in which the agent is conscious of the process – or indeed, in which such consciousness becomes a relevant factor in the development taking place. What he is denying is that Kohlberg's stages 1 to 4 are processes of that kind.

<sup>393</sup> Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 110.

something else. In place of stages, Gibbs says orientations 5 and 6 must be described in terms of an “existential theme,” as opposed to the naturalistic theme which for Gibbs is the norm for proper “stages” in a Piagetian stage-sequence.<sup>394</sup>

Before considering the meaning of this “existential theme,” it should be noted that Gibbs has actually made *two* challengeable moves. First, in accepting orientations 1 to 4 as “stages,” and excluding orientations 5 and 6, he needs arguments that *show* that, in pre-conventional and conventional moral thinking, the process by which one moves from one stage to the next does conform to the criterion he has explained under “naturalism,” i.e. processes that are “spontaneous and essentially unconscious.” This interpretation of Kohlberg is in fact challenged by Conn. Second, Gibbs supports his claim that Kohlberg’s orientations 5 and 6 depend on conscious awareness (and belong thus to the “existential theme”) by interpreting Kohlberg’s account of the move to a postconventional level of moral thinking (orientations 5 and 6) as the articulation, on the part of the subject, of a quasi-formal metaethics. Gibbs writes:

Kohlberg contends that “notions of natural rights, social contract, and utility are ‘natural structures’ emerging in nonphilosophers.” However, persons who introduce this complex of notions into their thinking may no longer be nonphilosophers. If the position accepted that anyone who constructs a social-contract theory of ethics is in effect a philosopher, then it is more reasonable to understand the principled orientations themselves as “constructive systematizations” starting from natural intuitions about morality and human nature.<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> Gibbs, “Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development,” 54-55.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*: 56-57. Gibbs quotes from Lawrence Kohlberg, “The Claim to Moral Adequacy of a Highest Stage of Moral Judgment,” *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973): 634. Gibbs takes this theory to interesting extents, going as far as to suggest that the different “principled orientations” may be better understood as self-conscious developments (in the meta-ethically reflective individual) of their earlier, implicit forms in the properly called “stages” of moral reasoning. Thus the “social-contract ethics” of orientation 5 seems to be a philosophical development of the pragmatic, instrumental, egalitarian intuitions present in stage 2, and the “ideal role taking” that characterizes (in Gibbs’ view) the meta-ethics of orientation 6 requires the third-person perspective-taking that is the particular achievement underlying stage 3. The principled (postconventional) stages may be understood, according to Gibbs, “as formalizations which are based on implicit achievements of the natural stages and which proceed on a reflective and philosophical plane of

But this interpretation of Kohlberg's stage theory, creative as it may be, conflicts at every step with the standard interpretation of Kohlberg's stages, and Gibbs therefore needs to offer specific arguments to support this interpretation.

For present purposes, however, as Conn also says, the goal is not "to arbitrate the differences between Kohlberg and Gibbs."<sup>396</sup> The point is to explore a possible way of determining if there are significant differences between "normal" moral development and moral conversion. Gibbs' attempt to formulate these differences in terms of a distinction between "spontaneous/natural" and "existential" presents initially a potentially good starting point. Unfortunately, his notion of the "existential" is developed in much the same vague terms of his presentation of the "naturalistic theme" – in this case, quoting a couple of lines from Teilhard de Chardin and Erich Fromm, and mentioning Frankl and Maslow.<sup>397</sup> The gist of these brief quotations is that the gradually waking consciousness of human beings is problematic and a cause of anxiety for them, a theme that adds little to the present discussion, except insofar as it draws attention to the human possibility, however difficult, of critical questioning.

The idea of the "existential" (implicitly emphasizing the aspect of critical questioning) becomes in Gibbs implicitly an opposite to the "naturalism" of the first four stages, which are essentially unconscious in the sense that their dynamism takes place

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discourse." Gibbs even suggests the possibility that less adequate ethical theories may have also this origin; that, for example, "the historically recurrent doctrine that *might makes right*," itself "post-conventional and reflective," may amount "to a formal, universalist philosophy, drawing its intuitive inspiration from the fusion of moral with physical superiority evident at natural stage 1." (Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," 56-57.)

<sup>396</sup> Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 110.

<sup>397</sup> Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," 56.

below the agent's awareness. Gibbs, however, does not enrich the notion of "existential" by dwelling on it further, or discussing any additional connotations, apparently because for him its only role is to denominate the metaethical constructions that characterize postconventional moral thinking.

### Conn's notion of the "existential"

But as indicated, Gibbs' distinction, though obscurely formulated, can lead in a useful direction. Walter Conn, in his analysis of moral conversion, considers Gibbs' distinction between natural and existential orientations, criticizing Gibbs' interpretation of Kohlberg's stages as focusing too narrowly on the Piagetian notion of a stage-sequence. Conn partially agrees with Gibbs' emphasis on an increased reflective/critical disposition of the agent in the higher stages of moral reasoning. He rejects, however, Gibbs' narrow interpretation of this reflective/critical disposition as involving the development of a metaethics. Furthermore, though Conn concedes great importance to the reflective/critical disposition, he does not identify the existentialist theme with it. Instead, Conn emphasizes the idea of "self-chosen values" as central to the existential theme, and to moral conversion itself.

Unfortunately, like Gibbs, Conn is also not very specific at the moment of defining the term "existential"; Conn never makes the meaning of the term explicit enough, and the reader is forced to surmise it by examining those sections of his text in which the term is employed. The notion is thus too undeveloped to justify an in-depth comparison with those elements proposed in Chapter 5, where a preliminary characterization of the notion

was proposed (i.e. as making reference to a change as important, personal, real and concrete, involving the contingency of the concrete and therefore involving unpredictability or unexpectedness, and connected to the theme of freedom). There is some implicit correspondence, but Conn's discussion focuses mostly on the element of freedom and its implications. His emphasis is distinctively placed on the theme of taking control of one's own life and actions, of making decisions for oneself. Thus, he quotes repeatedly Lonergan's phrase from *Method in Theology*, that "it is up to each of us to decide for himself what he is to make of himself."<sup>398</sup> He also cites Lonergan when he says that the moral subject is

at once practical and existential: practical inasmuch as he is concerned with concrete course of action; *existential* inasmuch as *control includes self-control*, and the possibility of self-control involves responsibility *for what he makes of himself*.<sup>399</sup>

This citation is perhaps the clearest clue to Conn's meaning of *existential*.

With regard to Gibbs' insistence on the *critical/reflective* element as constitutive of the existential, Conn takes Gibbs' cue but develops it in a different direction that eventually conflicts with Gibbs' interpretation. Conn also considers the *critical/reflective* element essential to the description of Kohlberg's postconventional level (stages 5 and 6). But while Gibbs, as was just said, understands this critical/reflective element in terms of the articulation, on the part of the subject, of a relatively explicit metaethics, Conn rejects that interpretation, and develops an alternative way of understanding this critical element,

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<sup>398</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 240.

<sup>399</sup> Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 113 (emphasis mine). The quotation is from Bernard Lonergan, "Faith and Beliefs" (paper presented to the American Academy of Religion, Newton, Massachusetts, 1969), 6.

in reference to the notion of *intellectual* or *cognitive conversion* (which is a process different from moral conversion). This approach yields the distinction between *critical* and *uncritical* conversion. Understanding what Conn means by this distinction, requires looking at his notion of *cognitive conversion*. The key element in Conn's understanding of cognitive conversion is the person's discovery of him/herself *as a knower*; that is, as someone who can know, understand, judge things through the use of his/her own capacities: cognitive conversion is the discovery that one can think for him/herself. This discovery (which Conn holds is not as common as one might expect) is ground-breaking, life-changing, and, Conn believes, justifiably merits to be called a conversion.<sup>400</sup>

With this distinction in mind, Conn speaks of *critical moral conversion* as that in which the person, having now "appropriated" their status as a knower (via cognitive conversion), takes the helm of his/her moral life, discovers that "in the moral life one must be one's own tailor, regardless of the brilliance of one's favorite designer."<sup>401</sup>

This, claims Conn, is something that takes place specifically at the Kohlbergian postconventional level of moral thinking, in which the person's moral life is no longer characterized by exclusively adopting the "conventional" answers of one's intersubjective (i.e. direct personal) groups or the larger society. Only stages 5 and 6, Conn holds, fit the profile for a *critical* moral conversion, and that is what is distinctive in

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 121-123., which includes some examples of what Conn means by this cognitive conversion. Conn examines in this fashion, for example, the intellectual conversion of Thérèse of Lisieux in Conn and Wolski Conn, "Conversion as Self-Transcendence Exemplified in the Life of St. Thérèse of Lisieux." See also Chapter 3, above.

<sup>401</sup> Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 127.



them, not their failure to conform to Gibbs' Piagetian criteria.<sup>402</sup>

As Kohlberg points out, it is only later, in the context of adult moral experiences of irreversible decision and responsibility for others, that an affectively and cognitively more developed *postconventional* subject can discover itself precisely as postconventional. Then a truly critical moral conversion is involved, for in this genuinely adult context the existential discovery that it is up to each of us to decide for ourselves what we are to make of ourselves presupposes at least an *implicit* cognitive conversion. Critical moral conversion involves, in other words, a subject's tacit but nonetheless real recognition and choice of self as criterion of the real and the truly good in her or his own self-transcending judgments and choices.<sup>403</sup>

Thus Conn draws on Gibbs' understanding of postconventional moral thinking as *reflective*, to offer his own description of this level of moral development in terms of the *critical/uncritical* distinction.

But Conn also concedes the possibility of an *uncritical* moral conversion. Moral conversion in general is understood by Conn in the Lonerganian terms of a shift in the criterion of one's decisions and choices from the criterion of satisfaction to the criterion of value.<sup>404</sup> Such a shift, says Conn, is already taking place at stages 3 and 4,<sup>405</sup> usually beginning during adolescence. At these levels, Conn says, the shift is effected *uncritically*; but it is still possible to identify in this shift an existential element because, for Conn, what is central to this element is the "self-chosen" aspect. Says Conn:

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<sup>402</sup> Given that, in Conn's valuation, there is something radically incomplete in an *uncritical* moral conversion (that is, Conn holds that moral perfection requires of the person that he/she undergo a cognitive conversion and become a critical thinker in his/her moral life), there is in Conn a normative reason for aiming at the later stages of moral thinking. (Ibid., 116, 128, 156.)

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>404</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 240. See Chapter 3, Section 2. Conn still defines moral conversion by referring to the Lonerganian central criterion of "a shift from satisfaction to values"; but this he considers the "object-pole" of moral conversion, which is in turn "rooted at the subject-pole in the existential moment when we discover for ourselves 'that it is up to each of us to decide for himself what he is to make of himself.'" (Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 116.)

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 128.

one's moral reasoning is not what one merely understands conceptually, but what one actually uses in making life decisions. A person's conscience is structured by conventional moral reasoning only if that person is *committed* to conventional values, only if, that is, he or she has been morally converted. . .

. . . For even an uncritical moral conversion is a deliberate *choice* of value as criterion for decision, and thus not simply spontaneous and unconscious, as Gibbs insists natural stage transition must be, but existential.<sup>406</sup>

By contrast, what characterizes stages 5 and 6 as “postconventional” is the fact, says Conn, that they are effected from a *critical* shift in the criterion for one's decisions and choices – and *not* the lack of an existential element at one level or the other.

Thus, where Gibbs understood the “existential” in terms of a conscious, reflective/critical disposition, Conn understands the term (still in opposition to a *natural/spontaneous* dimension of development) in terms of self-choosing or self-making. Thus the critical is not identified with the existential, as it is in Gibbs, and thus neither is the postconventional level of development (stages 5 and 6) identified in exclusive terms with the existential.

Conn, however, does not make a clear distinction in his terminology between Kohlbergian developmental stages and moral conversion. How does Conn articulate the distinction between normal moral development and moral conversion?

### The coexistence of the natural and the existential in Conn

The whole point of this discussion of Gibbs and Conn is to enrich the description of moral conversion and to clarify and support a distinction between normal moral development and moral conversion. Gibbs' distinction between natural/spontaneous

shifts and existential changes (“existential” understood as a critical appropriation/conceptualization of one’s moral views) aims at distinguishing neatly between developmental changes (which would, in his view, take place in the first four Kohlbergian stages) and “something” else taking place at the postconventional “orientations” – something that Gibbs does not name but distinguishes from (strictly speaking) staged developmental changes. Conn considers that the distinction holds some promise, but rejects Gibbs’ narrow understanding of existential-as-critical/reflective, and – more importantly – rejects Gibbs’ sharp categorizing of postconventional orientations as existential, and of the previous stages as natural/spontaneous. But how does Conn apply the natural/existential distinction to the Kohlbergian stages? And more relevant to our topic, how does he distinguish between Kohlbergian moral development and moral conversion?

Rather than allocating each to different stages or orientations, Conn is aiming at a model in which the existential dimension (which in Conn corresponds explicitly to conversion) and the natural/spontaneous dimension (which corresponds to development) actually coexist in one transforming process.

The point, however, is not to present a choice of *either* development *or* conversion, but to initiate a move to an integrated interpretation of the personal subject’s becoming which includes *both* development *and* conversion. In fact, while the developmental psychologists work within a model of development as a natural process of spontaneously unfolding stages, even their own theories, as we have noted, hint that something more is involved.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 107. The “something more” at which Conn is hinting is an existential, self-making, conversion element in all of these developmental changes.

Conn's analysis reaches completion when, after having criticized Gibbs' separation of the "natural" stages and the existential postconventional orientations, he asks the question of whether the natural and existential dimensions should be considered as mutually exclusive (within Gibbs' account). Conn answers in the negative:

We avoid the apparent contradiction here if we understand that the one transforming process has two dimensions: one unconscious and spontaneous, one conscious and deliberate. As *unconscious and spontaneous* the process is *the natural restructuring of moral consciousness called stage transition*. As *conscious and deliberate* it is the *existential choice of value called moral conversion*.

Gibbs is correct in distinguishing the existential dimension of moral development from the natural. It is not necessary, however, to relate them in an exclusive, "either/or" fashion: conventional stages are natural; postconventional orientations are existential. These two dimensions, rather, are better understood as simultaneously characterizing both conventional and postconventional moral consciousness. After all. . . there is no reason to think that the transformation of moral reasoning, which focuses on value, should simply occur in an unconscious and spontaneous way. All our experience of moral transformation, in fact, suggests conscious struggle as well as unconscious gift.

Indeed, the fact that transition to a new moral stage occurs in the context of the previous stage's functional inadequacy, or breakdown, is strong theoretical reason to expect the unconscious restructuring process to occur in conjunction with the conscious choice of value in moral conversion.<sup>408</sup>

Conn's strategy, then, is to speak of a "transforming process" that is a characteristic of every stage-change; this process is partly driven by natural/spontaneous changes that do not depend on the agent's awareness and willing, but are rather the effect of a constructive response to environmental and social situations; and is partly driven by the agent's cognitive grasp of the inadequacy of the current moral structures or habits, and a willful, existential determination to modify them.<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 129-130 (emphasis mine).

<sup>409</sup> This strategy is by the way analogous to William James' assessment, that in every conversion there are elements of the "volitional type" (i.e. the existential dimension) and the "self-surrender" type (i.e. spontaneous). James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 170.

Unfortunately, Conn develops this intriguing idea in only very brief terms; though from the few examples that Conn provides of its application to the Kohlbergian model,<sup>410</sup> it appears that it would have considerable explanatory potential if it were applied to a detailed analysis of the dynamism/integration of normal moral development and existential changes, both in Kohlberg's model and in other developmental stage-structures.<sup>411</sup> What will be retained here for present purposes is simply the suggestion that certain forms of moral conversion may be required at certain points to advance normal moral development to the next stage; and that conversely, certain forms of moral conversion may require, as a condition for their possibility, a certain level of moral development. This suggestion will be considered in more detail in section 5 of the present chapter.

### Conclusion

Gibbs provides a clear-cut way of distinguishing between developmental and existential changes: (1) consider "development" those changes corresponding to the preconventional and conventional stages, interpreted as unconscious, "natural/spontaneous" processes, and (2) consider "existential" changes those corresponding to the postconventional stages. This way of distinguishing them, if granted, could in turn be

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<sup>410</sup> Development to conventional moral reasoning, for example, "involves a conscious desire and deliberate option for the good as distinct from the good-for-me." (Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 156.) As to postconventional moral reasoning, says Conn, "more than a development from concrete, particular rules to abstract, universal principles, [it] involves a radical revolution in the very locus of moral authority. Initiated by a relativizing of conventional morality, the fullness of this revolution is based on the personal subject's critical discovery and appropriation of his or her drive for self-transcendence." (Ibid.)

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 156-157. Conn's framework seems particularly useful to examine some theories of moral development that theorize the need for certain "crises" to be engaged and resolved successfully, in order to move to the next developmental stage (and not become "stuck" in some form of developmental dead-end).

used to distinguish between development and conversion, by simply identifying conversion with an existential type of transition. But Conn's arguments provide very strong reasons to reject Gibbs' approach both to Kohlberg and to the distinction between what is "existential" and what is not. Conn's assessment - that in all stage transitions development and conversion are deeply interrelated as different moments of what could be called in more general terms a "transforming process" - seems to correspond better with both experimental observations and everyday experience.

Furthermore, expanding on Gibbs' original distinction between the natural/spontaneous and the existential, Conn presents an interesting, and potentially explanatorily rich account of the relation between development and conversion. Conn's accomplishment however is limited by the fact that he does not develop his notion of the "existential" in sufficient detail to know what would count as an instance of it in a conversion narrative. His project would have clearly benefited from a more explicit specification of the notion, as well as by a more elaborate account of how conversion relates to Kohlbergian stage-transitions. More importantly, in terms of establishing a conceptual distinction between conversion and normal moral development, Conn's approach is not satisfactory either. This is partly for the same reason, i.e. the criterion of his distinction - "development" corresponding to the natural/spontaneous and "conversion" corresponding to the existential - is formulated in vague, undifferentiated terms, requiring of the reader to fill the blanks with common sense notions of these concepts.

Further, even if the criterion were granted to be clear enough, Conn's contention that development recurrently requires an existential stance in order to proceed further would still have to be considered speculative at this point, until more research were done concerning the presence of existential factors in critical instances within the Kohlbergian stage-sequence (or other moral developmental sequences). In any case, Conn's criterion is too vague; it does not sufficiently encompass the themes mentioned earlier (in Chapter 5) that are usually referred to with the term "existential." Thus it cannot, in spite of appearances, provide conceptual support for a careful discussion of the moral development/moral conversion distinction, nor for the development of empirical observations required to establish this distinction.

In order to resolve these difficulties and proceed further in our investigation, a more developed explanation of the meaning of "existential" needs to be presented. In addition, it is necessary to establish – if not through formal empirical research, at least by looking at representative narratives – that "existential," defined in such terms, properly characterizes conversion as it is generally understood. This step will retroactively ground the general definition of "conversion" that was presented at the beginning of Chapter 5, and upon which the three-fold description of moral conversion was built.

Before this is done, however, in order to introduce some clarity into the somewhat murky business of distinguishing development from conversion, a new distinction will be introduced, namely, between "sharp-turn" and "incremental" conversion.

#### **4. “Incremental” and “sharp-turn” conversion: A distinction by analogy**

It becomes necessary at this point to introduce this new distinction both to clarify the Conn-Gibbs discussion, and also because it will be necessary to keep this distinction in mind in order to understand properly what will be explained in section 5 – that conversion can be better understood if considered through existentialist heuristic structures.

The most important thing to keep in mind about the distinction to be presented here is that the terms of the distinction are meant to be related *by analogy*. This type of distinction was heavily used in medieval philosophy to address not only logical but also metaphysical and theological questions. The distinction itself goes back to Aristotle. Aristotle distinguished, in his treatises on logic, between “univocal” and “equivocal” terms – the latter being terms meaning altogether different things, as when “nail” is predicated of a sharpened piece of metal and of the hard layer covering a human finger, and the former being terms that retain the same meaning in every case, as when “car” is predicated of a Saturn or an Escort. The notion of “analogy” is introduced to solve the difficulty posited by terms that mean partially, but not *exactly* the same, as when “healthy” is predicated of a living being, a medicine, or the weather. “Healthy” has its full, proper meaning when predicated of a living being, and not of the weather or an aspirin; the two latter meanings, however, are not unrelated to the former, and in fact derive their meaning from the former. This type of analogy (that medieval philosophers called “analogy by attribution”) established a “hierarchy” in terms of meaning: one use of the term would embody the prior, most proper sense, the “primary analog,” while other



uses would be derivative, posterior “secondary” analogues. This and related distinctions were extensively used to resolve such metaphysical difficulties as how *being* is predicated, or how *good* can be predicated of both God and finite beings.<sup>412</sup>

This somewhat lengthy introduction is needed to avoid misunderstanding the terms of the distinction between “incremental” and “sharp-turn” conversions that is about to be presented. The distinction differentiates between changes that occur incrementally, in a definite direction, and that become significant when one compares the beginning and end-points of the process, and changes that occur in such a way that they produce a certain amount of surprise, defying or thwarting one’s expectation or predictions or sense of regularity: changes that make us wonder whether we really knew the person beforehand.

It must be clarified from the outset that this distinction is not equivalent to that of “gradual” and “sudden” conversion, which, though found in many authors – it was used, for example, by William James<sup>413</sup> – is not of much help for the present purposes. The problem with the gradual/sudden distinction is twofold. First, the fact that a conversion process took many years or a few minutes is typically not of tremendous philosophical importance. Second – as James himself argues – a current towards change may have been subconsciously at play for a long while, but may become evident only suddenly, and so be ignored but for the last minutes in the narrative; if this is the case, then for the

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<sup>412</sup> The distinction is originally found in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (1003a33-35): “There are many senses in which being can be said, but they are related to one central point, one definite kind of thing, and are not equivocal. Everything which is healthy is related to health. . . and everything which is medical to medicine...” To what extent the medieval treatment was grounded in Aristotle’s distinction, or went into further original ways, is of course a matter of historical analysis.

<sup>413</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 152-153.

distinction to be useful much more information would be required about subconscious processes at work than what is usually provided in the narratives.

What characterizes a sharp-turn conversion is the significant *change of direction* manifested in the change, a new direction that defies, so to speak, a person's moral inertia. By contrast, what characterizes incremental conversion can be illustrated with the metaphor of pushing into a higher and then an even higher orbit, while maintaining essentially the same direction.

The story of Gandhi (case #8)<sup>414</sup> can be used to illustrate an incremental type of conversion. Gandhi's autobiography describes a persistent struggle for moral perfection. This struggle is fraught with internal and external obstacles, with youthful naivete and even some degree of self-deception; but the direction, the *attitude*,<sup>415</sup> Gandhi's moral orientation, remains consistently pointing towards a higher degree of moral perfection.<sup>416</sup> Thus reading Gandhi's biography one is perhaps surprised by the degree of moral perfection he eventually reached, but not, as in other stories, by the impression that Gandhi made a very sharp turn at any point in his life. His experience of being forced out of the train is a waking call for him, but it calls him to strive higher in the same direction he was already striving towards – he had, for example, already gotten himself in some trouble for refusing to bow under discriminating practices.<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> Gandhi's story has been discussed already in Chapter 5, Section 2.B.

<sup>415</sup> It may be useful to recall here the *spatial* meaning of the word "attitude," which adds to the illustration; attitude means the position of a body, particularly – in aviation terms – the orientation of the craft's nose towards a lower or a higher plane. In this sense, "attitude" and "orientation" are close to being synonyms.

<sup>416</sup> See for example his description of his days as a student in London, in which he details the "strict watch" he kept over his way of living. (Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, 48.)

<sup>417</sup> See for example the incident caused by his resistance to the rule of removing his turban in court upon arriving in Durban (Ibid., 99.)

By contrast, the story of Jackie Katounas (case #24)<sup>418</sup> illustrates a very surprising turn. Katounas, it may be recalled, had gone into a maximum security unit for the first time at 12, and went into prison at 16, spending eventually about 12 years in prison over a 25 year period (the article does not go over the details, but suggests that these convictions were due to stealing goods). She was also a heroin addict. According to her story, she had never given a thought to the victims until she received some stolen goods from a person that she knew; and somehow, this event triggered her conversion: she stopped “offending” for good, and became a facilitator in the New Zealand Restorative Justice program – dramatically turning her life around. If one looks a little below the surface and asks the question, “but was Jackie really a ‘bad’ person?” her case seems to be rather that of a person with a good heart (it did not take her too much to put herself in someone else’s shoes and feel remorse) but set in a self-destructive path. Thus the turnaround may not be a *complete* one – she might have had already a generous orientation that she was unable to actualize; and it is possible to speculate that maybe an undercurrent of remorse and desire to change might have already been at play. Even if we allowed credit to these speculations, though, the case qualifies as an instance of sharp-turn conversion because the moral direction she gives to her life goes outwardly (and probably inwardly too) in a different, opposed direction to the previous: a direction of generosity rather than one of selfishness, a fulfilling and constructive project rather than a self-destructive one.

In offering this distinction, however, I do not intend to convey the idea that actual

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<sup>418</sup> Katounas’ story was discussed in Chapter 5, Section 2.B.

instances of conversion can be simply put into two categories, clearly delineated and mutually exclusive. The distinction (again, by analogy) establishes two extremes in what may be conceived as a spectrum of possibilities; narratives of conversion may contain elements in need of an incremental push, and elements that must be suppressed or countered by adopting a different moral orientation.

For the purposes of producing a clearer characterization of moral conversion, and of distinguishing between normal development and conversion, “sharp-turn” conversions will be considered in what follows as the central referent for conversion, and our focus will be set on narratives that illustrate that kind of conversion. Incremental conversion, like development, moves in a definite direction, building on a previous base to achieve successive stages of increasing perfection; for this reason, distinguishing normal moral development from incremental conversion becomes at times very difficult. Sharp-turn conversion, instead, seems to deviate more clearly from the predictability and expectations pertaining to normal moral development; thus, a focus on sharp-turn conversion as the primary analog allows for an exposition of the characteristics of conversion in which these are presented in a sharper contrast with those of development. Once these characteristics are defined, it becomes less of a problem to identify how some of these characteristics – blurred as they may be in the actual stories – may help distinguish even incremental conversion from normal moral development.

This focus on sharp-turn conversion as the primary analog does not mean that “incremental” conversions are per se less “worthy” of being called conversions. The emphasis at this point on sharp-turn conversions is based on their making it possible to

sharpen our descriptive focus, so as to identify central characteristics of moral conversion in sharper detail than if we looked at narratives of incremental conversion. That is, a conceptual filtering is applied, but this is done for methodological reasons, and not for preconceived preferences for one description over the other, or to prematurely close the question being investigated. Furthermore, even if certain characteristics that will be considered here can be distinguished more clearly in sharp-turn conversions, this should be not taken to mean *a priori* that such characteristics are necessarily more significant in sharp-turn than in incremental conversions: that is something to be considered once these characteristics have been identified. So if it were determined, for example, that sharp-turn conversions strongly suggest the presence of free will in the agent (as will be discussed in the following chapter), this should not be taken to mean *a priori* that sharp-turn conversions demonstrate a “freer” will than cases of incremental conversion.

This said, the notion of “sharp-turn” conversion as the primary analog of conversion will now take a front seat in our considerations. As will be seen, this methodological move is of special importance when characterizing conversion as *existential*.

## **5. Moral conversion as “existential”**

### What is “existentialism”?

Though the problem of “existence” has a very long philosophical history, the term “existential” made its appearance in twentieth-century philosophy, with a more narrow – and one may say, dramatic - focus. Partly a reaction against a Hegelian type of rationalism, existentialist philosophy in its many, varied shapes focused not on the

general, metaphysical question of existence, but on the dramatic, concrete situation of the human being as existent.

The term “existentialism” does not denominate a philosophical school or tradition, but rather a cultural movement with expressions in philosophy, literature and art. Authors considered under this denomination (such as Heidegger or Camus) have sometimes fiercely opposed being characterized as such. The concept, however, is helpful in that it does identify a cluster of distinctive philosophical themes, “a relatively distinct current of twentieth- and now twenty-first century philosophical inquiry.”<sup>419</sup> Partly because the term was never considered to be the possession of a single school, partly because existentialist authors reflected on a number of issues that incorporated pressing concerns of their culture and times, and partly because of the extended reach of literary works through which these reflections were often expressed, the term acquired widespread use in Western culture, and has never entirely crystallized into a technical notion. The downside of this is that, while a certain ambiguity follows the use of the term, those who use it at times overlook this ambiguity, assuming perhaps that the meaning of the term is distinctly known by their audience. Gibbs and Conn, in the texts discussed above, exemplify this tendency. But on the other hand, perhaps an important reason for the popularity of the term is precisely that it collects a number of important themes in a dynamic, open-ended way that other philosophical terms dealing with the same issues do not. This is in fact the reason why the term has been chosen to characterize *conversion* in general, and *moral conversion* in particular: the term “conversion,” and the theme that it

designates, is also of a very open-ended, cross-currents nature; and thus no other term we have at our disposition seems to convey its problematic as adequately as the term “existential” does.

But in order for it to be of any use, the meaning of the term in the context of this work must be specified to some extent. The term resists a proper definition (e.g. by genus and difference); but it is possible to clarify its meaning by considering the themes that the term brings together, and the aspects regularly emphasized by existentialist thinkers. Not all of these themes, it must be noted, apply with equal significance to a characterization of conversion: specifying the term thus involves a certain “tailoring” of the concept to the needs of this work. The intention is to arrive at an adjectival notion that appropriately characterizes conversion.<sup>420</sup>

A preliminary discussion was offered in Chapter 5, Section 1.A. There it was proposed that the term, as it is commonly used, draws our attention, first, to the importance of the change, (as in the phrase “he made an existential decision”); i.e. it is a change that affects a person’s life in very significant and fundamental ways. Second, the

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<sup>419</sup> Steven Crowell, "Existentialism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2006 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (URL: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2006/entries/existentialism/>>).

<sup>420</sup> This approach may be accused of yielding somewhat of a circular definition: “conversion” is characterized as “an existential change,” while the meaning of “existential” is specified by mentioning those characteristics that the author attributes to conversion. Regarding this difficulty, three things can be said. First, that it is part of any theoretical development that wants to rise above the notions of common sense to circumscribe at some point a specific context of meaning with its related terminology: little solid advances can be made otherwise, if one is subject to the unexpected variations of meaning of everyday language. (See Lonergan, *Method*, 81-85.) This is what is being done here with the notions of “moral conversion” and “existentialism.” Second, that what is intended is not to arbitrarily designate the meaning of “conversion,” but to articulate the notion in such a way that it includes what has been gathered regarding the historical development of the term, its everyday use, and its use in the scholarly literature. These sources are constant referents. Third, that in order to get beyond a mere conceptual distinction (and show that the notion of conversion as shaped here corresponds to something actual) it will be necessary to refer again to narratives of conversion.

term points to something insofar as it is real and concrete, as opposed to something being “merely academic,” detachedly theoretical, etc. (as in an event “having existential consequences”). Third, the term “existential” has the connotation of something being personal; that is, the term seems to apply appropriately to persons and to persons only. Fourth, that *existential* involves the contingency of the concrete and of a consequent degree of unpredictability or unexpectedness – the fact that things happen that are not planned, plans fail, accidents occur, and this cannot be prevented by any amount of rational planning. And fifth, the term “existential” has the connotation of an emphasis on freedom, but also on freedom as a harsh blessing. While this was sufficient to clarify the meaning of “existential” for preliminary purposes, this presentation excluded some more technical connotations of the term that are very useful for a deeper philosophical understanding of moral conversion. It is necessary, for this reason, to go now into a more technical account of the notion.

Steven Crowell, in his article on “Existentialism” for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, provides a useful summary of the themes that characterize existentialism as a philosophical movement. Regarding its epistemological tenets, Crowell identifies as a characteristic of existentialism

its claim that thinking about human existence requires new categories not found in the conceptual repertoire of ancient or modern thought. . . neither scientific nor moral inquiry can fully capture what it is that makes me myself, my "ownmost" self.<sup>421</sup>

This insufficiency, it is claimed, does not entail a denial of the validity of scientific categories, but on the need (that Crowell traces to Heidegger) that the question of human

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<sup>421</sup> Crowell, "Existentialism."



existence be raised *concretely*, not as some academic exercise, but as “a burning concern arising from life itself, the question of what it means for me to be.”<sup>422</sup>

According to Heidegger, the categories bequeathed by the philosophical tradition for understanding a being who can question his or her being are insufficient: traditional concepts of a substance decked out with reason, or of a subject blessed with self-consciousness, misconstrue our fundamental character as “being-in-the-world.”<sup>423</sup>

This epistemological theme is developed further in the existentialist notion of *facticity*. Facticity includes all those properties that third-person investigation can establish about a person – about *me*; but although the validity of this investigation is not denied, what is claimed is that such an investigation reveals little about my existence, “the kind of being I am.” In contrast to this *facticity*, existentialist philosophers present a notion often articulated as “transcendence,” which refers in this context to “the stance I take toward my facticity. . . that attitude toward myself characteristic of my practical engagement in the world, the agent's perspective.”<sup>424</sup> This aspect of my “being-in-the-world” cannot be accessed by scientific inquiry, nor by the traditional categories of philosophy.

Two further elements of existentialist reflection should be mentioned regarding this stance or attitude. The first is that this stance or attitude (towards one’s facticity, towards one’s concrete being in the world, etc.) has been interpreted by some existentialist thinkers as a “fundamental project” or basic choice of oneself, which in turn gives distinctive shape to an individual’s life. This choice of self is not always transparent to

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

the person; but it is considered nevertheless fundamental in shaping a person's identity or being-in-the-world.<sup>425</sup>

The second point regarding this stance or attitude towards one's concrete being in the world is that there is the possibility of not taking any such stance at all – and more than a mere possibility, this seems to many existentialist thinkers to be the common case. We have seen this possibility come out, for example, in Lonergan's description of the “drifters,” those people the problem with whom is that “they do nothing very deliberately.”<sup>426</sup> The opposite of this possibility is formulated by many existentialist thinkers as “authenticity,” a normative ideal that could be fairly characterized as the central moral theme in existentialism.

Doing the right thing from a fixed and stable character — which virtue ethics considers a condition of the good — is not beyond the reach of existential evaluation: such character may simply be a product of my tendency to “do what one does,” including feeling “the right way” about things and betaking myself in appropriate ways as one is expected to do. But such character might also be *a reflection of my choice of myself, a commitment I make to be a person of this sort*. In both cases I have succeeded in being good; only in the latter case, however, have I succeeded in being myself. . . . In contrast, the inauthentic life would be one without such integrity, one in which I allow my life-story to be dictated by the world. Be that as it may, it is clear that one can commit oneself to a life of chameleon-like variety, as does Don Juan in Kierkegaard's version of the legend.<sup>427</sup>

The idea of “engaged agency,” the idea of the “integrity of a life-narrative,” the idea of “being autonomous,” of “choosing resolutely” and committing oneself to a certain course of action are variations on this theme of authenticity.<sup>428</sup> The theme, also frequently

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<sup>425</sup> The notion of choice is of course philosophically problematic; it will be discussed in detail in the next Chapter. In the present context, however, the language of “choice” is used with the specific purpose of laying out this important existentialist idea, the idea in other words “that in the first-person perspective of agency I cannot conceive myself as determined by anything that is available to me only in third-person terms.” Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 115.

<sup>427</sup> Crowell, “Existentialism.” (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

found in existentialism, of a tension or opposition between the individual and the public, the individual and the crowd is also related to the idea of authenticity:

“The crowd is untruth.” The crowd is, roughly, public opinion in the widest sense — the ideas that a given age takes for granted; the ordinary and accepted way of doing things; the complacent attitude that comes from the conformity necessary for social life — and what condemns it to “untruth” in Kierkegaard's eyes is the way that it insinuates itself into an individual's own sense of who she is, relieving her of the burden of being herself: if everyone is a Christian there is no need for me to “become” one.<sup>429</sup>

It was said above that the choice that grounds a “fundamental project” for the self is not always transparent. It should be added that there is also the possibility of self-deception. For this reason, the move towards the existentialist ideal of authenticity must commonly be prefaced by first becoming clear about one's own being as an inquirer.<sup>430</sup> (The parallel between this idea and the Lonerganian idea that moral conversion requires intellectual or cognitive conversion can easily be seen, and indeed, intellectual conversion is one of the key elements in Lonergan's own notion of “authenticity.”)

This notion of authenticity is of particular relevance in the context — another pervading theme of existentialism — of a perceived “collapse of objective values,” which renders the person bereft of an objective moral anchor. In this context, from an existentialist perspective, the only options left to the person are a) an uncritical acquiescence in values that would be found devoid of ground under careful examination; b) some sort of morally meaningless existence or c) the existentialist self-affirmation that characterizes the authentic person as the only source of his/her meaning, and so a wholly autonomous commitment to value.

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid.

In this context, the question about the nature of freedom naturally arises. The existentialist approach to the question about freedom is not framed in terms of the classical arguments against determinism; rather, the focus is on such experiences, key for existentialist authors, of *anxiety* and *alienation*, which, it is claimed, are not merely psychological events, but reveal fundamental aspects of the human self. The experience of “alienation” (expressed in the Heideggerian article *unheimlich*, translated sometimes as the “uncanny”) points to “the strangeness of a world in which I precisely do not feel ‘at home.’”<sup>431</sup> The experience of “anxiety” (*Angst, angoisse*)

pulls me altogether out of the circuit of those projects thanks to which things are there for me in meaningful ways; I can no longer “gear into” the world. . . . In thus robbing me of the possibility of practical self-identification, anxiety teaches me that I do not coincide with anything that I factually am. . .

So long as I am gearing into the world practically, in a seamless and absorbed way, things present themselves as meaningfully co-ordinated with the projects in which I am engaged... Anxiety undermines the taken-for-granted sense of things. They become absurd. Things do not disappear, but all that remains of them is the blank recognition that they are. . . . While such an experience is no more genuine than my practical, engaged experience of a world of meaning, it is no less genuine either.<sup>432</sup>

In this manner, the experiences of alienation and anxiety reveal to the person that a person is not to be identified with his/her “facticity,” that one is not, in that sense, the same as the objects in the world. Such experiences therefore have the potential to become wake-up calls, directing or restoring the person towards the path of authenticity. But although these experiences are, in a sense, fundamental to the human condition, this does not mean that everyone will necessarily have them or respond to them. A well-adjusted bourgeois, for example, might live his entire life without experiencing any radical sense

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

of alienation or anxiety – and as such, without becoming aware of a need or a call towards authenticity.<sup>433</sup>

What has been said should suffice for a general view of the themes fundamental to existentialism, and the connection between these themes. It remains now to indicate why it is claimed that the phenomenon of conversion may be better described – and be better understood - by making reference to these existentialist themes.

### Conversion as “existential”

The present claim is that the phenomenon of conversion (in general, and of moral conversion in particular) can be better described and better understood by making reference to some of the themes explored by existentialist thinkers. This claim may be expanded a bit by adding that even the “undifferentiated” understanding of the term “existential” – as it occurs in non-academic speech – can also contribute to a better description of the phenomenon of conversion.

To be clear, the claim being made here is not that moral conversion is a theme pertaining exclusively to existentialism, but that the historical emergence of the existentialist movement has provided us with heuristic structures that are extremely useful to describe and understand what goes on in moral conversion. As will be seen, some of the meanings that are thus gathered illuminate most clearly the primary analog, sharp-turn conversions, while some apply almost indistinctly across all analogues.

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<sup>433</sup> See for example Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, tr. Lloyd Alexander (New York: MJF Books, 1964), 83-85; Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words* (New York, G. Braziller, 1964), 87.

### 1. “Existential” as “important”

It was advanced in Chapter 5 that the term “existential” can draw attention, first, to the importance of a change, as when one talks of “an existential decision,” or of an event having “existential consequences.” One of the connotations of expressions such as these is that a particular change, decision or event affects a person’s life fundamentally. This is not a connotation found immediately in the philosophical use of the term “existential,” but it is present in the everyday use of the word. This connotation of “importance” is also characteristic of the notion of *conversion* across all of its analogues. The concept does not refer simply to any sort of change in a person’s views or habits, unless the people using it are being humorous, ironic, figurative, etc.; and even in these uses the humor or the irony is based on the understanding that, normally, the term “conversion” is reserved for very important, potentially or actually life-changing events.

*What* is considered a life-changing event or circumstance is of course a relative matter. Some changes may affect some people “existentially” in this sense, but not other people in the same way. A change, for example, from a life focused on consumerist acquisition to one focused on helping others might be an “existential” change for most people. A change in a person’s judgment concerning the moral status of abortion may only affect “academically” the students who are considering the issue in a college course, but may affect existentially a doctor or a nurse working in an abortionist clinic, or a pro-life or pro-choice activist. For the latter persons, the issue is at the center of their moral lives, or at least at the center of an important aspect of their moral lives. A change of this sort might then – if other relevant characteristics are also present – be considered a

conversion. Thus the term “existential” also implies that something has consequences that are real and concrete, as opposed to “merely academic,” detachedly theoretical, etc.

## 2. Facticity

Returning to the academic meaning of the term, an important point to call attention to is the existentialist observation regarding the limits of regular scientific categories when it comes to understanding the individual person – what has been considered under the notion of “facticity.” What arises from applying this notion to the prime analog of moral conversion is that a study of conversion, unlike a study of normal moral development, involves elements that seem to be beyond the reach of quantifying empirical method.

This point has been already suggested. While considering the methodological reasons for the use of narrative evidence in Chapter 5, it was proposed that quantitative empirical research on conversion, even if it happened to exist, would be of little use for this study, because what is intended here is to get insight into the “internal” processes – cognitive and emotional – that occur in conversion. The data from quantitative empirical research, it was argued, would yield very little information, if any, about these aspects; thus the preference for detailed narratives, frequently autobiographical, that elaborate on the internal struggles, the streams of internal argumentation, the conflicting emotions, and other aspects that might be regarded as operative in the process of conversion. The point for looking at the existentialist notion of “facticity” is that it points to the reasons why quantitative empirical research is of so little use when describing conversion. If the existentialist point about facticity is granted, this means there is much to understand

about a human person *qua* individual, much therefore that is beyond the reach of empirical, quantifying, “3<sup>rd</sup> person” research, and important elements of conversion belong to this category.<sup>434</sup>

The reason – expressed informally because a careful epistemological argument for this point is beyond the scope of this dissertation – is that an understanding of the intelligibility in the phenomenon of conversion involves understanding “existential” elements such as a (deeply) personal history of facts, attitudes, emotions and behavioral habits learned, imitated, admired, absorbed, resisted, questioned, examined, colored by a certain attitude, sometimes within, sometimes outside the developmental norm, that devolve (or not) into some sort of crisis, and get resolved into peaceful acceptance, a fearful step forward, an unstable truce, a hopeful resolution, or any of an enormous number of potential personal outcomes. Understanding the aspects of moral development that are natural/spontaneous means understanding regularities and, if possible, the general reasons behind such regularities; thus the quantifying empirical method is relevant to its study even if many of the elements mentioned above are also at play in relation to natural/spontaneous developmental processes. But understanding *conversion* means focusing on a personal history in terms of aspects such as the intellectual and moral, the affective, biological, relational, and dramatic; and even beyond a personal history, it means understanding a present attitude towards such elements, and even the empirically

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<sup>434</sup> There have been, of course, quantitative attempts to study conversion – Starbuck’s study of religious conversion, discussed in Chapter 2, is a classic example. But what Starbuck describes in his study of religious conversion fits better under the rubric of “natural/spontaneous development”: he describes in his study a recurrent phenomenon, and establishes its statistical frequency with respect to a clearly circumscribed age group. In other words, not every phenomenon that is called “conversion” in the literature or in everyday use would necessarily fit the description of a phenomenon that defies a quantifying analysis.



intractable element of *choice*.<sup>435</sup> Whatever natural/spontaneous, quantifiable elements are involved in moral conversion, the most important aspects of the process of conversion are not amenable to that kind of inquiry.

Another way in which conversion seems to be beyond the reach of quantifying empirical method concerns (by contrast) the way in which natural/spontaneous moral development is understood to be stable enough to admit of dependable *predictions*. The reason is that what we mean by normal moral development are *recurrent patterns* that can be found in a group, a population, or even across civilizations, patterns that can be identified through empirical quantitative studies; the presence of these patterns grounds the scientists' expectations of being able to formulate predictions regarding moral development.<sup>436</sup> Beyond scientific predictions, of course, it is also possible for people with enough experience of human behavior and conduct to identify similar patterns (albeit in methodologically undifferentiated ways). If, for example, the selfish behavior of a small child becomes a cause of concern for her young parents, an older adult may comfort them by telling them that "you were the same when you were that age," by which it is implied that the child is repeating normal patterns and, just as her parents did,

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<sup>435</sup> A further, more synthetic theory may be ventured here, though this is not the place to defend it, and is presented merely as "food for thought" at this point: the phenomenon of conversion is beyond the reach of a quantifying empirical analysis because *its intelligibility is of a narrative kind*, and as such beyond the grasp of a method that essentially attempts to divide its object into discrete, atomic units.

<sup>436</sup> Of course, researchers on the psychology of moral development work under the assumption that such patterns of normal moral development exist (at least within the context of extended human communities, if not universally), and that they can be empirically/quantitatively mapped to some extent; and (unless they are absolute empiricists) that some explanation can be found, some theory developed, that explains the regularity of a pattern. One needs to grant these assumptions in order to concede the significance in perceivable patterns of development; but perhaps this is not too much to ask for, given that the opposite would essentially mean generally invalidating all such research up to this day.

will eventually outgrow those imperfections – or, if preferred, reach a more perfect stage of development in that aspect. In fact, this kind of nontechnical prediction, like methodologically sophisticated predictions, may be issued *even without knowing the child in particular*, because the child is repeating general, well-known patterns. It is when a person deviates from such perceived patterns that he/she may become a cause of concern even for those familiar with the normal patterns of moral development, because in those cases there is great uncertainty regarding what will become of that person. For this reason, moral conversion often generates some degree of uneasiness among those close to the convert, even if some of the immediate fruits of the conversion appear to be good: the person is operating in ways very different from the known patterns.

Conn's interpretation of Kohlberg (though itself highly debatable) illustrates some of the consequences of the irruption of the existential (here as the "concrete unpredictable") in the realm of facticity. Conn, it was said, considers the process of moral development as a process in which both natural/spontaneous and existentially-driven changes take place; but if the process as a whole can be mapped, as Kohlberg does, into a quantifiable pattern, Conn seems to imply that the existential parts of the process account for the *significant irregularities* of the process as a whole. Kohlberg's stage-sequence, it may be noted, not only establishes very wide age-ranges for reaching the higher stages of moral reasoning, but also establishes that some individuals *do not reach some of these at all*. Conn explains this fact by positing the need of existential moves, that by definition are not natural/spontaneous, and as such are *not guaranteed* by any set of "developmental laws" based on the observation of recurrent patterns. Implicit in Conn there is an

explanation for the low rate of occurrences of the postconventional stages of moral reasoning: the higher the stage, the more conversions the person would have had to go through, which causes a cumulatively diminishing probability for each of the further stages until they become just too improbable to appear in any significant number, especially when the cultural conditions required for the higher stages are absent. Of course, Conn's description of moral development, if true, would posit a significant difficulty for empirical studies of moral development such as Kohlberg's: it would imply that the process of natural/spontaneous moral development is interspersed with "existential black holes" that resist here and there the analysis from facticity; "pockets" of a kind of intelligibility that quantitative empirical analysis cannot quite grasp.

Whether Conn is on target or not, his model also helps to understand an important difference between *sharp-turn* and *incremental* conversion. *Incremental* conversion is compatible with the natural/spontaneous process of moral development: its presence does not frustrate this process, or contradict its orientation (and, if Conn is right, it may even be required in order for the natural/spontaneous process to continue its dynamism into a higher stage). *Sharp-turn* conversions, instead, seem to be for the most part unrelated to the dynamism of natural/spontaneous development, and they may at times frustrate it or contradict its orientation.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> More precisely: Natural/spontaneous moral development is predictable regarding (1) its direction; (2) its rhythm or schedule; and (3) its success or results. Kohlbergian research, for example, has established to a significant degree that development is unidirectional (Gibbs, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," 48-49; Rest, "Background: Theory and Research," 16-18.), and has established a certain rhythm or schedule for the achievement of certain stages. In third place, natural/spontaneous moral development is essentially predictable in terms of results or success. There is, for example, a basic expectation that a society or a community in which the relevant moral and pedagogical structures are solidly established, and does not have significant systemic deficiencies, will produce morally well-adjusted people, at least by minimum

This break in regularity and predictability of natural/spontaneous recurring patterns, involved by the presence of conversion, raises important questions regarding the adequacy of pan-deterministic interpretations of natural regularities; questions directly connected with the discussion about the possibility of freedom. These questions will be considered in detail in Chapter 9.

### 3. Transcendence

The flipside of the existentialist observation on facticity is the notion of “transcendence” – which, because facticity has been discussed in some detail, will need to be considered only briefly. The existentialist use of the term “transcendence” adopts almost entirely different meanings from other philosophers’ use of it. In existentialist thought, the notion simply stands for that attitude or stance a person takes towards the person’s factual circumstances (the person’s *facticity*), and which as such, it is claimed, makes the person’s existence and conditions transcend that facticity.<sup>438</sup> A third-person investigation may be able to describe my factual circumstances – age, physical shape, social class, financial facts, etc. – but my attitude, the way in which I live or choose to live those circumstances is beyond the reach of such an investigation, and makes me

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standards, in a number sufficient to maintain the community in decent shape and pass on the moral standards to the next generation. The expectation is not that a sufficient number of people will experience some quasi-epiphanic experience of an awakening to moral values, but that in the regular course of events such people are produced.

The first point, direction, is the main point of distinction between *incremental* and *sharp-turn* conversion. Sharp-turn conversion is by definition unpredictable with regards to its direction, while incremental conversion by definition continues in a certain direction. *If* some forms of incremental conversion can be demonstrated to form part of an overarching developmental process, involving both natural/spontaneous and existential moments, then such forms of incremental conversion would also be to a certain degree predictable in terms of a schedule. In terms of success or results, however, it is probably adequate to regard both types as similarly rejecting a predictability based on recurring patterns.

<sup>438</sup> Crowell, "Existentialism."

more than that facticity.

Reflecting on this existentialist theme throws additional light on how conversion is usefully described as “existential.” As has just been discussed, conversion does not properly fit in analyses that focus on what the existentialists would call facticity. This entails then that the gravitational center of the notion of conversion is on the side of “transcendence.” This means that conversion can be understood as one of those “attitudinal” elements that make a person’s life be more than their mere facticity. Recall the examples of the second class of conversion, conversion regarding attitude, to see how this is the case. As indicated in Chapter 5, there is no report of the external circumstances of Antonio Pickett’s life (case # 20) varying significantly during his stay in prison; but at a certain point a change in his attitude took place, which made his life completely different, not only in terms of goals and objectives, but in his overall perception of the goodness of life. As Pickett’s partner in crime and in conversion Evans Robinson puts it, “the air smells different. The sun seems brighter. Things aren't so bleak all the time.”<sup>439</sup>

Moral conversion then can be characterized as “existential” in that *it involves a person in assuming an attitude or stance, which informs their facticity and transcends it*. This is sufficiently clear in conversions regarding attitude, and also in conversions regarding behavioral coherence (which, as was noted, involves itself an attitudinal change as well). It is less clear perhaps in conversions regarding content; but here it may be argued that, even if there is no significant change in a person’s attitude, the person’s moral attitude or moral stance (even if stable while other things are changing) still plays a

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<sup>439</sup> Huppke, "Four Who Watch over the City."

significant part in moral conversion. When one is challenged with facing the possibility that one's moral convictions were mistaken in some way or other – and therefore need restructuring - part of the challenge consists in maintaining (or restructuring) one's moral *attitude* in regard to the newly adopted content.

#### 4. Authenticity

The theme of authenticity is closely connected to that of transcendence.

Existentialist thinkers note the difference between “owning” one's life project, values, moral convictions, etc. as opposed to “drifting” – living a life perhaps highly moral, but lacking reflection and a positive embracing of such a project or set of values. This latter “drifting” attitude has been critically characterized in a variety of ways – as living in “bad faith,” being one with the unreflective crowd, living “bourgeois values,” taking morality for granted, being a “serious man,” living only a life of facticity, and so forth. But the central element and common theme in these characterizations is the combination of lack of reflection and lack of awareness about one's lack of reflection. By contrast, what is here being called “authenticity” involves a critical positioning of oneself regarding such values – a self-conscious attempt to reflect critically, to examine the grounding of values, or to acknowledge their lack of grounding if such is what one's critical reflection reveals, and then the taking of a position regarding them. It is a move not dissimilar to what Lonergan would call “critical self-appropriation.”<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>440</sup> Strictly speaking, the taking of a position might be labeled an “act of transcendence”; but note that one *can* take a position, adopt a stance, *without* critical reflection to ground it; but critical reflection, authenticity, without taking a position remains incomplete, “bad faith,” inauthentic. As has been mentioned, the key themes of existentialism are deeply interlocked in meaning and scope of application, unlike more tidily defined concepts in many other philosophical traditions.

To characterize moral conversion as existential in this particular sense a connection needs to be found between conversion and this particular theme. But the connection is in this case somewhat debatable. For it depends on elements of conversion that are considered essential by an important portion of the literature on conversion, but not universally. In the Lonerganian literature, for example, moral conversion in its most complete form always involves a move of the agent towards authenticity, that is (for Lonergan) a significant degree of critical self-appropriation. Without going at this point into the details of Lonergan's concept of self-appropriation, suffice it to say that this involves reflection on what it is for oneself to be a knower and a chooser. It is called "critical" in this context to communicate the connotation – common in philosophical texts – of identifying and dispelling a number of myths about knowledge and objectivity in knowing and choosing. It is precisely in this sense that Conn distinguished between a *critical* and an *uncritical* moral conversion. For Conn, the former involves a previous intellectual or cognitive conversion by which the agent becomes aware of his/her subjective part in accepting values and in choosing. But a moral conversion that is not preceded by a cognitive conversion of this kind would be, for Conn, an "uncritical," imperfect form of moral conversion.<sup>441</sup>

Even though the idea that conversion involves a critical (in this sense) element is not universally found in the literature on conversion, it does not seem however unreasonable to consider that whenever some profound revision of one's moral structures takes place – of one's values, their grounding, one's attitude towards morality, one's life

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<sup>441</sup> Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 116.

project, the things held as meaningful, or what is the real possibility of achieving a certain degree of moral coherence – some degree of awareness of alternatives, at least of what one is leaving and what one is adopting, and of how they compare to each other must accompany such a revision. It may be reasonable then to posit a continuum of reflectiveness in conversions, from the “some degree of awareness” just described up to full Lonerganian “critical self-appropriation.” This means that the existentialist notion of *authenticity* may need to be understood with varying degrees of analogy when applied to conversion. Nevertheless it still seems more accurate to refer to authenticity, in relation to conversion, as one of the concomitant meanings entailed in the expression “conversion as existential,” than to allow conversion to be described in terms of the unconscious “theories-in-action” and self-regulating processes that Gibbs, for example, proposes as characteristic of the realm of the natural/spontaneous.<sup>442</sup> And it may further be argued that, even if the theme of authenticity as critical reflection cannot be found in as many narratives of conversion as would justify including it universally, still this analogical understanding of authenticity as including “simply” reflection (i.e. not necessarily dealing with a *critical* discovery of oneself as knower), is an appropriate descriptor of moral conversion. Then the much stronger claim could perhaps be made that *every conversion, understood as the sharp-turn, prime analog, includes a measure of reflection.* This claim, however, cannot be defended here: it will be discussed in detail in Chapter 10.

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<sup>442</sup> Note that an emphasis on this theme may be also conceptually beneficial when it comes to distinguishing conversion from (profoundly harmful) processes that are *externally* similar, such as ideological indoctrination, “brain washing,” or behavioral changes caused by mental disease that are rationalized by the patient. (Interestingly, differentiating between these and conversion in the concrete cases could possibly be among the aspects that may at times escape the reach of investigations that only examine the realm of facticity.)



### 5. Anxiety and alienation

A quick survey of other existentialist themes would throw into further relief how fitting is the characterization of conversion as existential. The themes of anxiety and alienation can be related to the reported feelings of uneasiness and weariness that in a number of narratives precede the moment of conversion, as were described in the texts by Griffin and James considered in Chapter 4. Beyond mere weariness, however, a more emphatically “metaphysical” reading of these experiences – as found in Heidegger, for example – interprets them as experiences that fundamentally undermine our taking-for-granted the world and its familiar, operative certainties. This reading resonates strongly with narratives in which moral conversion is preceded by a sense of being lost in a familiar world, or followed by some form of estrangement from friends and relatives due to the new convictions or attitude. Think for example of the experience of Wayne Bauer (case #2), who, coming from a working middle-class, “American patriotism” background joined the Marine Corps in the 60’s, became an objector against the Vietnam war after some friends convinced him that his best argument “held no weight.” The way in which Bauer describes his feelings at the time clearly speaks both of alienation and anxiety:

And what happened was, all of a sudden, my view of who I was and my environment was shattered. It was like looking in the mirror and having the whole thing shattered on you and seeing all your values, all your beliefs, everything you thought was real just kind of crumble. And it left me without any values and it also left me in a position where I had this terrible feeling of loneliness that there was no one I could go to for help. All the people I had trusted, I feel, essentially, they had lied to me.<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

Not only has his familiar world been shattered morally; Bauer will physically estrange himself from that world and go underground for some years, until he is eventually discharged from the Corps.

#### 6. The contingency of the concrete

Another important connotation of the term “existential” is its reference to the contingency of the concrete. The observation here goes beyond the matter, already discussed, of the limitations of quantifying empirical method applied to moral conversion as its research subject, and its consequent limitations in terms of prediction capacity. Existentialist authors go beyond this observation to characterize phenomenologically the way in which this unpredictability is personally experienced, as a powerfully dramatic experience.

In contrast with natural/spontaneous development, conversion seems to be unpredictable in terms of direction, rhythm or schedule, and also in terms of results or success.<sup>444</sup> It is especially on the latter respect –unpredictability regarding results or success – that existentialist reflection narrows its dramatic focus. Existentialists characteristically emphasize the anxiety that the consequent awareness of a fundamental lack of control produces in the person, as an actual lack of control or as the ever present possibility of losing control in those matters that depend on our free choice. Sartre’s Roquentin in *Nausea* criticizes the illusory safety in which most people – particularly the bourgeois – seem to live, trusting in the regularity of events, a regularity that he perceives

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<sup>444</sup> See note 437.

to be ungrounded. The general perception of this ungroundedness is a cause for anxiety for him, and according to existentialist thinkers, to reflective people in general: things happen that are not planned, plans fail, accidents occur, and this cannot be prevented by any amount of rational planning. This anxiety is accentuated in processes that are dependent on subjective willingness, because this dependence entails that even one's best desires may succumb to one's own unwillingness to change, or to one's lack of stability in purpose, when either of these are demanded.

This type of anxiety seems to be particularly characteristic of narratives of conversion regarding behavioral coherence, in which the struggle to conquer old habits becomes the focal point of the person's efforts, and not only the struggle to conquer them but even to just maintain one's ground. The Christian tradition on spirituality is also very forceful on this matter: not only do we find insistence on the difficulties involved in doing what is good, but Christian treatises on spirituality are full of war images of fortresses and castles and with insistent calls to be vigilant, and to avoid being overconfident in one's own strengths.

This inherently unpredictable, almost accidental character of conversion often seems to make conversion something that can never be counted on.<sup>445</sup> Natural/

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<sup>445</sup> The episode told in Augustine's *Confessions* (III, 12) in which Augustine's mother Monica asks a certain unnamed bishop to help her convince Augustine out of his Manichean beliefs has interesting resonances in this respect. The bishop's first words of reassurance to Monica are developmental: he too was a Manichean when he did not know better, but eventually grew out of the heresy on his own. When this fails to comfort Augustine's mother, the bishop tells her, with some impatience, "Go your way! As sure as you live, it is impossible that a child of such tears should perish." Monica is not comforted by the developmental approach; the only other reassurance that the bishop can then offer to Monica is theological: it is grounded on Monica's faith in God's mercy and the hope that God will have pity on her, and not on expectations based on the regular course of events.

spontaneous development cannot be entirely taken for granted, given that accidents may occur; but it can be at least “counted on,” if everything goes normally; it is, so to speak, on the high end of probability. Such seems not to be the case with conversion, which, as an existential event, cannot be placed *at either end* of the probability scale, and rather seems to belong outside the realm of statistics and predictability altogether. People “hope” for conversion when they perceive that it is needed; they rarely “expect” it; what they can expect however is the natural/spontaneous aspect of normal moral development.

On the other hand, if this unpredictable, almost accidental character of conversion makes conversion something that cannot be counted on, it also makes conversion something that usually arrives unexpected. And the conversion stories are numerous enough to justify saying that it does sometimes arise. If the often pessimistic existentialist literature frequently emphasizes humanity’s causes for anxiety and the perceived precariousness of the human good and human virtue, narratives of moral conversion carry the message that the world *is still a place full of surprises* – good surprises: a place where love and forgiveness show up unexpected, where the personal path to self-destruction is not only sometimes averted but becomes the soil for transforming wisdom, where good intentions may overcome age-old hatreds and where goodness may rise against all apparent odds. The world of moral conversion is, granted, a world often overlooked, dismissed sometimes as an anomaly, not worth considering. But the narratives presented as examples in this work are real-life stories. As such they give us reasons for hope, because they show that what one may hope for is something real.

## 6. Conclusion

The question presented at the beginning of this chapter, how to distinguish “moral development” from “moral conversion,” has now been responded to, through some terminological and conceptual clarifications and the introduction of the distinction between incremental and sharp-turn conversion. At the terminological level, it was necessary to narrow down the expression “moral development.” “Moral development” is a very wide expression that is often used indistinctly to include all forms of moral transformation as long as they are considered generally positive (since “development” commonly implies a positive judgment). The narrower expression “*normal* moral development” was originally judged useful to frame the contrast with moral conversion. It soon, however, became somewhat insufficient, because it raised immediate questions about “what is normal”; and more importantly, because the expression itself is too vague to distinguish between development and some forms of what I have now called *incremental conversion*, that may be intertwined with regular developmental processes. This process of terminological clarification eventually settled on the phrase “natural/spontaneous moral development,” which was intended to be equivalent to the phrase “normal moral development,” and which was then contrasted with the notion of “moral conversion.”

Instrumental in this terminological development was the consideration of a difficulty proposed by Walter Conn; namely, his suggestion that conversion might be considered an integral part of normal moral development. This suggestion raised some conceptual difficulties, because conversion and natural/spontaneous development would

have seemed in that case to merge too closely for the distinction to be of any use. But this difficulty was resolved by introducing the distinction between *incremental conversion*, which may in some cases be so integrated into a process of normal moral development, and *sharp-turn conversion*, which cannot be so integrated, and on which, as the primary analogue of the notion of moral conversion, the analysis was consequently focused.

The key criterion to distinguish between normal (or “natural/spontaneous”) moral development and moral conversion was identified as the distinction between natural/spontaneous processes and (corresponding to conversion) “existential” processes. The idea of developing the distinction in this manner was inspired by Conn’s treatment of the distinction between moral development and conversion; but given Conn’s lack of sufficient clarity on this issue, it became then necessary to develop the meaning of the notion of the “existential” in more specific terms. This need was addressed through a focused application of the central existentialist themes, terminology, and heuristic structures to the notion of moral conversion. This helped to identify many important characteristics of moral conversion, most of them in contrast to the sphere of the natural/spontaneous. In order to carry these observations beyond a mere conceptual elaboration, and show that this characterization fits real stories, a few of the narrative examples from Chapter 5 were revisited.

Among the characteristics of moral conversion thus explored, this chapter has examined the issue of moral conversion being significantly beyond the reach of the quantifying empirical method, and also beyond the possibility of reliable predictions both following from empirical research and from common sense experience. In that regard it

was indicated that what seems of most relevance for understanding the phenomenon of moral conversion is not what is externally observable, but what is “internal,” those very personal factors that are better reached in part via introspection, and socially through data presented in narrative form. The questions these observations raise for epistemology are numerous, but will not be pursued in this work.

The problematic regarding the potential unpredictability of moral conversion (and conversion in general), added to another existentialist theme not explored in the present chapter, namely that of human freedom, direct now our attention to the problem of *freedom and determinism*. This issue has received significant attention since the early origins of philosophical speculation. The following chapter will consider whether a study of moral conversion can add any useful insights to this long-ongoing discussion.

## CHAPTER 9

# CONVERSION AND THE DEBATE ON FREE CHOICE AND DETERMINISM

### **1. Introduction**

The discussion about moral conversion as an existential process, that is, as opposed to one following a natural/spontaneous process, brings to the foreground a matter that has been hovering in the background since the beginning pages of this work: the matter of freedom, or more precisely, of free choice as a factor in conversion. On a first approach, the fact of moral conversion (i.e., the fact that people undergo changes such as the ones described in Chapter 5) seems to controvert, or to constitute evidence against deterministic views – “determinism” understood here as *the philosophical view that denies the existence of free choice*.<sup>446</sup> For example, the unexpectedness that moral conversion involves and the abandonment of long-held, regular patterns of behavior both seem to oppose the predictability implied by deterministic views. In addition, the process of moral conversion often involves experiences that are commonly associated with the

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<sup>446</sup> By invoking “the fact of moral conversion,” I do not mean to imply that the existence of conversion events is incontrovertible. On the contrary, one of the aims of the previous chapters (particularly of Chapter 5) has been to establish that such events do in fact occur, and that they have the characteristics attributed to them up to this point. The arguments of Chapters 9 and 10 build on this argument.



idea of *choice*, e.g. anguish, struggle, anxiety, resolve and others. Thus, both from the point of view of third-person observation (of patterns of behavior) and introspective experience, the fact of conversion may be invoked as evidence against the deterministic views. But is this argument valid? Does the claim that determinism is false follow from this fact?

The topic of this chapter will be the specific extent to which a study of moral conversion contributes to this debate. The focal point of this contribution will vary slightly from other discussions of this issue. While discussions on free choice and determinism frequently focus on discrete instances of decision and action - “discrete” in the sense of concrete, specific acts that are argued to be either the result of a free choice or of deterministic processes - the focal point of this chapter will be on conversion as a process, not a discrete action, through which convictions, values, general attitudes and, eventually, *whole patterns of behavior* change. This alternative focal point may identify data that have not been as carefully considered and new insights or new arguments that may enrich the discussion.

The free choice/determinism debate is centuries old and extremely complex. Its complexities include debates about the meaning of the key concepts discussed, about the epistemological issues involved, and about the metaphysical ramifications of the debate *a priori* or *a posteriori*, i.e., what metaphysical views make possible and/or what metaphysical views follow from either position on the free choice/determinism debate. This chapter’s contributions to this debate do not directly address any of these areas of philosophical contention. This chapter aims only at demonstrating that the fact of moral

conversion, once carefully described and differentiated from other aspects of human experience (the task of chapters 1-8), constitutes an important kind of datum that participants in this debate ought to attend to.

The opening sections of this chapter situate it in relation to the larger determinism/free choice debate. Then those aspects in narratives of moral conversion will be examined that indicate that the fact of moral conversion is an important datum for the free choice/determinism debate.

## **2. *What the discussion is not about***

Surrounding, and deeply intertwined with the debate on free choice and determinism, are two discussions that frequently get confused with the discussion about free choice and determinism itself because of their close implications regarding this debate. Before examining moral conversion both in terms of observable and introspective evidence and their philosophical implications, it will be helpful to clarify the terms of the discussion by distinguishing it from these related, but not directly relevant issues.

### **A. The discussion about the relative stability of moral convictions**

An issue that frequently gets confused with the discussion of free choice and determinism is that of the *stability of moral convictions*, and whether, once they are acquired (e.g., through the incorporation of the cultural values held by the community a person inhabits), such convictions or values are set for life. The view that claims that *moral convictions and structures, once acquired and internalized, cannot be changed*

*under any circumstances* will be called here an “*absolute value-crystallization*” view.

This is the view asserted informally in such expressions as “people don’t change,” or “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” In this view, should a person fail to acquire such moral structures by some “proper” age, he/she could not thereafter become a moral person.

This view is often confused with determinism, and vice versa. This confusion, however – and the ensuing possibility of confusing this issue with the debate on freedom and determinism - seems to be based on an equivocation. If one grants the truth of absolute value-crystallization, it would seem to follow that the agent cannot “choose” to hold different moral views, i.e., one is “determined” by one’s breeding etc. to think morally in certain terms because it is impossible to change the views acquired at an earlier age. The equivocation here concerns what “determined” means. The fact, if it is one, that one cannot control or choose with respect to one trait or process does not entail that one cannot control or choose with respect to *every* trait or process, much less every act. Thus, even if one were to grant the truth of absolute value-crystallization, this would not exclude the possibility that one could act *against* one’s (unchangeable) moral convictions in specific, discrete instances. That is a separate question. In fact, the common experience of feelings of guilt and remorse after actions contrary to established moral conviction indicates that one’s moral convictions can remain as they were even as one has acted against them. Thus, one may conduct the debate about free choice and determinism regardless of one’s position about value-crystallization.

It is worth noting, however, that the truth of absolute value-crystallization would challenge the possibility of freedom on a specific context related to moral conversion. That is, if one were to conclude that moral conversion requires an exercise of freedom to take place, and absolute value-crystallization were true in its denial that such an exercise of freedom can take place, then the truth of absolute value-crystallization would entail the rejection of the possibility of moral conversion. So if the evidence of chapters 1-8 is accepted as confirming the existence of moral conversion as described, then absolute value-crystallization *must be false*. But as has been mentioned, neither this conclusion nor its contrary would tell us anything specifically about the wider free choice/determinism debate.<sup>447</sup> Absolute value-crystallization seems in any case to be extremely difficult to defend, in view of the achievements of psychology of moral development and of the evidence for the existence of instances of moral conversion.

While an absolute value-crystallization view is opposed to the possibility of moral conversion, however, a theory of *relative crystallization of moral values*, i.e., that moral structures normally become more stable, and progressively more difficult to modify in fundamental terms as the person becomes older (which seems to be confirmed by everyday experience and psychological observation) is not per se opposed to it. On the

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<sup>447</sup> An alternate version of absolute value-crystallization supports its claims by defining away competitors, that is, by stating the content of the “unmodifiable” moral structures in terms sufficiently general and vague to resist any factual comparison. One could take, for example, the story of a selfish person who eventually becomes generous or self-sacrificing (Dickens’s Scrooge is the paradigmatic figure), and say that this person was that way all along – that the selfish personality was a posture, that the person “had a good heart,” so there has been no real transformation. Or alternatively one could claim that this person’s values were not “crystallized” yet and counted as moral convictions only in the final pattern. One value of mentioning this possibility is that this pattern of definitional “argument” appears quite often in discussions of free choice and determinism, and in related discussions.

contrary, the truth of relative value-crystallization would partly explain why sharp-turn conversions are regarded as extraordinary, surprising, unexpected. But whatever views one holds with regard to this issue, the issue itself must be separated from that of the free choice/determinism debate.

### B. Indoctrination and externalist views on moral learning

The discussion of internalist and externalist views regarding the origin of moral convictions and moral judgments will be the focus of Chapter 10. It is in many aspects, however, entangled with the discussion about freedom and determinism; and for this reason it becomes necessary to disentangle them here.

A simplified way of getting at the meaning of “externalism” is by referring to the idea of “indoctrination.” To “indoctrinate” means “to cause somebody to have a particular set of beliefs, especially by giving them no opportunity to consider other points of view.”<sup>448</sup> “Indoctrination” is not a neutral term. It carries a negative implication, even an accusation: i.e., that the entity that indoctrinates is depriving the indoctrinated of something important, i.e., the opportunity to reflect on or debate the truth of the beliefs involved. Indoctrination can be carried out by brute force or by cunning or by a combination of the two, not by processes focused on inquiring, seeking the truth, or evaluating the contents of relevant beliefs. Thus indoctrination implies taking advantage of those whose critical capacity is not sufficiently developed to argue or question the beliefs involved, or overcoming the capacities of mature inquirers by force or cunning. It

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<sup>448</sup> Jonathan Crowther, ed., *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, Fifth ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

carries the implication of a dehumanizing process, of a diminution of the indoctrinated's effective freedom (assuming, as this notion ordinarily does, that there is such thing as freedom). In addition, as an outcome, those indoctrinated will be less prone to question potentially indefensible, irrational or unethical commands, and consequently more prone to act as desired by the indoctrinators rather than on their own judgments and choices.

One of the characteristic elements of indoctrination is that it is a matter of indifference to the process whether the indoctrinated contents are true or not. The reason why these contents come to be believed or become convictions rather than others is that an effective process of indoctrination has taken place. Here is where the similarities with externalist explanations of morality can be found. According to externalist explanations of morality, the specifically normative content of moral norms and values is not what makes them more or less apt to become moral norms or principles. The fact that moral norms or principles are acquired, adopted or internalized by the moral agent is attributed to "external" factors, that is, factors entirely independent of the intelligible/cognitive content (i.e., what is there to understand) of such principles or norms. In its most radical forms (e.g. Skinner's radical behaviorism, theories of psychological or behavioral contagion), "reinforcement" (conditioning) is postulated as working even without cognitive representations,<sup>449</sup> so that even the possibility of cognitive appropriation of the contents of norms of action is rejected. In less radical forms (e.g. modeling theories, vicarious reinforcement),<sup>450</sup> cognitive activities are involved: the person needs to be

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<sup>449</sup> Thomas E. Wren, *Caring About Morality : Philosophical Perspectives in Moral Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 42, 46.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

cognitively aware, for example, of the modeled behavior and/or the associated reinforcement (a reward or punishment). But even in the latter views, the content of the modeled behavior is still irrelevant; theoretically any behavior could be made into a pattern and judged as moral. The reinforcement process may not be guided by the malignant intentions usually associated with indoctrination, and this is where the analogy between the two falls short. But for externalist accounts of morality, it is not the “content” of the process that is relevant to the success of the process.

As to the external factors to which the causation of moral convictions is attributed, externalist theories range in their considerations, from the crude stimuli associations of *behaviorist theory*, to the more sophisticated propositions of *conflict resolution*, *approach/avoidance*, and *modeling* theories. The former proposes a “conditioned reflexes” model, coupled with ideas of contiguity and association; the latter propose what are essentially psychological mechanisms of adaptation to the environment.<sup>451</sup>

These theories, and the debate between moral internalism and moral externalism in general, will be considered in the next chapter. The point in mentioning this discussion here is to avoid confusion with the free choice and determinism debate. The connection between externalism and determinism is very close: a deterministic view may follow from the rejection of an internal venue of moral reflection or the like, if the latter is understood as essential for the possibility of free choice; and thus deterministic theories and externalist theories normally coincide. This coincidence, however, is not a logical necessity. One may logically conceive the possibility that all norms are externally

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<sup>451</sup> See Chapter 10, section 2.

produced (externalism), and yet that a person may choose in particular instances not to abide by such norms (non-determinism). For some externalist theories this may not be true; for example, in the case of radical behaviorism, both the acquisition of moral norms and values and the determination of behavior are tied to the quasi-mechanistic model of stimuli-reaction. But this needs not be the case in all externalist theories of morality, and so a theory-by-theory examination is needed to determine which theories are *both* externalist and determinist, and which are not.<sup>452</sup> For the purposes of Chapter 9, therefore, the question of whether we are talking about internalist or externalist theories of morality will remain open, because the focus here is on free choice vs. determinism.

### **3. The notion of “free choice”**

The preceding considerations should help clarify what the discussion on free choice and determinism *is not* about, and thus help avoid becoming sidetracked by related discussions. It would be appropriate now to consider in more specific terms what the discussion *is* about.

There is a group of connected concepts that stand in opposition to (and as such, constitute the target of) determinism. Central among these concepts are those of *freedom*,

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<sup>452</sup> A special situation seems to arise when the discussion of externalism/internalism is framed specifically in terms of “moral motivation,” as has become somewhat popular in recent philosophy, particularly within 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-American treatments of the problem, and in approaches originated in or sharing ground with psychological research (see for example Sigrún Svavarsdóttir, “Moral Cognitivism and Motivation,” *The Philosophical Review* 108, no. 2 [1999]; Wren, *Caring About Morality*, 15-16). The internalist view is often presented as entailing that *motivation ought to follow from the grasp itself of the cognitive content of a moral principle or norm*, or alternatively, that “moral cognitions are intrinsically motivating” (ibid., 15). But the distinction between the discussion of externalism/internalism and the discussion of free choice and determinism stands despite these complications.



*will, decision and choice.*<sup>453</sup> A quick survey of the meaning of these concepts will help situate the discussion.

The word “freedom” is the abstract noun derived from the adjective “free,” and the concept here may be more easily understood by analyzing the adjective. Traditionally, two levels of meaning have been attributed to this term. One meaning is essentially a *negative meaning*: something/someone is “free” if devoid of obstacles in a certain respect. An animal is “free” if it is not inside a cage or tied down; a person is “free” if he/she is not a prisoner, or a slave, or subject to other substantial limitations – physical, legal, etc. An object is in “free fall” if it is falling and there is nothing arresting its movement. A person is “free to choose” among different possibilities if there are no reasons to expect that, in electing one over the rest, the person will encounter particular obstacles.

In the Western philosophical tradition, however, there has commonly been recognized another complementary meaning for the term, a positive one. This *positive meaning* of the term “freedom” makes reference to a human being’s mental and/or spiritual potencies. Specifically, “free” refers to a person’s capacity to *choose*, and is evidenced in acts of choosing.

In its weak sense, the term “to choose” means “to deliberate,” the selection process, the mental (in a broad sense, “rational”) calculation that leads to selecting one among many possible options. In its strong sense, as it will be used in this dissertation,

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<sup>453</sup> The term “liberty” is sometimes used as a synonym for “freedom,” but more often refers more narrowly to the *absence of coercion*, especially in political discourse.

“choosing“ means *directing oneself* to the selected possibility, action, object or state of affairs; an act of self-determination that crowns the process of deliberation.<sup>454-455</sup>

By “free choice” then it is meant, first, that the chooser is not limited to one course of action, but has a certain openness to more than one course of action (negative sense). Secondly, it means that the course of action to be undertaken is determined by the chooser (positive sense). The determining originates, so to speak, from within the personal center of the chooser, and the chooser has control over what decision will be taken.

This *choosing that is free* is understood by some to be grounded on, and to flow from, an aspect or element in the person’s constitution – a *faculty*, in classical terminology – that enjoys a degree of independence from physical, environmental, cultural, psychological or any other factors that might otherwise collectively fix the person’s decision on one way or another. This faculty is understood to be independent from these factors to the extent that they are ordinarily insufficient to determine the

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<sup>454</sup> Sometimes this positive aspect of freedom is emphasized by noting how a person may “choose” even when there are no alternative physical actions available. A person may choose among different possible attitudes, even if the physical options are restricted – a prisoner, for example, may or may not choose submit willingly to his or her fate. See for example Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 157. A special case within this discussion – which exceeds the range of this work - occurs in Christian theology, when freedom is considered in the context of the doctrine of the beatific vision.

<sup>455</sup> The term “wanting” can also have two meanings, one weak and one strong, and it may help to clarify them here because, although not commonly used with a technical meaning in philosophy, it can sometimes become the source of equivocations. In its *weak* sense, it is as an equivalent of *desiring*, in the sense of experiencing an attraction or felt need for something, but an attraction that may otherwise remain idle or unacted upon. Its *strong* meaning, which is less commonly used, coincides essentially with the strong meaning of “choice”; it is the meaning at play for example in expressions such as “who wants the act wants the consequences of the act” – by which is meant that the person that chooses an act is freely making him/herself responsible for the consequences of the act. The strong senses of “wanting” and “choosing” are not exactly identical, however, in that *wanting* adds a linking of the choice to the appetitive aspect of human personality; and conversely, *choice* may entail a reference to the deliberation process, which is not implied by the term “wanting.”

possibility or course of action that the person will select. In a long tradition following Aristotle, the term “will” (the adjective “free” is implied when “will” is used) has been used to designate this faculty in terms of which the person is capable of free choice (which is understood, in turn, as an exercise of the will). The Aristotelian/Thomistic tradition has considered this faculty in quite some detail, postulating it to be an essential property of the human spiritual substantial form (or soul).<sup>456</sup> Many other traditions, and even everyday language, make use of the concept (though not necessarily with exactly the meaning employed in the Aristotelian tradition), and the expression “free will” was formerly a frequent way of designating the focus of the free choice/determinism debate, whether an analysis of human action in terms of a specific “faculty” of will is involved in the argument or not. In the present chapter, a discussion of free will in terms of “faculty” will not be part of the argument, though the expression “free will” itself may be used at times.

The term “decision” is very close in its meaning to that of “choice”; if there is any difference, it is that the term “decision” implies, when used, a (possibly relatively lengthy) deliberation process – thus one “arrives at” a decision, or “makes” a decision. Other than this, the terms “decision” and “choice” are often used interchangeably.

To sum up, the terms used in this chapter should be understood as follows. *Choice* or *choosing* is an act by which the person determines one course of action or one potential direction among many that are open. It is understood (though this is precisely the point under discussion) to be a *free* act, that is, that the direction or course of action to

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<sup>456</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 83.

be taken is ultimately under the control, or the self-determination, of the person that chooses (or of the person's *will*, as the faculty enabling free choice). The term "decision" is almost equivalent with "choice," but will be used - to preserve the slight difference in meaning mentioned above - to indicate that the choice follows a deliberation process of some duration. Finally, to designate the debate itself, a number of expressions can be used ("free will and determinism"; "freedom and determinism"; "free choice and determinism"). To settle on a standard terminology, the latter, "free choice and determinism," will be the one used throughout this chapter.

It remains to examine briefly the meaning of "determinism" that is relevant to this dissertation.

#### **4. *Naturalistic determinism and its challengers***

##### Theological and naturalistic determinism

Now that the meaning of "free choice" has been examined, determinism, the polar opposite in the debate, can be defined (as it will be understood in the course of this work) as *the philosophical view that denies the existence of free choice* in general, and in human beings in particular.

From the outset, two types of determinism can be distinguished: one that may be termed "theological", and one that may be termed "naturalistic." Theological forms of determinism claim that actions are predetermined by a divine intelligence or a divine will. (An alternative version sees human beings as unable to avoid predestined states of affairs regardless of how their acts of choice are understood. This view is properly called

“fatalism.”) In the present work I will not discuss theological types of determinism, which are not only multiform, but also more properly the subject of theological discussion. I will focus instead on the concept central to most philosophical discussions of this topic, naturalistic determinism.

In general, naturalistic theories attempt to explain reality (including mental and moral elements) without making reference to theological or “supernatural” elements – or, as John Dewey puts it a bit more technically, by working on the assumption that “there is no breach of continuity between operations of inquiry,” by which he means intellectual knowledge and related operations of the mind, and “biological operations and physical operations.”<sup>457</sup>

In developing a naturalistic theory, the emphasis may alternatively be put either on the *metaphysical* or on the *methodological*. That is, a metaphysical naturalistic explanation is one that denies or rejects the existence of a theological or supernatural or spiritual realm of reality, in which case the view is often a version of *materialism*. But a methodological naturalism simply attempts to set that realm of possible reality aside when framing its questions or the terms of inquiry. Although quite often naturalistic determinism is backed by implicit materialistic assumptions, this is not necessarily the case. Therefore, unless specifically mentioned, the term “naturalism” will be used here in the sense of *methodological* naturalism, without any further implications regarding metaphysical assumptions.

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<sup>457</sup> John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, The Later Works, 1925-1953, vol. 12: 1938 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 26.

Speaking specifically of *methodological naturalistic determinism*, what is operating at the core is the idea that the actions of structurally complex entities (specifically human beings) can be explained *in their totality* by the laws governing the activities of the simpler factors constitutive of those entities (i.e., can be “reduced” to these laws). From this point of view, social institutions and social processes, feelings, thoughts and philosophies, moral rules, and particularly the outcomes of individual persons’ decision-making could theoretically be explained in terms of activities of the atomic, molecular or cellular level, and so by the application of the rules of physics, or chemistry, or biology, or other higher order candidates such as psychology or economics. “Free choices” would be then explained as solely the effect of factors that are absolutely beyond the agent’s control, factors that can cumulatively be said to *determine* the agent’s activities (the agent may be aware of all, some or none of them). The arguably nearly universal awareness of the mature human agent that he/she seems to be in control of his/her decisions is then explained (explained away, since it is an illusion) by additional theories.

Care should be put in distinguishing this view from the view that was traditionally termed “mechanism.” A central philosophical tenet of mechanism is the *theoretically absolute predictability of every event in the world*. Originally, mechanism was based on a (now outdated) mechanical/physical model of causation; that is, predictability in terms of mechanical laws, laws governing the motion and collision of matter, extrapolated to apply to the whole of reality. In Laplace’s famous pronouncement, an intelligence that knew “all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the

beings who compose it” would be able to predict any single event in the future.<sup>458</sup>

Mechanical-physical mechanism no longer carries any weight within the sciences, its scientific principles having been abrogated by changes in the physical sciences, especially the “non-determinism” (that is, the non-predictability) of quantum physics. But the idea that every action is ultimately predictable has not altogether disappeared – it is found often at least at the level of scientifically uninformed common sense, and sometimes fostered by scientifically informed writers who choose to ignore the problems of mechanism for literary purposes.

The problem of whether every event is ultimately *predictable* is a different philosophical problem from that of whether human actions are wholly *caused* by events independent of choice.<sup>459</sup> In mechanism, however, both problems seem to come together, because the grounds for its thesis of absolute predictability are also grounds for a deterministic view: the reason why every action is ultimately predictable in mechanism is that there are no factors to be considered outside of mechanical/physical factors; therefore, there is no space in mechanism for factors such as the free will. The two problems, however, must be kept separate. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to examine whether all events are predictable and to what extent, and whether contemporary scientific models carry such implications or not. The problem of whether human actions are wholly *caused* by events independent of choice, on the other hand, is the focus of this

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<sup>458</sup> Pierre-Simon Laplace, *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*, trans. F. W. Truscott and F. L. Emory (Dover, 1953), 4.

<sup>459</sup> The two theses are often conflated in the everyday usage of the expression “scientific laws,” when they are said, for example, to “govern” (i.e., cause) our behavior.

chapter; and insofar as determinism seems to entail predictability, the theme of predictability will be discussed further in Section 6.

### Challenges to determinism from within methodological naturalism

It is important to note that from within the tenets of *methodological naturalism* itself, it is possible to conceive of a non-deterministic view of human action. One way to interpret the central tenet of naturalism is in terms of “continuity”; thus Dewey says, of the term “naturalistic,”

As it is here employed it means, on one side, that there is no breach of continuity between operations of inquiry and biological operations and physical operations. “Continuity,” on the other side, means that rational operations *grow out of* organic activities, without being identical with that from which they emerge.<sup>460</sup>

Depending on how this “continuity” is interpreted, determinism may or may not follow. Bernard Lonergan, for example, when formulating his view of “emergent probability,” characterizes each successive level of structural organization found in nature – physical processes, chemical processes, biochemical processes, biological development, etc. – as “continuous” with the previous, in the sense of not abrogating the laws that govern the behavior of what he calls the “lower conjugates,” i.e., the less complex levels of structural organization. But at the same time, the higher conjugates evidence their characteristics and activities (expressed in their own sets of laws), distinctive of their own level of structural organization, which progressively and in important respects “emancipate” the more complex structures from the deterministic limitations of the

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<sup>460</sup> Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 26.



lower, less complex levels of reality.<sup>461</sup> Thus understood, the higher levels of organization enjoy a certain “freedom” from, are not wholly limited by, the laws of the lower-level structures. Birds, for example, though heavier than air, do not simply fall (nor do they simply ignore their weight); monks, though belonging to a typically heterogamous species, choose to be celibate (nor do they simply ignore the sexuality of their human constitution). Stating the same points positively, the more complex structures are endowed with their “level-specific” goals and meaning: birds attempt to perpetuate their structural organization by eating insects; monks spend a substantial amount of time – time that could be used for foraging or mating – in prayer or the illumination of sacred texts.

Whether such a naturalistic “freeing,” if metaphysically or evolutionarily conceived, could go far enough to ground the possibility of human intellectual knowledge and free choice, is open to discussion (this seems to be, for example, part of Dewey’s project). But all that is intended here is to open to consideration the possibility of a methodologically naturalistic theory that is compatible with the idea of free choice.

On the other hand, the “continuity” postulated by methodological naturalism may be held to entail an explanatory reduction of the “mechanisms” or dynamisms or laws of the higher structural levels to those of the simpler structural levels. It is in this manner that naturalistic determinism is grounded in many, perhaps most, accounts.

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<sup>461</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 144-151, 504. It is not implied here that Lonergan’s system is “naturalistic,” which would be a matter for a very complex discussion. His method, however, has enough points in common with methodological naturalism to allow using it as an example here.

This way of understanding the continuity of levels of activity, however, is philosophically problematic in an important way. What causes the problem is that, to be consistent, this way of thinking demands that *every* aspect of reality be explained in terms of the simplest available structural patterns. Consider, for example, a biological reductionism that attempts to explain all human activity – and particularly, instances of choice and action – in terms *exclusively* of biological factors: survival instincts, reproductive instincts, a tendency to foster genetic diversity within the species, etc. The question that has to be posed to this approach is: Is there something peculiar to *biological* explanation that cannot be reduced to (that is, explained completely by) physical processes? If the proponent of the theory responds affirmatively, one could then ask: Why must only the biological level of explanation be accorded explanatory power that is not reducible? Why not acknowledge that, by the same rule, other levels of structural organization (e.g. the organization of complex ecosystems, or of highly intelligent beings in communities, or of nations into economic conglomerates) might merit a type or level of explanation specific to them? Why reduce their behavior to biological paradigms? Unless a proper answer to that question is found, the reductivist version of naturalism seems to demand the reduction of *all* naturalistic processes - including sociological, economic and psychological processes, which are quite often proposed to be reducible to biological models - to physical processes, and these to “sub-physical” processes, etc.

This is, of course, only a partial refutation of biological (or other kinds of) reductionism. But insofar as various disciplines adopt deterministic interpretations based on an only partial biological reductionism, they implicitly grant the possibility of realms

of human activity that are in some respects “free,” i.e. independent of the deterministic limitations of lower levels of organization. What is to be concluded is either that all naturalistic deterministic theories must be reduced to a “physical” determinism (or some “sub-physical” determinism, if the science of such a thing eventually came to being), or that they must explain how and why their level of consideration must not be reduced, yet further levels of organization can legitimately be reduced to it, or else that it must be granted that progressively more complex degrees of structural organization may have different structure-specific, “emergent” forms of activities with their own sets of laws, thus opening the door to a potential rejection of determinism *within methodological naturalism*.

For this reason, examining the free choice/determinism issue from a methodologically naturalist perspective – i.e., that there is a continuity of inquiry and explanation, and by implication, of activities and events themselves, from the simplest to the most complex – does not resolve the issue in favor of the determinist position.

### Challenges to determinism from outside naturalism

Challenges to a naturalistic determinism can also be presented from the quarters of theories or views that reject the naturalistic standpoint, either as a metaphysical theory or as a methodological stipulation. A rejection of naturalism as a metaphysical theory of reality entails the view that natural processes and the material universe are not all that there is. The rejection of methodological naturalism, instead, is the rejection of the view that naturalism is the only legitimate methodological approach – though it may be

conceded to be a valid or indeed the required method for specific sciences or realms of knowledge. Both rejections, in different ways, assert that the “continuity” postulated by naturalism must somehow be “broken” in order to gain a full understanding of the world. This view, logically, entails the possibility of rationally (i.e., philosophically) knowing something about realms of being other than those available to the naturalistic approach, though positions vary on what these are and how much we can know about them.<sup>462</sup>

For a token example of how a naturalistic determinism may be challenged by postulating a mode of being that is or exists outside the canons of methodological naturalism, it is useful to look at Aquinas’ explanation of freedom, grounded on his understanding of Aristotle. Aquinas explains freedom (as “*liberum arbitrium*,” i.e., the possibility to choose among different particular goods) as a necessary consequence of the fact that practical reason is not determined to find, among finite goods, any one good as absolutely determining of the will – that is, a good so perfectly adequate to the constitution of the will, as *intellectual appetite*, that the human person will be irresistibly oriented towards it as their final good. The will for Aquinas is “intellectual appetite”; its orientation is towards unrestricted being. Thus finite goods (that is, everything but God), which appear (correctly) to human intelligence as limited and contingent, are not determining of the will; and in this non-determination the possibility of freedom is grounded.<sup>463</sup> In turn, the inadequacy of finite goods to the intellectual appetite are

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<sup>462</sup> Note that while most (perhaps all) religions reject naturalism as a metaphysical view, this does not of itself entail the rejection of methodological naturalism as an epistemological paradigm. On the contrary, some thinkers reject metaphysical naturalism by reasons of (religious) faith, yet support methodological naturalism, thus restricting scientific and philosophical knowledge to the boundaries established by naturalism as a method.

<sup>463</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 82 a.2, c.

grounded on Aquinas's understanding of these faculties (intellect and will) as *spiritual*, that is, as imbued of a certain degree of immateriality in their operation that can only be explained by reference to a subsistent or spiritual form (the human soul) as their metaphysical substratum.<sup>464</sup> In short, for Aquinas human beings – unlike other animals – are free because their peculiar metaphysical constitution is not subjected to the physical determinism inherent in a purely naturalistic constitution (which would fix one's appetites on specific limited ends). Note that, in grounding the character of free choice specifically as spiritual, Aquinas emphasizes that its freedom derives from our peculiar *cognitive* situation – our capacity for intellectual understanding of what is not contingent and *material*, and also therefore our capacity to reflectively grasp ends as such, and oneself as an agent. Other philosophical traditions emphasize first the specific condition of the human will as a rational appetite, and as such, as endowed with a certain degree of indetermination/independence from that which it is drawn to, and with reflective capacities regarding the self as desirer/chooser, such that humans can “will the willingness” to do something, choose to choose or not to choose, etc.<sup>465</sup>

The point in presenting these examples of a non-naturalistic theory is not to develop a criticism of naturalistic determinism based specifically on this theory; rather, the

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<sup>464</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, q. 75, a.2. A very accessible development of this view – not strictly Thomist - is presented by C. S. Lewis in C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Touchstone, 1996). It was, incidentally, the difficulties of contemporary naturalistic explanations of intellectual knowledge that, Lewis claims, eventually moved him to “convert” from an atheistic materialism to a view closely akin to Aquinas's. (Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*.)

<sup>465</sup> If one wishes to pursue this approach to argue against determinism, care must be put in the order in which these arguments are presented. It is not unusual, for example, to find arguments for the soul's spiritual constitution that are based on reflections on human freedom. But if the intention is eventually to argue for free will on the grounds that this is a consequence of the soul's spiritual constitution, this approach should obviously be avoided; otherwise one would be reasoning circularly.

intention is to survey the theoretical context within which the discussion of free choice and determinism takes place. What should be concluded from the preceding is simply that determinism, as a philosophical thesis, does face potential contenders both under naturalistic and non-naturalistic methodological paradigms, and that none of these can be discounted a priori.

Once this point has been made, it is time to examine whether the present study of moral conversion can bring any new insights into the discussion, or whether it brings to the fore some form of evidence that has not been sufficiently attended to. A brief detour is required at this point to discuss the matter of the validity of this kind of evidence, in the context in particular of some challenges posed by empiricist views..

##### ***5. A comment on the evidence used in the discussion of free choice and determinism***

The evidence for the reality of freedom is likely to include such items as the reported introspective experiences of, for example, anxiety at the time of difficult choices, or the role in numerous human institutions of intention as relevant to social responses to people's actions. But under the canons of the empirical method, introspective evidence of any kind is considered highly suspect. A first person account of an experience is suspect because of the high degree of interpretation that this account demands, and because the experience itself as a "fact" – as actually lived by the person as described – cannot be corroborated from a third person perspective in the manner, for example, of a replicable scientific observation, much less a scientific experiment with

controlled variables. Are we, then, at a dead end in terms of an investigation of freedom and determinism? Not if “corroborated by others” can be understood in a broader sense. An experience can arguably be corroborated not only through the replication of an experiment, or through the repetition of an empirical observation, but also by the fact that the person who listens to the account has had a similar experience, or an experience of a similar kind. The fact that the *interpretation* of such experiences and their implications may come under fire does not detract from the possibility of their becoming evidence for the support or refutation of theories.

In order to discuss the problem of free choice and determinism without resolving its key questions in advance by how “evidence,” “corroboration” and “verifiability” are defined, it is methodologically necessary to consider evidence in a broader sense, namely as *any kind of experience that may to a certain extent be corroborated by others*. And the same is true of trying to determine whether the fact of moral conversion sheds any light on the free choice/determinism debate, as the kind of evidence for moral conversion offered in Chapter 5 should make clear. The problem of adequately interpreting the evidence still remains, as does the problem of gauging how much weight can be given to particular items of evidence. But when a person reports, for example, saying or doing things in anger, and later regretting them, that is a first person claim that is often considered very reliable because it is capable of being corroborated in this broader sense. (A formal psychological study in which research subjects are angered in order to see if they react with expressions of regret afterwards would support its conclusions with what is arguably a more replicable kind of evidence and corroboration, that is less dependent

on first person interpretation.) For present purposes it is enough to say that, given the subject matter of this chapter, it would be shortsighted to restrict evidence and corroboration only to what can be obtained in such kind of studies.

### Data categories relevant to the discussion of free choice and determinism

Surveying the discussion of free choice and determinism, it is possible to find that certain facts or phenomena are recurrently brought up, under the claim that their explanation necessitates the existence of free will in the human spirit, or of free choice in human actions. These facts or phenomena are used to ground significantly diverse types of argument for free choice, and correspondingly may be grouped in different key categories of “data.” These are also the facts/phenomena/data that those arguing in favor of naturalistic determinism need to either provide an alternative explanation for (one that is consistent with determinism), or else they need to argue that these purportedly common human experiences are profoundly misdescribed by those claiming to experience them, or are illusory and do not actually happen at all.

Most notably, these include:

1. People choosing an unexpected course of action with respect to *their own* previous, observable patterns of action, which seems to entail that a person’s actions are not predetermined.
2. People choosing a course of action that (whether going against their previous patterns of action or not) goes against the established norms, values or moral



feelings of one's community, which seems to entail that a person's actions are not absolutely determined by social/environmental factors.

3. "Decisional anxiety," reported feelings of tension and anxiety involved in choice.
4. The possibility of some sort of direct introspective experience of one's capacity to choose. In the present exposition, the discussion of this possibility will focused on two types of experience, those of (4.a) "volitional exertion" and (4.b) "resolve."
5. Feelings of regret, guilt or shame when or after one chooses a course of action deemed wrong, or with bad or evil consequences. Correspondingly, feelings of pride, honor and merit when one chooses a course of action deemed right, especially when this involved some hardship or sacrifice.
6. Socially instituted forms of praise, blame, rewards, punishments, and other forms of social response that acknowledge or make sense only under the assumption that the agent is acting freely, including institutions in which the agent's purpose or intention in acting are important determining factors of the social response.

Although the philosophical literature of the free choice/determinism debate has attended to each of these categories to some degree, it has not focused carefully on the philosophical implications that follow when these categories are examined as they manifest themselves *in the context of moral conversion*. Typically, there is a significant amount of detail available in narratives of moral conversion about these categories, and in addition, because moral conversion is a *process* rather than just a discrete instance of choice, some additional fresh air may be introduced into the debate from that perspective.

For greater clarity, the presentation here will be divided in two parts: one dealing with *third person* (“*objective*”) *evidence* and discussing category 1 (including a brief note on category 2), and the second dealing with *introspective evidence* and discussing categories 3, 4.a, 4.b and 5. By “*introspective evidence*” is meant first person reports, whose contribution involves reflection by the corroborator on his/her own subjective experience. Categories 3, 4 and 5 can also involve corroboration by means of observed behavior, “*body language*,” etc.; but these alone, without the corroborator’s reflection on his/her own comparable experience, are typically considered insufficient as evidence.

The sixth category of data, namely that of the presence of socially instituted forms of social response that acknowledge or make sense only under the assumption that the agent is acting freely, is frequently discussed in the free choice/determinism debate. But this category has not been found illuminating regarding moral conversion, and will therefore not be examined further in this study.

#### **6. *Data category 1: Moral conversion and third person evidence for free choice. Unpredictability in a person’s patterns of action***

It was considered in the previous chapter how conversion, in its prime analogue, involves the unfolding of a course of action that is unpredictable or unexpected. This unpredictability goes beyond the potential anomalies of discrete acts that do not conform to the expected patterns; in moral conversion it often involves *the replacement of the expected patterns altogether by a new schedule or pattern of action*. This observation is

the correlate, in a study of conversion, to the first category of data that seems to oppose a deterministic model.

The reason why a significant degree of unpredictability in human life seems to constitute a difficulty for determinism is that determinism would seem to entail a significant degree of predictability; instances of failure of this degree of predictability would arguably weaken the determinist position.

But this argument against determinism must not be oversimplified. A determinist might reasonably allude to both the complexity and the hiddenness of the variables involved in causing the actions of any concrete human person. A person, the determinist could argue, is a tremendously complex system, and many, perhaps most of the relevant variables are hidden from easy analysis. So we cannot expect to predict his or her acts to any high degree, when our science barely allows us to achieve a decent weather prediction. One version of this response, at least, is not acceptable; namely, if the determinist is simply proposing a theory that cannot be challenged by evidence (essentially claiming ignorance in order to defend his/her conclusions). A deterministic position that denied the relevance of corroborating empirically a certain degree of predictability in human actions would be an empty, because unassailable, proposal.

“Predictability,” however, does not need to be univocally understood, and one of the most contested issues in the free choice/determinism debate today concerns the degree of predictability that a meaningful determinist position entails. On the one hand, there is no science or method, at least in the present state of the human (i.e., social and behavioral) sciences, able to predict with any degree of accuracy the behavior of

*individual* human beings (sciences such as economics claim prediction capacities in the great numbers). On the other hand, the ability to achieve such predictions is an ever-present part of daily practical life, indeed a common and necessary practical skill. We do this in daily life by observing patterns of action in people, and by inferring the existence of certain “habits,” or of a certain “character” that explains and grounds these regularities. For example, if someone who is constantly late arrives late to a meeting, we are not surprised; but if someone who is always punctual fails to arrive on time, we worry. Similarly, we put our trust in those who show signs of trustworthiness for different reasons – honesty, responsibility, etc. – and show these to be stable traits, and we try to be careful not to put our weight on those who with some regularity have failed our trust or that of others. We even have names for designating such habits and characters – untrustworthy, responsible, honest, lazy, etc. - and these help, for good or ill, to pin down our experience of how individual people we know have behaved, so as to predict how they will act in future occasions, and even reassure or warn others about the placing their trust on them. Thus practical knowledge, managerial knowledge, the skill of the politician or the leader to know whom to trust, the experience of parents, friends, teachers, mentors and spiritual directors, etc. – all attest to the possibility of grasping certain regularities, and a consequent predictability in matters of individual human action.

But this measure of predictability in individual human action is insufficient to support the determinist’s position for several reasons. One is that the level of predictability that can be expected from even those most skilled in the observation of their fellow human beings falls short of the degree of predictability that the determinist’s

causal account of human action seems to entail. It is not an exaggeration to say that even honest people can be “expected” to lie sometimes, self-controlled people to lose their temper, and so forth – an “expectation” crystallized in the saying, “nobody is perfect.” The presence of these irregularities of predictability is a challenge for deterministic accounts that hold that every human action, and especially every human choice occurs with causal necessity as the effect of antecedent events. It does not pose such a challenge, however, in non-mechanistic accounts that allow for some statistical variation, as will be discussed below; it is the unpredictability posed specifically by moral conversion (and possibly other forms of conversion too) that actually challenges this scientifically savvy form of determinism.

A second reason is that the kinds of predictions just discussed arguably depend on more than third-person evidence. They are most dependable when they are based on first-person reflection on the predictor’s own experience, i.e., the kind of evidence that causal accounts of choice typically reject as too dependent on subjective or interpretative factors.

But the third and most important reason why determinists can take no consolation in the kind of “humanistic” predictability of human action just described is that even this limited degree of predictability is simply overthrown by the fact of moral conversion.

The study of conversion introduces a radically new category of unpredictability into the free choice-determinism debate. In the conversion process, and in sharp-turn conversion especially, what can be observed are not just discrete occurrences in which individual persons diverge from known patterns of actions, but a *replacement* of the

known, predictable pattern by a different one, typically, in fact, the establishment of an altogether new pattern. As has been argued, one of the marks of moral conversion, which can in fact be *observed* in the person, is the establishment of new patterns of action replacing either the previous ones or adding to the previous ones in such a way that the older patterns are transformed.<sup>466</sup>

Note that the establishment of new patterns of action does not of itself entail unpredictability or an instance of moral conversion. For new patterns are also established in what has been characterized as natural/spontaneous moral development. But our capacity for predicting individual human action, discussed above, includes an ability to project, and to some extent anticipate, the “moral trajectory” of a person through our knowledge, incomplete as it may be, of factors such as motivation, commitment, the person’s courage and perseverance, etc. Such an ability to predict a person’s future action also takes into account typical human patterns of development, and, to the extent that this can be gauged, such factors as the strength of the drive to develop in that direction, the degree of commitment to that direction of development, the person’s demonstrated perseverance and so forth. This is equivalent, for example, to the ability of a perceptive teacher who can anticipate with some accuracy which students will develop a mastery in their discipline, which only moderate familiarity with it, and which will drop along the way.

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<sup>466</sup> There may also be situations in which all that is directly observed is a discrete act that diverges from the known pattern, but in which other indicators provide reasons to believe that this divergence is the result, not of accidental circumstances, but of a conscious decision to behave in a different manner; that is, they suggest that moral conversion is taking place. If, for example, the act is preceded by intense deliberation. For simplicity, I will consider in what follows only changes of patterns of action, and not such instances of isolated, “conversion-related” actions.

But in the case of moral conversion, there is typically an unpredictability in the development of the new patterns of action, the new habits, convictions, etc. These go in a significantly different direction from the previous, especially as was considered when characterizing sharp-turn conversion as its prime analogue. In fact, the immediate reason why an instance of conversion calls out to our attention is that we find a discordance between the person's present moral status – his/her attitude, convictions, projects, character – and what would have been so far expected by someone who knew this person reasonably well.

**It becomes then a matter of explaining this divergence.** Attributing the changes to a blanket “statistical variation” – some amount of unpredictability is to be expected - does not work here, because we are in the presence of an unpredictability of a different order, the establishment of a wholly new pattern with its own schedule and regularities.<sup>467</sup> Alluding to the efficacy of hidden or unknown factors is also not valid as an explanation. The only valid strategy for determinism would be that of – through further research – somehow actually uncovering previously hidden or unknown causal factors and making the conversion necessary, i.e., determining this human action to occur – or alternatively, demonstrating the inherent reducibility of explanations and descriptions of moral conversion to the modes of explanation in which everything is predictable, as explained in the previous section.

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<sup>467</sup> Underlying this comment is an implied conception of a unitary self, so that the conversion process involves a shift from a unitary self going in one direction – to adopt a useful image – to a unitary self going in a different direction. This implied conception will have more explicit relevance in Chapter 10.

A note on data category 2: When patterns of action diverge from socially established norms

Another observation that is sometimes presented as a challenge to determinism, from a third-person point of view, is the fact that people's patterns of action do not always reflect those that their society is structured to teach, foster and even enforce. This is the point adverted to in the data category number 2, above. This data category, considered generally (and not specifically with respect to moral conversion) is important for arguments against a type of determinism that considers human behavior as absolutely causally determined by cultural/societal teachings and practice. It is also important for the discussion of internalism and externalism, since it may be evidence that societal practices and teachings are not the only causal factor involved in the formation of moral convictions. The fact that these patterns of action are different from those generally espoused by the community the person belongs to adds the implication that the influence of the community is not the main (or the only) causal factor in that particular case. This discussion, as was said, concerns more directly the internalism/externalism debate, which is considered in the next chapter. In relation to the free choice/determinism debate, however, the second data category is only of tangential relevance. What is of most significance in instances of moral conversion (from a third-person perspective) in terms of the free choice/determinism debate, is that the person adopts patterns of action that are



significantly different from the ones held previously, and thus unpredictable in the sense described.<sup>468</sup>

### **7. Moral conversion and the introspective evidence for free choice**

In addition to data that can be gathered from third-person observations, such as the unpredictability with regard to patterns of acting that has just been discussed, arguments for the possibility and existence of free will also incorporate the presence of certain experiences – sufficiently common among human beings to attempt a generalization – that in some cases suggest, and in some cases appear to require the existence of free choice in order to be explained. A discussion of these categories of data requires, however, a brief detour to again consider the legitimacy of introspective data.

#### The use of introspective data

Some considerations have been made above (in section 5) regarding the need to understand “evidence” – that which can be used as data for an investigation, and which is essentially verifiable - in broader terms than as the standard empiricist model understands them. The use of narrative data in previous chapters is justified by this broader meaning of the term. But a few words should be said specifically regarding the use of introspective

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<sup>468</sup> A matter that may be tied to data category 2, but that cannot be considered here, is that of social groups revising and modifying their moral structures as a group, an event that can perhaps be called “social moral conversion.” An example of this is Jim Consedine’s report of New Zealand’s “Black Power” gang’s rediscovery of traditional Maori values, that led to a change, for example, of the gang authorities’ and gang members’ view on rape, which was banned by their 1978 national convention (Consedine, *Restorative Justice: Healing the Effects of Crime*, 83-84). Such instances prompt interesting questions regarding group agency (which overlap with the internalism/externalism debate), and may pose a challenge to sociohistorical determinists; but discussing these issues in sufficient detail would be elaborating on issues that are far beyond the scope of this work.

data in the arguments that follow.

From an empiricist point of view, introspection is considered suspect because there is no way of empirically corroborating a *reported* experience, when corroboration is understood exclusively as “looking at” something, as empiricism does. This argument against introspection, however, could be turned against empiricism itself and its privileged objects. As Joseph Fitzpatrick notes,

The knockdown argument against the empiricist model of knowing is that it is impossible to line up the proposed ideas on the one side, and the realities they are supposed to represent on the other side, and see how they compare.<sup>469</sup>

As Wittgenstein points out, there is no reason to believe that what I associate with my sensations or images will be the same as what you associate with yours: the sensations or images I associate with the word ‘red,’ for example, are private to me and hence there is no way of knowing, in such a theory of meaning, that what I mean by ‘red’ is the same as what you mean by ‘red.’<sup>470</sup>

The heart of the matter, Fitzpatrick points out, is that “introspection will be vulnerable to the same criticisms as the model of knowledge in which it stands.”<sup>471</sup> “Looking at” something cannot be unreflectively taken as the single criterion for verification. As a method, it is itself dependent on a more complex process; and that process, when applied critically, may reveal that standard empiricism is itself inappropriate for certain questions. Introspective accounts, cannot be corroborated by “looking at” or “looking into” someone’s mind, but they *can be corroborated* to a great extent by the fact that people share similar experiences or have had experiences similar enough to affirm common features.

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<sup>469</sup> Joseph Fitzpatrick, *Philosophical Encounters : Lonergan and the Analytical Tradition*, Lonergan Studies (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 100.

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

Of course, a particular reader may not resonate with all of the experiences described here. This, however, can be considered as an equivalent to the reader believing that the material evidence reported in a study is dubious in some sense. In the latter case, the roads open to the reader are either to trust that the researcher is being truthful and accurate, to duplicate the relevant experiments him/herself, to withhold final judgment pending more data, or to simply reject the conclusions of the study without further investigation (a course of action that a careful investigator will probably avoid). In the case of introspective evidence, the alternatives available to the reader are the same. The only difference is that instead of duplicating relevant experiments, the reader may need to reflect more carefully on his/her own experiences, seek out others' narratives (biographical, plausible fiction, etc.) or ask around if "something like this happened to anybody," or perhaps just live a little more. To aid this process, philosophers, psychologists, writers of biography and autobiography, fiction and poetry, drama and screen plays, etc. all attempt to anticipate this difficulty by capturing in their descriptions of human life experiences that are sufficiently universal to elicit agreement in the reader/audience.

So, introspective data has the partial disadvantage of not being corroborable in an experiment with controlled variables, which precludes its usefulness for standard quantifying methodologies (although the growth of qualitative social/behavior research in the last half century challenges this generalization as well). But this disadvantage does not annul its usefulness as a source for information. On the contrary, introspective evidence allows access to important sectors of human experience and so allows for the

discussion of philosophical questions, like the free choice question, that reside in those sectors of reality. There are some risks involved, however. Much as researchers who base their investigations on standard empirical methodologies must be on their guard to consider the data honestly (and not subtly “fudge” the data to better suit their hypotheses), researchers who uses introspective evidence in their investigations must be on their guard against subtle ways of fudging the data.

One such possibility that deserves particular mention is that introspective data rely on the memory of the reporter, and that memory may be retroactively modified in subtle ways by accepted ways of articulating experiences, by various psychic mechanisms or even by the reporter’s interest in a particular conclusion. It also grows fuzzier with time. But on the other hand, even when a reader is being cautious about such possibilities, when introspective accounts “resonate” with the reader, the reader can corroborate the evidence *immediately*. In the case of studies requiring replication, researchers have to work most of the time on pure trust in the competence and honesty of their fellows because replication of controlled-variables experiments is costly and time-consuming. In sum, there is no method of inquiry which does not depend at some point on accurate reporting of personal experiences to others, who corroborate such reports through comparing them with their own personal experiences. While these observations do not resolve the complex epistemological questions involved here, they are hopefully sufficient to motivate a careful look at what this dissertation’s findings about moral conversion suggest regarding the free choice/determinism debate.

### The question about direct experience of the “free-ness” of free choice

Can introspective data provide something like a *direct* experience of the “free-ness” of free choice? The position supported in this work is that the independence of determining causes other than the act of choosing – what might be called the “free-ness” of free choice - cannot be directly experienced introspectively, but that certain categories of introspective experience strongly demand its possibility and existence in order to be properly accounted for.

Aristotle and Aquinas provide an explanation for why the quality of “free-ness” is not directly knowable. The relevant Aristotelian principle is that *we cannot directly know potency but only act, and potency only through act.*<sup>472</sup> We can only, in other words, have knowledge of what we are capable of doing by actually doing it. Applying this principle to the problem of freedom, it follows that we have no direct cognitive access to the unactualized “free-ness” of our choices, but only to the fact that we choose in one way or another. Whether we could actually have chosen a different way of acting is not perceived in any direct manner, according to Aristotle and Aquinas, because the only way to know that directly would have been to act in that way rather than the one we actually chose.

The presence of certain types of experience, however, that accompany the act of choosing, has been used frequently to argue for the existence of free will/free choice. We

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<sup>472</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1049b12-17. Also Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, IX, 7 (1846): “The concept of actuality must therefore be prior to the concept of potency, and the knowledge of actuality prior to the knowledge of potency. Hence Aristotle explained above what potency is by defining it in reference to actuality, but he could not define actuality by means of something else but only made it known inductively.”

are aware, for example, that we take part in a decision-making process, balancing in our mind costs and benefits, duties and non-mandated options, desires, aversions, and even reflective desires to desire and so forth. If it seems that we cannot decide for one way or the other, we may experience frustration or “indecision.” If the potential consequences of the choice are important, we often experience a certain degree of anxiety. We may experience our own determination (the closest thing, perhaps, to experiencing freedom?) as weak and potentially shaky, or we may experience strong resolve. Even after having taken action, we can experience emotional states related to the choice – regret, remorse, pride, merit, elation. Such experiences do not seem to constitute water-tight proof because (again, not having a *direct* experience of freedom) they seem to require a certain degree of interpretation; but, on the other hand, the presence of these experiences accompanying every day actions seems to make it impossible even for advocates of determinism to live their lives in complete coherence with a rejection of freedom. The following sections will examine how these experiences take place in the specific context of a process of moral conversion, in order to show how they shed some additional light on the free choice/determinism discussion in support of this position.

### Data category 3: The evidence from the experience of decisional anxiety

The present section will examine the way in which *decisional anxiety* (data category 3) is usually conceived in fictional accounts of conversion, and contrast it with non-fictional accounts. The results, as will be seen, are at best ambiguous: while some biographical instances of decisional anxiety can be identified within accounts of moral

conversion, this is not very frequently the case. So this particular category of evidence is inconclusive. But its presentation is nevertheless necessary because it is occasionally mentioned as relevant evidence, and has certainly proven important to existentialist writers and to many authors of fiction. It will also bring to light some aspects of conversion that will be relevant to the internalist/externalist discussion in the next chapter.

A favorite theme of existentialist philosophers is that of identifying some extreme experiences and interpreting their philosophical/existential significance. One of the particular favorites among these experiences is *anxiety*, and its more paroxysmic form, *anguish*. (For present purposes, this shall be called “existential anxiety.”) In the existentialist conception of these experiences, it is characteristic of anguish and anxiety that they do not have a specific object (as “fear” is typically fear of something, e.g. fear of snakes). Instead, they seem to be directed at nothing in particular – or at existence itself. This anxiety, in more or less converging ways, is interpreted by some (characteristically, Kierkegaard) as consciousness of guilt or of sin; by some as a constituent of being in a world that is not familiar or hospitable, and by some (characteristically Sartre) as a confrontation with the fact of freedom, with the fact that we do not have a fixed nature and pre-made goals, but that it is our task (and responsibility) to create these, thus setting up a front against the abyss of nothingness.<sup>473</sup> Existential anxiety/anguish is thus presented as an experience directly related to freedom.

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<sup>473</sup> Philipp Lersch, *La Estructura De La Personalidad*, trans. A. Serrate Torrente, 8th Spanish edition ed. (Barcelona: Editorial Scientia, 1971), 279-281; Alasdair MacIntyre, "Existentialism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1967).

Its use as evidence of freedom, however, has been criticized not only because of its proponents' tendency to put stress on extreme and exceptional experiences, but also because the variety of interpretations available suggests – as MacIntyre phrased it - that “the ratio of interpretation to experience may be too high.”<sup>474</sup>

Downplaying a bit the existentialist interpretation, it is possible to recognize introspectively a more common form of anxiety that will be here called *decisional anxiety*. This is the rather familiar, often oppressive emotional state that people experience when they find themselves responsible for an important decision, particularly one in which the consequences appear to be rather obscure or uncertain. The experience can be described as being suspended in the middle of a decision-making process, of having to “make up one’s mind” but being yet unable to do so, of being conscious that it is up to oneself to decide for one way or the other, and desiring certainty (or at least more information) but not finding it, of wishing for more time to make the decision, while time seems to be running away too fast, of wishing the responsibility for the decision could simply go away.

If the process of moral conversion involves in fact a crucial choice, one would reasonably expect it to be laden with some degree of decisional anxiety or related inner drama. And certainly such is the way in which moral conversion is frequently portrayed in fictional visions, particularly in films or TV shows. Practically a cliché, the moment in which the villain decides to amend his/her ways is more often than not made visual through close-ups of the character’s troubled, changing expression, rendered musically

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<sup>474</sup> MacIntyre, "Existentialism," 149.



tense by an orchestral crescendo, that devolves into highly elated tones when, at last, the “bad” character decides to change sides, overturning the negative outcome and, not infrequently sacrificing him/herself in the process. Such a sequence is designed to express externally the inner struggle of the redeemable antagonist – and to some extent, to visually portray a “free choice.” The conversion itself, of course, is usually not unexpected by the audience, since according to conventions (particularly Hollywood narrative conventions) hints of the subject’s redeemability are often provided earlier in the story.<sup>475</sup>

Fictional narrative, however, has its own imperatives, particularly the requirement to maintain a certain degree of narrative tension and to intensify it towards the climax of a story. Moral conversion, marked by inner struggle, is one of the most widely used devices to this purpose – perhaps because this struggle can be even more captivating than external, purely physical struggle. However, while the real narratives of moral conversion considered do often contain a certain amount of drama and emotional struggle, the source of this inner drama does not seem to be *decisional anxiety* in particular. Rather it seems to be the case that, by the time real moral conversion is achieved, the proper decision has come to be quite clear to the agent, at least cognitively speaking; and the emotional struggle that ensues is caused more often than not by the need to come emotionally to terms with what is now seen as a relatively clear direction for decision. Though not

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<sup>475</sup> It is prudent to restrict these observations to the context of the U.S. movie and TV industry, because narrative conventions do vary significantly in this matter. Japanese cinema, for example – albeit influenced in many ways by the U.S. tradition – is often populated by ambiguous villains with only a thin commitment to their evil ways, who will move to the heroes’ side without making too much of a fuss about it.

without some exceptions, this appears to be the common state of affairs in actual moral conversions.<sup>476</sup>

Consider, for example, one of the few, well-known real-life narratives of moral conversion that in fact records high levels of anxiety: Augustine's struggle, immortalized (not without some humor) in his *Confessions*.

For this very thing did I sigh, bound as I was, not by another's irons but by my own iron will. The enemy had control of my will, and out of it he fashioned a chain and fettered me with it. For in truth lust is made out of a perverse will, and when lust is served, it becomes habit, and when habit is not resisted, it becomes necessity. . . . Thus did my two wills . . . contend with one another, and by their conflict they laid waste my soul.<sup>477</sup>

But I . . . had said, "Give me chastity and continence, but not yet!" For I feared that you would hear me quickly, and that quickly you would heal me of that disease of lust, which I wished to have satisfied rather than extinguished.<sup>478</sup>

At this point in the narrative, Augustine's religious conversion is well advanced, but he finds himself held back in his progress by his inability to relinquish some habits that are incompatible with the new life that he desires to embrace wholeheartedly. As the critical point in this conversion gets nearer, this internal division becomes more acute, to the point that Augustine even speaks of "two wills."<sup>479</sup>

Augustine, however, seems to have a clear mind about what the *right* decision is;

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<sup>476</sup> Broadening the focus to include also religious conversion, this general pattern is consistent with the analysis of Emilie Griffin, outlined in Chapter 4. (Emilie Griffin, *Turning*, 1980.) Religious conversion is frequently preceded by intense thought, an intellectual struggle of sorts, and it is sometimes accompanied or followed by strong emotions. Among the accompanying emotions, relief and elation seem to occur very frequently, and a degree less frequently, sorrow or remorse for the faults of the previous way of living. A form of retrospective dread can also be present, when the convert assesses the previous habits as likely to have been conducive to his/her destruction and now feels as one who has narrowly escaped doom. But Griffin does not associate these emotions, nor the intellectual struggle involved, with the kind of anxiety here termed decisional anxiety.

<sup>477</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII, 5.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid. VIII, 7.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid. VIII, 5 and VIII, 9.

the alternative paths have ceased to be regarded as morally equally valuable, or as equally fulfilling of his duty. This indicates that he is at the threshold of a conversion regarding *behavioral coherence* (and perhaps, to some extent, regarding his commitment to right/wrong, this being a natural occurrence when behavioral coherence appears very difficult to achieve). It is the question, “will I be able to endure living such a different life from mine?” that delays the completeness of Augustine’s conversion, to the point that he begins questioning whether he will be ever able to take the step that is now seen as demanded of him.<sup>480</sup> But if decisional anxiety is conceived as anxiety caused by the need to choose between similarly alluring – or similarly obscure – options, this does not seem to be what causes Augustine’s anxious state. **His anxiety is emotional and powerful**, but it is not *decisional*.

A perusal of a wider number of narratives of moral conversion confirms that decisional anxiety seems not to be the norm. In conversions regarding content, for example, it is very common to find that the convert regards the previous views he/she held with a sort of ***astonishment at their own blindness***, or their inability to see the contradictions involved by such views. In a case cited by Bellah the subject, given the name of Brian Palmer (case #1 in the Appendix) looks back – after a divorce that came as a big surprise - at his previously held values, which are categorized by Bellah as a “utilitarian individualism.” He does it in these terms:

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<sup>480</sup> The emotional aspect of the struggle may be amplified in fact by Augustine’s passionate nature. Together with his own, Augustine also relates the conversion of his friend Alipius, and this is a much less dramatic conversion. Ibid. VIII, 12.

So I went back and reexamined where the thing broke down and found that I had contributed at least 50 percent and, depending on the vantage point, maybe 99 percent of the ultimate demise of the institution. Mostly it was asking myself the question of why am I behaving in such and such a way. Why am I doing this at work? Why was I doing this at home? The answer was that I was operating as if a certain value was of the utmost importance to me. Perhaps it was success. Perhaps it was fear of failure, but I was extremely success-oriented, to the point where everything would be sacrificed for the job, the career, the company. I said bullshit. That ain't the way it should be.<sup>481</sup>

During this process of self-examination the subject settles for what Bellah categorizes as an “expressive individualism.”

To be able to receive affection freely and give affection and to give of myself and know it is a totally reciprocal type of thing. There's just almost a psychologically buoyant feeling of being able to be so much more involved and sharing. Sharing experiences of goals, sharing of feelings, working together to solve problems, etc. My viewpoint of a true love, husband-and-wife type of relationship is one that is founded on mutual respect, admiration affection, the ability to give and receive freely.<sup>482</sup>

The subject describes implicitly his previous views as mistaken or shortsighted, and does not at any point seem to be torn by the need to choose between previous views and current ones. It is to him a matter of common sense – or of bettered sense.

In another case cited by Bellah – which can also be categorized as conversion regarding content -, the subject, Wayne Bauer (case #2), recounts having left the Marine Corps in the 60's:

During this time, some friends of his who had gone to college in New York began to argue with him about the Vietnam War. “And after this went on, to make a long story short, for about three or four months, I realized that my best argument held no weight. And what happened was, all of a sudden, my view of who I was and my environment was shattered. It was like looking in the mirror and having the whole thing shattered on you and seeing all your values, all your beliefs, everything you thought was real just kind of crumble. And it left me without any values and it also left me in a position where I had this terrible feeling of loneliness that there was no one I could go to for help. All the people I had trusted, I feel, essentially, they had lied to me.”<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 5.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

After this he went AWOL, and resurfaced after a time to embrace a life as a political activist. There is mention in these accounts of *a struggle to make moral sense of things*, of the need to reevaluate moral categories, but commonly there is no mention of something like a terrible weight regarding a difficult choice between competing valuable alternatives. The questions frequently asked are “how” or “what,” but not “which one”, i.e., “whether” A or B.

The same can be said of conversions regarding attitude towards right/wrong and the meaning of life. While these classes of conversion are frequently followed by a moral struggle to change one’s habits – a struggle that frequently develops into a conversion regarding coherence – the “awakening” to the need for embracing a moral life does not take the shape of an anxiety-charged, standing-on-the-edge-of-a-decision experience. The collection of cases presented by James Leuba, involving mostly the conversion of recurrent alcoholics (ergo, dealing in its majority with cases of conversion regarding attitude and/or coherence) is a good example. The subjects frequently express a state of near-despair at the sight of their lack of success in previous attempts; but when conversion occurs, it simply happens, and is met either with joy or a certain resignation, as in the case of “Subject E”:

He met with the biblical phrase "He that has the Son has life eternal", and could not proceed further, all the while feeling there was another being in his bedroom. "It was unquestionably shown me, in one second of time, that I had never touched the Eternal, that is, God, and that if I died then, I must inevitably be lost. I was undone. I knew it as well as I now know I am saved. . . What could I do? I did not repent even; God never asked me to repent. All I felt was, "I am undone," and God cannot help it, although He loves me. No fault on the part of the Almighty.<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," 373-376.

In fact, as Leuba's collection attests, it is not uncommon in this type of conversion to find that the awakening experience takes the subject with a certain degree of surprise; and by the time the transformation has taken place, the subject can only look at the past attitude with the shame or embarrassment that a very unintelligent mistake provokes.

On the other hand, there *are* some narratives of moral conversion that do describe instances of decisional anxiety. This seems to take place occasionally in cases of conversion regarding content and regarding commitment/attitude. An example of the latter can be found in the life of Thomas Merton, as analyzed by Conn. Merton's adult life is at many times marked by struggle and anxiety, and the origin of the anxiety seems to be his difficulty to reconcile what seem to be contradictory life-callings – the ascetic/mystic and the successful writer.<sup>485</sup> Coherence is one of the elements at stake – at many times Merton considers his duty to forgo his activity as a writer, while at the same time enjoying his success – but what seems to be centrally at stake is Merton's difficulty to reconcile two “meaning-giving” activities that seem to exclude each other. It seems then that in a conversion regarding commitment (in this example, commitment to a specific meaning-giving activity) there can be decisional anxiety, when two (or more) life options both strongly appeal to the person but present conflicting demands.

It seems also possible to find instances of decisional anxiety related to the first type of conversion, conversion regarding content, when the resistance encountered arises from resistant mental habits or convictions that are backed by the authority or respectability of religious and moral institutions, or of intersubjective groups to which the person is

attached or believes that he/she owes some loyalty. In such cases, mental habits, authority and/or group pressure seem to counterbalance the perspective that arises from “seeing things in a clearer light,” and the person is forced to resolve the conflict by taking a stand, by making a choice between them, since mental clarity alone seems insufficient to define the issue. Walter Conn illustrates this struggle using a passage from Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.<sup>486</sup> Huck, having helped Jim the slave escape, begins to feel the guilt from having “stolen” the slave from a poor woman, which makes him a “wicked boy,” and which he fears will be punished by everlasting fire. He tries to pray, but realizes that unless he writes a letter to the owner, letting her know of Jim’s whereabouts, this prayer would be a lie. So he resolves to write this letter and, after doing this, finds that he can pray again and feels clean of sin. But then he remembers how good Jim has been to him, his only friend now:

I was a-trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: ‘All right, then, I’ll go to hell’—and tore it up. It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming.<sup>487</sup>

Conn reads this episode as “a transition from a moral consciousness defined by socially imposed rules and dominated by the fear of punishment attached to disobeying them, to a moral orientation defined by concern for value and liberated by a loving care that reaches out to others.”<sup>488</sup> Huck is struggling against his superego, and fails to find

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<sup>485</sup> Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 232-233.

<sup>486</sup> Walter E. Conn, “The Desire for Authenticity: Conscience and Moral Conversion,” in *The Desires of the Human Heart*, ed. Vernon Gregson (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 45.

<sup>487</sup> Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1948 [1884]), ch. 31.

<sup>488</sup> Conn, “The Desire for Authenticity,” 46.

relief from his “superego guilt.”<sup>489</sup> But his sensitivity to value, says Conn, does not let him take this route.

Huck’s true moral dilemma presents itself to him in starkly clear, existential terms . . . And the “two things” he must decide between are not, he realizes, just two possible courses of action in this situation, one right and one wrong, but two radically different modes of moral existence. . . The full meaning of Lonergan’s understanding of moral conversion is at stake: the choice of value as criterion for decision *and* the choice of oneself as a free and responsible moral self. . . And, as with Huck, one chooses oneself as a free and responsible creator of value not abstractly, but in the concrete situation of a very specific action decision.<sup>490</sup>

It seems possible, then, to identify some instances of decisional anxiety in moral conversion, though these cases appear to be exceptional within the moral conversion literature. In cases of *conversion regarding content*, decisional anxiety may be involved when the content of the (potentially) new moral orientation conflicts with the person’s existing religious convictions, or some other set of revered or respected truths, and when the person feels that the contradiction may only be resolved by making a choice for one or the other set of truths.<sup>491</sup> And in *conversions regarding commitment*, decisional anxiety may be involved when the person needs to decide among paths that are relatively balanced in potential gains and losses, which results in locating the weight of the choice in the person’s willing. In *conversions regarding behavioral coherence*, a certain anxiety can take place when coherence looks to the person to be an unattainable ideal, because of attachment to previous habits or – the other side of the coin - an “insufficient motivation”

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid.

<sup>491</sup> It is possible, however, that the person may already have taken a stand, and the anxiety felt is produced by the person’s discomfort, fear or repugnance at the prospect of disobeying or contradicting these long-held, long-revered truths.



to counterweight such habits; but it does not seem that what is passing through the subject's mind is "decisional anxiety."

Other than scenarios similar to these, however, decisional anxiety does not figure prominently in actual moral conversion (though it seems to be prominent in fictional accounts). The popular fictional image of the person at the threshold of conversion struggling to throw their weight one way or another, despite its popularity, is not representative. From the evidence available, a more common scenario is that of the person arriving to a somewhat solid conviction, i.e., of *knowing* that he/she was previously in the wrong, or is/was behaving incoherently with respect to moral convictions that are regarded by them as correct. It would seem therefore that, except for the few scenarios mentioned above, in actual moral conversion previous convictions and old mental habits do not weigh the process down once they are identified as inadequate, except possibly at the behavioral level. But clearly more study of decisional anxiety would be needed before this category would significantly impact the free choice/determinism debate.

#### Data category 4.a: The experience of *volitional exertion*

The next type of experience that has been proposed as revealing the reality of free choice is the experience of *volitional exertion* (data category 4.a). This can be described as *the experience of exerting oneself in order to solidify in one way or another a so far unresolved decision, or to confirm a previous decision or road of action when our resolve*

*seems to waver*. It is a more common experience in stories of moral conversion than the relatively rare experience of decisional anxiety

Acts of volitional exertion stand out as potential evidence for the “free-ness” of free choice because they involve a degree of mental energy and reflective attention much higher than regular acts of choice, in which most of the attention and energy are focused on the object of our actions. Often, however, the experience of volitional exertion is short-lived and quickly dilutes. I may have accomplished, for example, a relatively significant feat of volitional exertion to finish the current paragraph without getting up to get some coffee, dividing my attention between articulating my thoughts and pushing back the thoughts of coffee; but I will probably forget the experience itself as soon as I sit down to work on my next paragraph. Also, some people seem more able to sustain focused acts of choice in the face of continuing resistance than others - they are often said to have more “willpower.” As a consequence – a somewhat paradoxical consequence - people with more willpower are bound to experience volitional exertion with less frequency (because they, so to speak, channel their mental energy more efficiently), and thus perhaps will be less reflectively aware of their acts of choice. It is peculiar circumstances and a high degree of exertion that make the experience of volitional exertion memorable – if, for example, exhausted, I finished the last section of a race “by willpower alone,” a situation that will not only be per se memorable, but in which my whole attention would be focused on my exertion and how to prolong it.

In the context of moral conversion, however, it is possible to find the experience of

volitional exertion over an extended process of choice, or as the resolving factor in such an extended process of choice. In this sense, **moral conversion may be a privileged context to experience volitional exertion.**

However, volitional exertion does not seem to appear significantly in the first category, conversion regarding content. As the narratives considered in Chapter 5 have shown, moral conversion regarding content is sometimes preceded by varying degrees of inner argumentation or “dialectic”; but once a “conclusion” is reached, the resistance of ingrained mental habits is typically *not* perceived as a strenuous obstacle, one that might require an exercise of volitional exertion. What the narratives indicate instead is either a certain degree of surprise for not having previously realized what is now realized, or a focus on the eye-opening character of the specific experience and what has been learned from it, with little or no mention of resistance and a need for effort (volitional exertion) in order to overcome past patterns.<sup>492</sup>

Volitional exertion does not seem to be a typically relevant factor in conversion regarding attitude either, with the exception perhaps of cases in which the agent finds him/herself in a **stalemate position**, uncertain as to what course to take (and plagued,

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<sup>492</sup> This pattern is found, for example, in the cases cited by Consedine, Bowen and others in the context of “restorative justice” programs. There is mention of surprise and remorse, but the reality of one’s having harmed an actual human being – sometimes one’s own neighbor – irrupts almost unhindered by potential defenses or rationalization. The usual reaction during these encounters is an acknowledgement, on the part of the offender, of the wrongness of their previous actions - accompanied by varying degrees of remorse according to the gravity of the crime, together with a focus (perhaps prompted by the structure of the interview) on what needs to be done to repair the harm, and to get one’s life back on track. See *Te Ara Whakatika*, September 2001; Consedine, *Restorative Justice: Healing the Effects of Crime*; Consedine and Bowen, *Restorative Justice: Contemporary Themes and Practice*; “Face to Face,” *Te Ara Whakatika: Newsletter of the Court-Referred restorative justice project*, July 2001. Also Kenneth Melchin, “Insight, Conflict and Justice”; paper read at the Lonergan Workshop, Boston College, June 19-24, 2005.

perhaps, by decisional anxiety) and needs to exert his/her will in order to choose for a certain direction.

But instances of volitional exertion are found with relative frequency in the third category, *conversion regarding behavioral coherence*, and this analysis will focus on such instances. The person attempting to achieve a higher degree of behavioral coherence – according either to newly incorporated moral convictions, or to a renewed attitude/commitment regarding previously held values, or simply as realizing that he/she had drifted away from an acceptable degree of coherence – frequently experiences the resistance of old habits. When the desired coherence seems to evade the agent, however, what happens is that the person lives for a relatively prolonged period of time in the presence of his/her inability to make the desired choices and even longer in the presence of the resistance these choices eventually confront. In this context, attention to one's willpower comes naturally as frustration accumulates, including explicit reflection on whether one is capable of changing by oneself or not.<sup>493</sup> That is, the not-choosing is interpreted as a lack of capacity by comparison with oneself choosing in other matters, and other persons choosing and choosing again against resistance, even in the same matter. And when the person finally begins to choose and choose again, this is similarly attended to closely and often interpreted as the (first) demonstration of one's *capacity* for free choice in the matter. (Such are the kind of acts Aristotle and Aquinas had in mind when they said that from one's - and others' - acts one infers one's capacities - and

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<sup>493</sup> The first among the "twelve steps" of the Alcoholics Anonymous program for recovery, for example, indicates the need to acknowledge, as the very first step, that one is "powerless over alcohol; that our lives had become unmanageable." (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 59.)

others’.) This “forced attention” makes moral conversion regarding behavioral coherence a privileged context for examining the experience of volitional exertion as potentially valuable (introspective, but corroborable) evidence for free choice.

The struggle to reform resistant habits can be approached through either cunning or “brute” willpower. Anyone who has ever had to struggle against a persistent flaw or bad habit has probably first hand knowledge of both approaches. Both strategies involve volitional exertion, though in different degrees.

The “cunning” approach involves setting up devices and external situations so that one is less often in the presence of temptations, less often faced with the possibility to transgress, and more often (or systematically) reminded of and prompted to engage in good habits. A smoker trying to quit may cut his cigarettes in half; an alcoholic may set up his daily routine so that he does not walk next to bars or is left alone at home; a student used to procrastination may set up a system of rewards as incentives for a morning well-spent, or may travel to a public study place where occasions to procrastinate may diminish. Engaging in such efforts of “cunning” is clearly experienced as an act of choosing in the face of one’s interior resistance to the desired patterns of action, although the strategies themselves involve a combination of exertion (because in most cases the external devices themselves cannot absolutely prevent the person from recurring in the undesired conduct) and the external devices themselves that are hoped to increase the efficiency of one’s exertion or the motivation to persevere.

The alternative approach is through a “brute” or direct exertion of one’s will: the smoker may simply resist or reject the temptation to smoke every time it comes around;

the student may simply force herself to avoid distractions and stay on task every time her mind wanders or she feels the inclination to spend her time doing something else. Those who take this approach are often said to be exercising their “will power.” This is often conceived as a (now fairly stable) capacity for focusing on a resolution and carrying through despite distractions, temptations and even threats. As it was noted at the beginning of Section 7, affirmation of a capacity depends on experience of the acts themselves, so willpower as a stable capacity can only be recognized by observing the *pattern* of acts of choice in the face of persisting resistance. The exertion applied in those acts of choice that require it, however, is experienced quite directly.

In narratives of conversion regarding behavioral coherence, there is often at play a factor that may be characterized as heteronomous even by parties that defend free choice: this is the element of *tension towards change*, which is increased as the person becomes more disgusted with the bad habit or habits and with his/her apparent incapacity to modify them.<sup>494</sup> These subjective feelings of disgust are rarely initiated by the person directly; they are experienced most often as a natural/spontaneous reaction to the situation lived. This element of tension is sometimes very strongly emphasized in the narratives, and for this reason, it can give grounds to considering it as the only relevant causal factor in moral conversion regarding behavioral coherence. But though it is true that in some accounts of moral conversion the active, causal role of the subject appears at

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<sup>494</sup> The expression “to touch bottom” indicates the extreme point of tension which usually initiates a powerful – though not always successful – reformatory reaction.

times to be minimal,<sup>495</sup> the mention of volitional exertion in the narratives – whether in the form of cunning strategies or brute willpower – reveals an active role on his/her part in *choosing* for an increased behavioral coherence.<sup>496</sup>

Furthermore, it should be noted that the presence of volitional exertion does not entail *success* in the achievement of the desired degree of behavioral coherence. But even if success in reforming one's patterns of action constituted, in statistical terms, some sort of anomaly in relation to instances of failure, the possibility remains that in those situations in which conversion regarding behavioral coherence does not occur, experiences of volitional exertion can be found that, though not sufficient to yield the desired result, are still relevant, and can be invoked as potential evidence for free choice.

#### Data category 4.b: The experience of *resolve*

Another experience that deserves consideration – in some cases related to volitional exertion as its culmination, but not necessarily related to it - is the experience of *resolve*.

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<sup>495</sup> An example of this is Robert Cooley's (#19) decision to visit the FBI and offer his help in gathering evidence against his mob bosses. "Getting a corned beef sandwich," he writes, "was my only purpose in life. When I turned the corner onto Dearborn Avenue, I happened to pass the Federal Building. It seemed to draw me like a magnet. Suddenly I thought, 'Maybe I should see who's up in the Strike Force office.'" (Cooley and Levin, *When Corruption Was King*, 181.) At this point in his life Cooley can barely stand working for his corrupt employers; an enormous amount of pressure is building in his psyche. At the same time, however, he is unable to make the decision consciously to turn against them, aware of the terrible danger this implies; so his decision has to be hidden from himself at every step of the way.

<sup>496</sup> Passive or heteronomous elements are often emphasized in studies of *religious* conversion, as can be seen in William James' and Emilie Griffin's characterization of the experience of *surrender*, considered in Chapter 4. In their accounts, what seems to be the norm in religious conversion is that the person reaches a certain point in which he/she cannot proceed any further by their own volition, and only what has been characterized as *surrender* can bring them forward or allow them to conquer their hindrances. In the narratives of moral conversion considered here, however, "surrender" and similar processes of passive, dramatic transformation are not mentioned at all. This suggests a significant difference between religious and moral conversion; perhaps surrender becomes a necessity (psychologically or theologically) at the critical moment of moving from non-faith to faith.

By “resolve” is here meant, not the act of choosing, but *the emotional state that accompanies a person’s act of choosing*. Resolve can be of different kinds, and experienced differently. Sometimes resolve is “weak,” or “shaky” (on again, off again), or experienced as mere exploratory steps to see what happens, or perhaps as weak as merely external pronouncements regarding what direction to follow but lacking internal conviction all along. In these latter experiences of “weak” resolve, the person can be described as still waiting for some form of external confirmation that their choice is the right one; the choice, in a sense, is left at the mercy of external factors. Alternatively, the course of action to follow may be determined in a mostly unreflective manner, without much awareness on the part of the agent of being a chooser. Many, perhaps most of our actions seem to take place in such manner. To call such actions instances of “resolve” would seem to be straining the term.

For present purposes, *resolve* (or alternatively, “being resolute”) will be understood as *the (strong) feeling of self-determination that accompanies the act of choosing, when this act is exercised with a significant degree of conscious awareness and firmness of mind with respect to the course of action chosen*. Externally speaking, **being resolute** means that the person is at little risk of being easily swayed from his/her choice, by others or by external circumstances. The person is volitionally prepared, and *feels* capable (“motivated” is often the contemporary, but perhaps misleading term) of taking on heavy obstacles including danger, losses, social pressure, and long-term frustration in order to carry out his/her chosen action. Internally, the person experiences with great intensity the sense of *being a chooser*. This means that, whatever the reasons or motives that moved



the person towards choosing, the person perceives these as his/her *own* reasons or motives, affirmed in his/her own choosing, and perceives him/herself as setting him/herself firmly on that chosen path. Colloquial expressions that convey the spirit of this is “to put one’s foot down” and to “take a stand” in regard to acting in a certain way. In doing so, the person experiences him/herself as a chooser of that course, as a responsible being, responsible for that act, its results and so also responsible as one who determines him/herself and (to varying extent) the surrounding world as well.<sup>497</sup>

The difference between the experiences of resolve and volitional exertion should be sufficiently clear. Though resolve may sometimes result from volitional exertion, it is not dependent on it and may often be achieved without such exertion. Volitional exertion, on the other hand, may sometimes result only in a weak form of resolve. That is, the two kinds of experience are only contingently related.

Unlike the cases that showcase volitional exertion, which usually deal with people who have tried and failed a number of times and are now familiar with their goals, **narratives that most vividly portray *resolve* seem to deal most frequently with people who have just undergone a *conversion regarding attitude/commitment* and are now trying to make sense of what the consequences of their conversion are in terms of action. In other words, the more common context for this experience to take place is at the interface between the second class and third class of conversion: their attitude/commitment**

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<sup>497</sup> It is possible to speak of an *implicit* resolve when a person’s convictions and/or attitude have become firm or unyielding. The focus in this section, however, is on resolve as an *experience, revealing* of something. If the resolve is implicit, this means that the person is unaware of or at least not particularly conscious of the feelings themselves, and as a consequence, this meaning of “resolve” does not count as an “experience,” but as something else (a disposition, perhaps, or a quality of the person’s attitude).

conversion implies that the resolve to live differently should extend to the details of their lives, and that resolve now needs to determine a concrete shape for its undertakings.

Thus, for example, Helen John (case #6), the anti-nuclear proliferation activist that left her family to live in an anti-nuclear demonstration camp, mentions in her account that “it had to be my own decision”<sup>498</sup> – a phrase that expresses both a newfound awareness of herself as chooser, and also that whatever her decision would be, she would not be easily swayed. An attitudinal shift has taken place already; she is now referring to a choice regarding *action*. Similarly, when Gandhi (case #8) resolves to fight racism - after the incident in which he was put out of the train by reason of his “colored” skin - his deliberation and resolve are directed at the course of action to be taken.<sup>499</sup> He does not have any apparent “choice” with regard to the impact of the event as eye-opening; this just happens, while the resolve that the event led to was of his own choosing. (It is interesting to speculate however that, if he had chosen to continue living the way he was and not do anything about it, like most people did around him who were treated similarly, the experience might have sooner or later been forgotten, retroactively annulling its eye-opening quality.)

The context of a recent conversion regarding attitude/commitment adds a particular shine on the experience of resolve, that makes it come out with a clear, vivid contrast into the light, much like the shine that the new sun of the morning gives to things makes them look clear and vivid. This is the effect of the person seeing things anew, with renewed

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<sup>498</sup> Helen Haste, "Moral Responsibility and Moral Commitment," 337-341.

<sup>499</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography; or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*, 104.

possibilities for good. “The air smells different. The sun seems brighter. Things aren't so bleak all the time,” says Evans Robinson, the gangster turned CeaseFire activist (case #21).<sup>500</sup> “I feel better about what happens in a single day in the classroom than I ever did during my years in law,” states Russ Fee, the lawyer turned school teacher (case #22).<sup>501</sup>

These are statements that reflect the renewed meaning, renewed interest in life that the second class of moral conversion produces. Being resolute to live differently is not an experience in isolation from living daily life; the resolve imbues daily life with its “shine,” with the new meaning the person’s choice creates. In this context, the person thus experiences a real possibility of re-creating their lives, beginning a new path to concretely replace the old ones that were tired and dreary. Resolve in this context is not the isolated resolve that has for its object discrete actions and decisions, the meaningfulness of which may not extend beyond these concrete goals, but a resolve that has for its background the opportunity and the hope of entering a new way of life. More lived experience may reveal, perhaps, that these opportunities are not nearly as limitless or as accessible as they are experienced by the person during early periods of resolve. But the focus here is on what the chooser experiences and introspectively affirms, and from this point of view, it may be appropriate to say that in this situation the person does not merely observe resolve, but *lives in* resolve.

The experience of resolve is clearly connected with *choice*; it draws the agent’s attention directly to his/her role as chooser and self-determining. It is beyond the scope of

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<sup>500</sup> Rex W. Hupke, "Four Who Watch over the City."

<sup>501</sup> Hilary Anderson, "New Teacher Lays Down the Law... and Picks up the Books."

this dissertation to estimate the precise weight of the presence of such experiences as evidence of the free choice (in particular against the possible argument that choice is illusory), and so as the basis for arguments against determinism. But insofar as introspective evidence of resolve can be carefully corroborated, perhaps with the assistance of technical phenomenological descriptions of resolve, those defending determinist positions must offer serious reasons why this kind of evidence does not undermine their claims. Therefore, those interested in pursuing the determinism/free choice debate clearly should examine narrative accounts of moral conversion regarding attitude/commitment, in order to evaluate the relevance of the experience of resolve to their debate.

#### Data category 5: Regret, guilt, shame; pride, honor, merit

It remains to say a few brief words about the group of experiences from data category 5, also identified introspectively, that are not experiences of volition as such, but are feelings or emotions that are often attached to experiences of choosing in the narratives of moral conversion. These are the negative feelings such as regret, guilt or shame, and positive feelings such as pride, honor and merit.

In the narratives studied for this project, while converts often report experiencing feelings belonging to the “negative” group, usually in reference to their previous behavior and their convictions at that time, those cases in which the convert reports experiencing pride, honor or merit are much rarer. A plausible explanation is that it is in the overcoming of obstacles or resistance that people most often find reason to be proud, or

feel meritorious. But as was discussed in the first two classes of moral conversion, resistance is either not encountered, or not experienced as significant, or not experienced as conquered through one's own energy, choices, or "willpower." Thus, when no significant resistance is encountered, converts tend to regard their conversion as simply a matter of "seeing things in a better light" and choosing to follow that "light." The clarity of this seeing involves in itself nothing to be particularly proud of – even though one's own choice has set oneself on a path informed by it - and it may in fact prompt embarrassment, regret, guilt or even shame regarding one's previous obtuseness.<sup>502</sup> On the other hand, if significant resistance is encountered and overcome, as does happen in the third class of moral conversion regarding behavioral coherence, a common reaction seems to be one of relief and even religiously motivated gratitude for one's unhopd-for deliverance. But in such cases, some justifiable sense of merit, honor, even pride is sometimes reported.

The presence of feelings of these kinds, both negative and the occasional positive, figures frequently in the literature of the free choice/determinism debate, as evidence (or not) for the argument that human actions are free. Contrary arguments, of course, abound; their strategy frequently focuses on explaining such feelings as aberrant, that is, as constructions of the psyche that grew as the psychological counterparts of the demands of social institutions and biological needs, but the presence of which deceives people into

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<sup>502</sup> This experience of "seeing things in a better light" may involve, on the other hand, some pride-ridden attitudes *ad extra*, when the person looks back at those who are still "stuck in the old ways," and lacks the cognitive/moral capacity for understanding or sympathizing with their more restricted viewpoint. But these attendant emotions and others are not illuminating for the free choice/determinism debate.

attributing reality to the idea that choosers originate their choices (in some meaningful, measurable way) and thus to the idea of free choice.<sup>503</sup> The debate mostly continues in that vein, that is, in terms of the adequacy or not of such introspective evidence, or of the value of emotions as evidence for a metaphysical claim. It should be noted, however, that such arguments do implicitly grant the connection between these attendant feelings and the claim of the reality of free choice. The likely reason for this connection is that these categories of emotion are difficult to make sense of within a human personality except as emotional evidence of a perception of oneself as morally responsible; and one common argument in favor of the reality of free choice is premised on the reality of moral responsibility. Therefore these emotions may be indirectly relevant to the free choice/determinism debate even if their direct contribution is uncertain.

One further observation should be made here. When expressing feelings of regret, guilt or shame – whether for past discrete actions or for past views and patterns of behavior - people do not focus exclusively on judgements of moral matters, such as “how could I do something so mean?” or “how can I be so selfish?” It is common to hear instead people recriminating themselves with expressions such as, “how could I do something so *stupid*?” or “that was so *thoughtless* of me!” In the context of looking back after moral conversion has taken place, the presence of such cognitive elements often seems to be particularly strongly accentuated: that is, the person seems to regard previous moral stances, attitudes and/or behavioral patterns in general as highly flawed from a

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<sup>503</sup> See, for example, Jacinto Choza, *Conciencia Y Afectividad : Aristoteles, Nietzsche, Freud*, 2nd ed. (Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, 1991).

cognitive point of view.<sup>504</sup> Of course, these judgments are intricately tied to more strictly moral categories, e.g. the fact that someone feels guilty for having been thoughtless implies that it was a morally faulty kind of thoughtlessness. But such a pattern of increased cognitive concern supports a line of analysis not related directly to the free choice/determinism debate, but to another debate, about externalism vs. an internalist understanding of morality. It is to that debate that this study turns in Chapter 10.

## **8. Conclusion**

This chapter has considered the possible evidence that can be gathered from an examination of moral conversion in relation to the debate about free choice and determinism. The first part of the chapter reviewed the general terms of the debate, distinguishing it from some related but not directly relevant discussions, establishing the terminology to be used here, and noting that any evidence from an examination of moral conversion would depend on a broader understanding of the notions of “data,” “evidence” and “corroboration” than what is accepted in the standard empiricist tradition.

The second part of the chapter categorized and grouped together various phenomena that are commonly invoked in arguments for the reality of free choice and showed how these categories manifest themselves in the context of moral conversion. The main distinction between these categories of phenomena is that between externally observable data and introspectively observed experiences. The former categories consist,

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<sup>504</sup> See, for example, the cases of Brian Palmer (#1 in the Appendix), Wayne Bauer (#2), “Lenny” (#7), and Leuba’s “Subject E” (#12), whose remorse took “the shape of regret after my *folly* in wasting my life in such a way.” (Leuba, “A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena,” 373-376. Emphasis mine.)

for present purposes, in observations of the fact that moral conversion defies the predictability of regular patterns of personal or social behavior.

With respect to introspective evidence, the analysis has focused on four categories of experiences that have been considered to be evidence of free choice: decisional anxiety, volitional exertion, resolve, and the group of positive and negative feelings that indicate personal moral approval or disapproval after the fact. Independently of the debate about introspective evidence, the results are still not unambiguous in their implications. None of these experiences figures prominently across the board in moral conversion, or with comparable significance in all three categories of moral conversion. Thus in the case of *decisional anxiety*, its lack of prominence among accounts of actual moral conversion (even though it is prominent in fictional accounts) suggests that in actual moral conversion previous convictions and old mental habits do not weigh the process down, except possibly at the behavioral level. But clearly more study of decisional anxiety would be needed before this category would significantly impact the free choice/determinism debate.

An analysis of the role of the experiences of *regret, guilt, shame, pride, honor* and *merit* in the context of moral conversion does not yield particular ways in which their examination may enrich the debate on freedom and determinism. The absence of consistent patterns of either positive or negative feelings and above all the fact that these are emotions rather than actions makes questionable their weight as evidence in a metaphysical argument. Nevertheless, insofar as they do occur, they may point indirectly



to elements of converts' introspective experience that have bearing on the debate, i.e., the experience of being morally responsible.

*Volitional exertion*, on the other hand, is potentially evidence of the convert's experience as a chooser and it is found in the specific context of conversion regarding behavioral coherence. In this specific context, frequently the person experiencing it will have typically struggled for a considerable time against resilient bad habits, and the exertion required – in the form of repeated acts of choosing new ways of concrete action – will be at the focus of the person's attention, constituting it a relatively important source of evidence of experiences of free choice.

Finally, the experience of *resolve* appears with considerable frequency especially in accounts of moral conversion regarding significant changes in attitude or commitment especially in relation to the articulation of a behavioral program consistent with the convert's chosen attitude or commitment. Nevertheless the argumentative weight of these considerations within the free choice/determinism debate, like those regarding volitional exertion and unpredictability, cannot be evaluated without consideration of many other matters. The point here is rather to suggest that there is much material in a study of moral conversion that deserves attention by those engaged in the freedom/determinism debate.

But if we step back from this debate and allow a progressively more refined picture of the process of moral conversion to emerge from these considerations, it becomes increasingly clear that the image of moral conversion as that of a person struggling against him/herself in order to overcome resistant habits of the mind or conduct *through choice alone* is not entirely adequate. In particular, the somewhat common notion that the

operation of free choice entails simply directing oneself in one way or the other (to thus resolve conflicts and impasses) seems less and less descriptive of what happens in moral conversion, and a more organic integration between the role of reason and the role of the will seems worth investigating. Therefore the next chapter will examine the role of cognitive elements in the process of moral conversion.

CHAPTER 10  
FEELINGS AND COGNITIVE OPERATIONS IN MORAL  
CONVERSION: AN INTERNALIST VIEW.

**1. Introduction: foundationalism and anti-foundationalism; internalism and externalism**

This chapter considers what can be the contribution of a study of moral conversion to the internalism/externalism debate. To make that contribution clear, it is important as a first step to differentiate this debate from another, connected but different debate, that between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism.

One of the central questions of ethical theory regards the grounds or foundations of moral convictions. This is the question about why the content of moral convictions (what can be called “moral norms” here for the sake of brevity) is or can be considered morally demanding or imperative, and whether there are reasons for considering the imperativeness of moral norms as grounded in something more than the purely subjective acknowledgement of the agent, or of a social acknowledgement of their imperativeness. In other words, whether there are *objective* grounds or foundations for moral norms. In more general terms this discussion is often referred to as the discussion regarding the *foundations of morality*.

A philosophical argument attempting to achieve a defense of the objective imperativeness of moral norms (i.e., answering for the positive with respect to the existence of objective foundations for morality) can be characterized as *foundationalist*, while the opposite view – the view that denies such objective foundations – is commonly called *anti-foundationalist*. Foundationalist arguments have been attempted in a variety of ways, some focusing on disclosing some form of logical necessity (as with Kant’s first formulation of the categorical imperative), some establishing the moral sphere as a necessary aspect of human nature – a consequence of human rationality, or freedom, or of a peculiar disposition towards happiness and the good -, some establishing *value* as an actual property of things, some explaining morality as having its source on a divine imperative, etc. Anti-foundationalist arguments have also attempted a variety of arguments to explain the presence of moral institutions in human society, and of moral convictions in individual human agents; some of these explanations characterize the existence of moral institutions as convenient (for evolutionary purposes, for progress and happiness, etc.) while some characterize it as something of an aberration; but coincide in denying the grounds for an objective imperativeness of moral norms.

The discussion on *externalist/internalist views of morality* can be considered to be a part of this larger debate.<sup>505</sup> As was explained in Chapter 9, according to *externalism* the specifically normative content of moral norms and values is not what makes them more

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<sup>505</sup> My use of the terms “internalism” and “externalism,” though somewhat inspired by their use in the current Anglo-American metaethics literature, is not typical; thus the need to identify the use of the terms here. Their use here follows very closely Thomas Wren’s in *Caring About Morality*. The bearing of this analysis on other ways of formulating the debate is beyond the scope of this project.

or less apt to become moral norms or principles. The fact that moral norms or principles are acquired, adopted or internalized by the moral agent is attributed to “external” factors, entirely independent of the intelligible/cognitive content of such principles or norms. The motivation for following moral norms is seen as the result exclusively of a process that can be characterized, using a term from psychology, as “reinforcement,” i.e., the psyche attaches or associates certain feelings (feelings of aversion, imperativeness, fear, guilt, etc.) to certain actions or behaviors. Whatever the mechanism invoked (conditioning, modeling, etc.) these moral feelings are essentially defined by the process that produces them in the psyche, and moral phenomena are, according to externalism, sufficiently explained by a description of this process. As a consequence, the content of the behavior is not regarded as relevant to the success of the reinforcement process, or as playing any part in the constitution of the moral convictions themselves. What is more, theoretically any behavior could be made into a pattern and judged as moral.

According to the *internalist* view instead, the content of the act (the intelligible content, the act as it is known) is at least one of the intrinsically relevant elements by which the morality of the act is judged. (The term “internalism” makes reference principally to the intelligibility “internal” to the action/behavior itself, that determines it, as opposed to its being determined by “external” factors; additionally, the term makes also reference, using a spatial image that involves some controversy, to the “internal” realm of the cognitive.) This content is cognitively appraised and - in ways that vary according to what is implicitly or explicitly considered by the agent as the determining criteria of the morality of his/her acts – it becomes a part of the process by which the

agent gauges their morality. Further, the content of the acts (and their cognitive appraisal) is for internalism an essential factor in the grounding of the criteria of moral action themselves – the determining notions according to which we judge things to be right or wrong. And the content of the acts (and their cognitive appraisal) is for internalism also an essential factor in the constitution of the agent's *attitude/commitment* to acting morally.

It is important for methodological purposes to note that an internalist view does not exclude the possibility of particular events taking place as externalism describes them, so that if some human actions were proved to have taken place as externalism describes them, that of itself would not entail the refutation of internalism. On the other hand, the externalist claim is universal without allowing for exceptions: according to this position, no human action takes place as internalism claims (although, as will be seen in the following section, some externalist views, without betraying their externalist claim, allow for cognitive elements to be relevant in the shaping of human action to a higher degree than other externalist views).

The terms “internalism” and “externalism” are frequently identified with foundationalism and anti-foundationalism respectively. This is not the position taken in this work. “Internalism” will be understood here in the restricted sense of the claim that a cognitive appraisal of various kinds takes place in the shaping of moral convictions, and of the agent's *attitude/commitment* towards morality. This claim (which will be soon qualified further) can be regarded as an intermediate step towards foundationalism, but the claim itself, if demonstrated, will not entail that the truth of foundationalism has itself

been demonstrated. *If* demonstrated, the internalist claim can go as far as to imply that there is a human need or a desire/drive for something like rational adequacy or reasonableness in one's moral structures. But in order to ground a foundationalist view as such, further steps are needed (which would establish an object correlative to this drive). These additional steps are beyond the goals of this study. Thus it is necessary to distinguish clearly between this restricted notion of internalism, and foundationalism.

On the other hand, externalism seems to involve an anti-foundationalist position (and is in fact situated at the far anti-foundationalist range of the spectrum). Externalism essentially rejects the possibility of cognitive operations having to do with morality, which entails the rejection of the possibility of morality being grounded in a certain intelligibility.

The aim of this chapter is to propose that a study of moral conversion can provide new insights on the discussion of internalist and externalist views of morality, in the sense explained above.

One of the central difficulties in the internalism/externalism discussion is that a person's moral makeup (understood here as a composite of the content of a person's moral convictions, the person's attitude towards right/wrong and happiness/meaning/eudaemonia, and the person's habits of moral action) begins to take shape during a person's early years, before reasoning, critical thinking or any differentiated form of moral reflection can take place. As a consequence, there is very little introspective data on the cognitive and emotional processes involved when moral convictions and attitudes/commitments first develop. The person is then too young to grasp reflectively what is

involved, much less to verbally articulate it (a difficult task even for most well-educated adults). The reach of external observation, on the other hand, is limited to externally observable actions and patterns of action, as well as such information as is verbalized by the (young and inarticulate) subjects. But if an introspective examination of developing morality during early childhood is mostly beyond reach, there is something that is the “next best thing.” This next best thing is a study of first-person accounts of adult moral conversion. In these accounts we can gain a certain degree of introspective access to the processes through which new moral contents replace old ones, or a different attitude towards moral matters is gained.

As has been said in the previous chapter, regarding introspective evidence, access in this setting is not transparent; a person’s introspective observations can be expected to be offered from a certain point of view, and their articulation conditioned by previously acquired terminology and theoretical frameworks. But while mediating interpretations might obscure to some degree the purity of the data thus gathered, this difficulty is counterbalanced by the powerful effects that the conversion event has on the life of the person who reports it and the corresponding vividness of the story and the desire to share it accurately, perhaps even as something for which existing categories seem to be insufficient, and careful, critical articulation is especially important.



## **2. Examples of externalist theories of morality**

To understand better the challenge of externalism, it will be useful to review a number of theories of morality that express varying ranges within the externalist position. In this review, I will follow closely Thomas Wren in his book *Caring About Morality*.<sup>506</sup> According to Wren, while philosophical metaethics has favored – though not universally – an internalist perspective, Anglo-American psychology has favored an externalist view.<sup>507</sup> Though the latter’s various theories of “socialization” have dealt with morality in increasingly cognitive terms, they have not become any the less externalist in their underlying metaethical perspective. Wren develops this claim by conducting a survey of the most influential theories of socialization; his intention is to show that there has been a gradual shift, in the recent history of psychology, towards a wider acceptance of the relevance of cognitive factors in the study of moral behavior, though the underlying philosophical framework is still dominantly externalist. This is partly shown by the shift towards more cognitive models in psychological explanations of the psychogenesis of moral ideas.

### **Skinner’s radical behavioralism**

Among the externalism theories that most completely exclude cognitive processes we find Skinner’s behavioralism or “peripheralism.” This theoretical framework is committed to externalism from the outset, to the extent that, in its most precise formulation, it does away not only with references to such introspective factors as

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<sup>506</sup> Ibid.

<sup>507</sup> Wren, *Caring About Morality*, 37-38.

desires, feelings and the concept of *self*, but even to rewards and punishments – since the latter still make reference to the subject’s expectations.<sup>508</sup> The intention is to frame all descriptions of behavior in terms of “observable response probabilities rather than feelings, images or even expectation, all of whose usual definitions suppose some capacity for mental representation.”<sup>509</sup>

According to Wren, there has been no shortage of researchers willing to work within this framework, but this line of research is “seldom very relevant to the philosophically interesting features of moral experience.”<sup>510</sup> Non-cognitively reinforced behaviors (e.g., Pavlov’s dog experiments) will very rarely have moral relevance, notes Wren; in fact, many central ethical theories would consider such behavior from the outset as not pertaining to the realm of morality at all.

Wren argues that by the early 1990’s it had been sufficiently established within psychology “that specifically human conditioning usually, perhaps always, involves an awareness on the subject’s part of the reinforcing character of the reinforcement.”<sup>511</sup> It had been established, in other words, as an empirical claim within psychology at that point, that people have at least *some* degree of awareness or representation (in terms at least of intentionality, and perhaps of reward/punishment expectations) involved in the reinforcement of “socially interactive” behavior. Skinner himself admitted in 1963 the

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<sup>508</sup> Ibid., 42. See also B. F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior* (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

<sup>509</sup> Wren, *Caring About Morality*, 42-43.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid. Quoting W. F. Brewer, "There Is No Convincing Evidence for Operant or Classical Conditioning in Adult Humans.," in *Cognition and the Symbolic Processes*, ed. W. B. Weimer (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1974).

impossibility of avoiding cognitive categories altogether.<sup>512</sup> Thus, most other theories accepting the externalist position consider at least a minimal degree of cognitive activity as essential to the conditioning process, the minimum being that human subjects “cognize reinforcements as rewards or punishments.”<sup>513</sup> Under the standard psychological conditioning paradigm, however, this minimum is still very far from conceding relevance to the cognitive content itself as a basis for moral motivation or for establishing the morality of an action; the “value” given to an instance of behavior is mechanistically linked to the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the stimuli associated with the behavior, and what are called moral convictions or motivations are redescribed to fit within that framework.<sup>514</sup>

### Theories of psychological contagion

An alternative attempt to explain morality in externalist terms which Wren labels the “behavioral contagion” or “psychological contagion” approach focuses on the observation that people respond to “vicarious arousal.” Such “arousal” is produced by exposing the subjects to the sight of other persons being aroused by stimuli that would not naturally produce such reactions. Subjects may become conditioned, for example, to experience painful arousal in the presence of certain audible tones, by being exposed to the sight of other persons (actors) being so aroused (grimacing, etc.).<sup>515</sup> Using this

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<sup>512</sup> Wren, *Caring About Morality*, 42. Citing B. F. Skinner, “Behaviorism at Fifty,” *Science*, no. 140 (1963).

<sup>513</sup> Wren, *Caring About Morality*, 43.

<sup>514</sup> A classical example of this conditioning paradigm, mentioned by Wren (*ibid.*), is found in “The Clockwork Orange.” In the story, one of the characters is forced to watch images of undesired behavior while provided with painful or unpleasant physical stimuli, with the object of extinguishing the character’s inclination to such behavior.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

observed pattern of behavior as a starting point, researchers proposed that the genesis of moral behavior is the effect of conditioning of this sort: we become conditioned to helping others, for example, if we find that our help produces in them gestures of pleasure or well-being, which in turn arouse such emotions in us.

There is some minimal cognitional activity involved in the process so described: the subject has to see or otherwise experience the model, and has to correctly “read” the emotions modeled. But the feelings or emotions are linked to a certain behavior by a purely *external* or arbitrary link, so this is clearly an externalist account. It is indifferent whether a positive empathic reaction is linked to a helping conduct, for example, or to spontaneous aggression.<sup>516</sup>

#### “Force-composition” models: Approach/avoidance theories, and Freud’s early theory of *Cathexis*

Wren also considers a group of externalist theories in which the cognitive elements are more relevant than in the theories previously mentioned. These theories consider the variety of intrapsychic drives or desires as the equivalent of vectorial forces within the psyche, so that the course of action taken is the result of the composition (or in an alternative expression, the “algebraic summation”) of all the relevant forces (drives,

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<sup>516</sup> In terms of the explanatory power of this type of theory, Wren criticizes some conflicting aspects raised by their research: aggressive feelings, for example, appear to be easier to inculcate by such non-cognitive modeling than feelings of empathy, and this could be read as suggesting an incapacity in this type of reinforcement to produce many fundamental types of moral behavior. Furthermore, the motivational effects of vicarious arousal that are of interest to moral investigation (e.g. one’s anger being aroused by exposure to an angry model) seem to be also dependent on a certain degree of interpretation or cognitive mediation on the part of the subject. Thus, while useful to explain a limited range of psychological phenomena, this approach seems deficient at the time of addressing the problem of the psychogenesis of moral structures.

desires) at play at any given time.<sup>517</sup>

The theories in this group vary regarding the terms in which this force-composite is described; but they all employ a fundamentally mechanistic model. The prevailing idea, says Wren, about mechanistic models of human processes, “is that the resolution of conflict is *paramechanical* rather than *parapolitical*.”<sup>518</sup> That is, the conflict is not resolved by some motives having a “privileged status or authority (as in a political system) but only by their greater strength or power (as in a mechanical system).”<sup>519</sup>

As exponents of this type of theory Wren mentions Freud’s early theory of *cathexis*, and the theories known as “approach-avoidance” theories. The latter

depict the subject as caught in an inherently nonrational force-field of desires, simultaneously inclined toward and away from some global state – similar to a rat for whom getting food also involves getting a shock.<sup>520</sup>

The subject is “pulled” by competing goods, or “pushed” to avoid competing evils. The forces involved – which usually receive the non-technical name of “desires,” and the technical general name of “conations”<sup>521</sup> – are defined in terms of “tension-reduction” (“push”), or of “expectancies” (“pull”). But though the idea of “expectations” might suggest a slightly greater emphasis on the cognitive quality of the processes involved, the interpretation given to these terms by approach-avoidance theories is still deeply

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<sup>517</sup> Hobbes’ conception of “will” and “deliberation” can be considered as an early example of a force-composition model. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994) I, vi, 49-53.

<sup>518</sup> Wren, *Caring About Morality*, 50.

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>521</sup> *Conative*: “The aspect of mental processes or behavior directed toward action or change and including impulse, desire, volition, and striving.” (*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Retrieved May 31, 2007, from Dictionary.com.)

committed to the mechanistic “law of Effect.” Formulated firstly by Thorndike,<sup>522</sup> the “law of Effect” says that “when a subject learns, he or she always does so reactively, as part of a psychosocial process objectively determined by causal forces and explicable by universal laws.”<sup>523</sup> Drives or conations, in other words, are not considered in hierarchical or “parapolitical” terms, but rather as a part of a system of forces operating according to a mechanistic model.

Wren interprets Freud’s theory of *cathexis* – an early theory, later set aside in Freud’s further work – as another example of the force-composition model. The term *cathexis* refers to the notion of psychic (especially sexual) energy channeled to an object different from the original object (or, actually, its representation). It is a psychic mechanism to achieve internal equilibrium or homeostasis under the tension of conflicting demands (which are understood, ultimately, as a set of non-cognitive psychic energies, eventually the *Id*).<sup>524</sup> Socialization (the element that takes the place, within this framework, of moral learning) is then understood as “the set of culturally induced processes by which the direction and distance of displacements are determined.”<sup>525</sup>

In his assessment, Wren notes that it may be inappropriate to conceive Freud’s idea of human motivation as just a network of blind forces, “since the importance of his work consists largely in its recognition of unconscious purposiveness.”<sup>526</sup> But in his meta-scientific framework Freud continued to advocate

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<sup>522</sup> E. L. Thorndike, *The Fundamentals of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1932).

<sup>523</sup> Wren, *Caring About Morality*, 38.

<sup>524</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Repression," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1915/1957).

<sup>525</sup> Wren, *Caring About Morality*, 53-54.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

an 'economic point of view' that would do away with qualitative, teleological accounts of motivation in favor of quantitative ones that could be manipulated algebraically.<sup>527</sup>

In other words, the forces at work are external to, independent of the subject's cognition of anything as morally imperative.

### Modeling/vicarious reinforcement theories

Modeling theories (a set of theories whose best-known representative is Albert Bandura) add to the externalist repertoire by explaining the process of internalization of moral norms as brought about by the observation of a model's behavior. The process clearly requires complex cognitive activities because the subject must observe the model's behavior and process this information adequately enough that the general pattern of the model's behavior is retained for imitation, though not its irrelevant details. The subject must also possess the cognitive capacities to apply the internalized norms to their concrete behavior, i.e., to "reproduce" the behavior. Furthermore, insofar as the consequences of the model's behavior are considered by these theories to be a "reinforcing" element of the model's effects, the subject must be able to perceive the consequences of the model's actions as desirable or reinforcing and associate them with the modeled norm.<sup>528</sup> Theories in this group also put emphasis on certain "inner states or feeling tones" that the model experiences, and which serve as a source of vicarious reinforcement for the subject: the model must express these feelings "in order to inform the subject that an apparently unrewarding act really has positive consequences for the

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<sup>527</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>528</sup> Ibid., 57-58.

agent and vice versa.”<sup>529</sup> There is also the idea that the model, *as model* (i.e., as apprehended as worth imitating or its opposite) becomes a force in the internalization of moral norms.

Modeling is a very powerful means of transmitting values, saving the subject from tedious trial and error procedures; but it is a derivative mechanism for internalizing moral norms, still dependent on conditioning as the *original* reinforcement/internalization mechanism.<sup>530</sup> Thus, modeling theorists, says Wren, despite their open acknowledgement of the importance of cognitional processes in the internalization of moral norms, still remain externalist regarding the appropriateness or rightness of the moral norms themselves. The learned patterns of behavior respond to the model’s own reinforcement schedule, and through it to social standards of appropriate behavior. But there is nothing in the patterns that become norms themselves that makes them particularly worth learning – in the moral sense – or that, in Wren’s terminology, make them “motivating in themselves.”<sup>531</sup> That is, the subject is not imitating the model because “it seems right”; rather, the action “seems right” because it has been successfully modeled.<sup>532</sup> Thus, despite a more sophisticated depiction of the learning process, the deep-level concept of moral learning on which these theories rest remains unmoved: “what brings people into morality in the first place is the likelihood of rewards or punishments.”<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid., 61.



### Self-controlled delay in gratification

The body of psychological research focused on the study of “self-controlled delay in gratification” is considered by Wren as involving far more cognitive activity than the previous examples, but because of its reliance on the mechanistic “law of Effect” it is still basically an externalist position.<sup>534</sup>

The phrase “self-control” may remind us of Aristotle’s treatment of “moral weakness” (or “weakness of will”)<sup>535</sup> and the virtues that remedy it; but the focus of this research is much narrower. What it focuses on is the capacity of the subject to postpone or inhibit the satisfaction of proximate inclinations for the sake of greater gains or rewards in the mid- or long-term. Moral norms are understood in terms of gratification delay, and thus all that is needed to explain the psychogenesis of morality is to describe the mechanisms by which the subject develops the ability to delay gratification.<sup>536</sup> To this effect, the theory borrows from the theories previously described: the process of developing the ability to delay gratification is explained in terms of traditional conditioning, imitation, and especially modeling.<sup>537</sup> The resources that the subject employs to inhibit proximate inclinations are themselves highly cognitive in nature,

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<sup>534</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>535</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 2.

<sup>536</sup> The expression “self-control” is understood in this context also mechanistically – i.e., an effort is made to understand the “self” as the medium of behavioral modifications, and not as a self-determining entity that through the exercise of his/her willpower rejects the temptation of immediate gratification. Still, says Wren, insofar as the “self” becomes an object of examination (and even of self-examination, as a component of the process of behavioral change), the door to a cognitivist understanding of the psychogenesis of morality is pushed an inch wider. “Theories of self-regulation. . . lie somewhat nearer the cognitive end of our spectrum of moral psychologies. . . because they operate under the assumption that holistic and reflexive categories such as the ‘self’ are fundamentally intelligible.” (Wren, *Caring About Morality*, 66).

<sup>537</sup> Ibid., 67.

involving the mental presentation of incentives, and including such internal resources as self-praise and self-blame. But the motivational effects of these learnings operate entirely mechanistically. Thus this research may help illuminate certain aspects of morality, specifically questions regarding the gap between motivation and action when as “motivation” is understood solely as the expectation of a reward; but it risks limiting the understanding of morality to a structure to enhance self-gratification.

### Kohlberg, and an internalist psychology of morality

While Kohlberg’s theories have been discussed elsewhere,<sup>538</sup> it will be useful to contrast the externalist psychological explanations of morality with his own, as a psychological theory that Wren identifies as internalist. Wren quotes Kohlberg, writing about Stage 1:

Punishment is seen as important in that it is identified with a bad action rather than because the actor is attempting pragmatically to avoid negative consequences to him- or herself.<sup>539</sup>

The focus here is quite different from that of the previous theories: punishment and rewards are no longer the determinant of attitude or action, but are the consequences of actions because of the intrinsic moral qualities of actions. Kohlberg views the ground of moralness at the other stages similarly.<sup>540</sup> In addition, the Kohlbergian tenet of *developmental hierarchy* - namely, that stage-progression takes place in one direction

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<sup>538</sup> See Chapter 8.

<sup>539</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Six Stages of Justice Judgment," in *Essays on Moral Development. Vol. 2. The Psychology of Moral Development.*, ed. Lawrence Kohlberg (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 624.

<sup>540</sup> As will be seen in the next section, however, Wren is not entirely satisfied with Kohlberg’s position. While Kohlberg seems to have arrived at an internalist point of view, he is still one step short of a foundationalist account according to Wren. Kohlberg, says Wren, tends to engage in explanations of the “justification game” “as though they were solipsistic exercises or, if that is too strong, as though one engages in moral reasoning by, and for, oneself alone.” (Wren, *Caring About Morality*, 154).

only: once a person reaches a certain stage of development in their moral reasoning, they do not “go back” to earlier stages – is closely tied to an internalist point of view.

As the developmental hierarchy has been explained by James Rest, one of the elements that researchers have tried to evaluate is the *comprehension* or understanding that subjects at a certain stage of development have of the concepts that play a part in other stages. In one study, for example, subjects were asked to paraphrase arguments for a case resolution, as they are typically formulated by people at various stages during stage-assessment studies. The experiment’s aim was to evaluate comprehension, and measure “an inventory of concepts that the subject *understands*, whether or not the subject actually *uses* these concepts.”<sup>541</sup> What the research showed was that comprehension for the stages is cumulative: subjects at Stage 4, for instance, had high levels of comprehension for Stages 3, 2, and 1. Comprehension also tends to be high for moral categories typical of the subject’s own stage, and poor with regard to higher stages than that at which the subject currently is (as assessed by the usual Kohlbergian procedure).<sup>542</sup> What Rest concluded from these studies is that, as people outgrow old ways of thinking, they *still understand them but do not prefer them*, while, on the other hand, subjects at lower stages do not prefer the higher ones, but do not understand them either. “In summary,” says Rest, “who says higher stages are better? *Subjects do themselves*.”<sup>543</sup> As subjects get to understand the reasoning structure of the stage

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<sup>541</sup> James Rest, “Background: Theory and Research,” in *Moral Development in the Professions*, ed. James Rest and Darcia Narváez (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Assocs., 1994), 16.

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

hierarchically following the one they currently are in, they end up preferring it. This suggests that *understanding* the conceptual structure of each stage is an essential factor of moral development, and more generally of moral life, which situates Kohlbergian theory clearly on the internalist side of the debate.

Wren's survey of psychological theories in terms of their philosophical commitments about the ground of the experience of moralness nicely illustrates what the debate between internalism and externalism is about. It is time now to consider how a study of moral conversion contributes to the discussion.

### **3. *Cognitive operations, and the notion of internalism***

#### Two potential misunderstandings

By now the reader should have a feel at least for what constitutes an internalist position. But it is necessary to address two possible ways in which this position may be misunderstood. One is understanding internalism as merely the position that certain cognitive processes take place during the moral decision-making process. The point of internalism is much narrower. The point is not whether images, representations, verbal labels, conceptual thinking, association and other cognitive activities take place or not during the process (this psychological point seems to be sufficiently supported at present by the decline of radical behavioralism and the gradual incorporation of cognitive elements in subsequent psychological frameworks over the last half-century or so.) Instead, the point, using Wren's words, is whether "the *reasons* behind normative

judgments can be meaningful in their own terms, efficacious determinants of moral action, and crucial as explanatory elements in moral psychology.”<sup>544</sup>

The second way in which the internalist position may be misunderstood is by understanding “cognitive processes” in the narrow sense of “processes employing or following a logical sequence of thought.” If internalism were understood as proposing that the moral decision-making process is always the result of clearly formed concepts and well-constructed, emotionally detached, impersonal reasoning, then defending internalism would be extremely hard, since the process of moral decision-making rarely seems to be so tidy and detached. But if a broader meaning of the term “cognitive” (and related notions) is to be used, it needs to be explained.

The difficulty here is illustrated in the discrepancy between Wren’s and Conn’s evaluations of Kohlberg’s position. Wren expresses concern that Kohlberg’s model may be “unduly cognitive,” since there is in it a tendency to regard reason-giving as an end in itself, what Wren calls a “justification game” that lacks an integration with “the richer atmosphere of desires, needs, affectivity, and other persons.”<sup>545</sup> Conn on the other hand arrives at an opposite evaluation of Kohlberg as properly blending the cognitive and the affective:

Logic, of course, is applied to complex moral problems, but the essence of specifically moral reasoning, leading to judgments of moral value, *is evaluation*, which is rooted *not in the purely logical analysis of concepts, but in the affective-cognitive apprehension of concrete human values*. Even the most advanced formal logical operations, therefore, do not by themselves enable a person to make mature moral judgments.

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<sup>544</sup> Wren, *Caring About Morality*, 109.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

Given this analysis of Kohlberg's understanding of moral reasoning as a fundamentally affective-cognitive unity, criticisms of Kohlberg's approach to moral development as rationalistic must be judged as inaccurate.<sup>546</sup>

Whether either evaluation is an accurate assessment of Kohlberg's thought is not a point to be discussed here. But the discrepancy between the two evaluations illustrates the difficulties that arise for internalism if the cognitive process, is understood in the narrow sense of a cold, logical procedure. Quite often, internalist views are rejected precisely on the basis of an understanding of this view that renders it vulnerable to charges of rationalism and intellectualism, and are dismissed on the basis that people seldom, if ever, acquire moral views or make moral decisions by such a detached and focused exercise of logical reasoning. But knowing, i.e., the cognitive process, needs not be understood in this narrow manner. Explaining what is the meaning of "knowing" for internalism – and the specific operations involved in knowing - is the next step in this discussion.

### Experience, understanding, judgment

The task of explaining the notion of "knowing" as it is understood in internalist views can be simplified by following the presentation of the matter by Bernard Lonergan, who spent considerable effort examining it in his opus magnum *Insight*.<sup>547</sup> Lonergan's

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<sup>546</sup> Conn, *Christian Conversion*, 81 (emphasis mine). Conn's discussion of the matter suggests that Kohlberg has usually shown more methodological subtlety (or caution) than his peers, defining his theoretical interest and the limits of his research narrowly enough to present a very small target. Most of the fire that Kohlberg's theories draw seems to be consequently misdirected, aiming at a wider target than what Kohlberg intended. (See also *ibid.*, 78-80.)

<sup>547</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*. While the notion of *understanding* that is operative in this chapter follows closely its development by Lonergan, internalism as such needs not be tied to this particular explication: alternative presentations by other thinkers may equally apply, insofar as they have a sufficient degree of compatibility

development of this notion will be described briefly here with the purpose of clarifying the notion of internalism, but also because, coupled with the Lonerganian treatment of *intentional feelings*, it plays a significant role in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Lonergan identifies and describes many cognitive operations operating at different levels, namely the levels of *experience*, *understanding* and *judgment*. All these operations are driven in a unified movement by the *desire to know*.<sup>548</sup> “Knowing,” though most frequently identified with the operation of *understanding*, is better understood as a complex act that develops towards perfection in the dynamic integration of operations at all these three levels.

The first level of cognitive operations will be here called “experience”; it is labeled “empirical consciousness” in Lonergan’s somewhat idiosyncratic terminology.<sup>549</sup> It consists essentially in the gathering of data. This group of operations considers the basic ways of gathering data, mainly *sense-perception*. But the notion is analogical, and “gathering data” can be understood also in other senses. Reading, for example, may be

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with the notion presented here. Given that Lonergan draws substantially from Aristotle’s theory of knowledge, compatible understandings of “knowledge” should abound.

<sup>548</sup> In postulating an “unrestricted desire to know” as a fundamental, original human drive, Lonergan aligns himself with the classical position stated originally by Aristotle, that “all men by nature desire to know.” (*Metaphysics*, I, 1). This position is opposed to a pragmatist view that rejects such drive as original, and explains all human questioning and knowing as fundamentally dependent on and instrumental to vital/practical needs or other values. The outcome of this debate is not of direct relevance to this work; the adoption of a pragmatist viewpoint would demand some rewriting regarding the way in which knowing is understood, but Lonergan has integrated in his inclusivist view some tenets compatible with pragmatism, to such an extent that the two views are not diametrically opposed. However, the adoption of a pragmatist view here would result in the exclusion of certain question-generating dynamics (as described below) that are arguably important for a theory of knowing. I have discussed this matter in the paper “John Dewey and the Desire of Knowledge” (2001).

<sup>549</sup> As Lonergan works with the difficult task of producing a description of the structure of knowing, he continuously experiments with the terminology. The reader should be thus aware that his terminology is not consistent across the board, and that his choices result sometimes in obscure expression, in the sense that common terms are used with specific meanings that may not be clearly grasped without at least a cursory explanation.

considered within this level, and introspection, which does not involve the senses, though it may involve memory and imagination.

By consciousness is meant an awareness immanent in cognitional acts. But such acts differ in kind, and so the awareness differs in kind with the acts. There is an empirical consciousness characteristic of *sensing, perceiving, imagining*. As the content of these acts is merely presented or represented, so the awareness immanent in the acts is the mere givenness of the acts.<sup>550</sup>

Lonergan notes that gathering data is usually a spontaneous event (we hear a noise or see events happening in front of us), but it can also be a voluntary activity, through the focusing of our attention with the intention of answering specific questions.

Lonergan's second level of operations will here be called "understanding";

Lonergan's term is "intelligent consciousness."<sup>551</sup>

But there is an intelligent consciousness characteristic of *inquiry, insight, and formulation*. On this level cognitional process not merely strives for and reaches the intelligible, but in doing so it exhibits its intelligence; it operates intelligently.<sup>552</sup>

The activity of understanding is very basic, i.e., is not a subcategory of any other form of human activity. Consequently, attempts to describe the activity of understanding by using alternative expressions ("grasp," for example, is a common image) often ends in the unhelpful repetition of these alternative expressions. For this reason, Lonergan and Lonerganians usually explain what understanding is by pointing at<sup>553</sup> acts with which the reader should be familiar and identifying them as acts of understanding (for example, Archimedes' insight in the bath, reaching the resolution of a detective story, the formulation of a hypothesis) and particularly to acts of understanding of the reader

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<sup>550</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 346. (Underlining mine.)

<sup>551</sup> The term "insight" is also mainly attributed to this level of operation.

<sup>552</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 346. (Underlining mine.)

<sup>553</sup> That is, what is sometimes called "ostensive definition."



him/herself.

Understanding does not happen simply, however, despite the impression that expressions such as “grasping” or “insight” may give. The move from the first, data gathering level of cognitive operations to the level of understanding is driven by *questions* (which Lonergan calls “operators”); for example, “what is this?” “why does this happen?” etc. In an important sense, the questions for understanding precede the achievement of understanding, but the question (not necessarily formalized and phrased as such) and the development of (possible) responses to the question are the operations that, conjoined, make up the activity of understanding.<sup>554</sup> Even in the sometimes sudden act of “putting it together,” there is always an active endeavor of our intelligence to make sense of the data, an endeavor (questioning) that, according to Lonergan, precedes the achievement of insight or the fulfillment of understanding.

The third level of cognitive operations will here be called “judgment”; Lonergan’s expression is “rational consciousness.” Intelligence, driven by the desire to know, is not satisfied by understanding merely, but wants to know *truth*. It does not rest in what seem to be sufficiently explanatory insights, in an answer or answers; it poses further questions, for example “Is this so?” “Is this explanation in agreement with the data?” “Is it necessary to gather more data?” “Are there any questions unsolved, or unasked?” The questions and answers of understanding must be tested in activities of judgment. It is

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<sup>554</sup> Lonergan, like Coreth and other post-Kantian Scholastics, sees questioning as already shaping what, in less technical accounts, might be called “the answer,” so that no clear line can be drawn between questioning and answering. The concern to erase this dichotomy is one reason why understanding is first explained ostensively, counting on the reader’s experience to validate the inseparable connection of questioning and responding.

when all inconsistencies with the data have been resolved and no further questions remain or are raised, that intelligence can “rest” in (relative) certainty.<sup>555</sup>

In addition, in *Insight* Lonergan identifies a fourth level of cognitive operations, the level of *responsibility* or “responsible consciousness.” At this level, questions for action/decision are accessed by a correspondent set of “questions for responsibility” (“Is it good? Is it worthwhile?”). This fourth level articulates Lonergan’s early attempts to integrate the sphere of morality into his cognitive structure. As will be discussed later in the chapter, this attempt is not quite successful, but it is useful to mention it here for completeness.

Such is the general structure of cognitive operations as developed by Lonergan, and it is helpful to have it in mind as an example of a cognitive theory that can be applied to an internalist view. The structure will be developed in more detail below, when it becomes applied to the process of moral conversion. The open form in which the different operations are characterized (a characterization that plays out an analogical conception of knowing) makes this theory particularly useful for a work that attempts to be inclusive of a variety of theories of knowledge. For Lonergan’s efforts are focused not in establishing a water-tight classification of cognitive operations, or in developing a thoroughly detailed systematic presentation of these operations, but in guiding the reader towards “self-appropriation,” that is, towards identifying these operations and their dynamism in one’s own experience as a knower.

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<sup>555</sup> Thus the “is” of judgment – it *is* the case – is not merely an equivalence sign. It is an affirmation of the *reality* of what (or of some of what) the activity of understanding has produced (or it is a denial of the reality of some offering of the operation of understanding).

This openness – which can be expressed technically by saying Lonergan offers an analogical conception of knowing – also leaves room for the “intrusion,” so to speak, of feelings and desire into the sphere of knowledge, in ways that are not isolated or compartmentalized but continuous and fluid. In acknowledging this “analogically fluid” relation between the emotional and the cognitive – a useful image might be that of the shore of the sea: where does the sea begin and the land end? - one is provided with a conception of knowing that permits an integration of the cognitive and the emotional/affective spheres. Such an integration, it will be argued, is essential for the formulation of an internalist theory that does not encounter insurmountable difficulties at the time of articulating the move from the cognitive to the realm of action/decision. This point will be considered in the following section.

#### ***4. The integration of the affective and the cognitive in internalist moral theories: Examples from the Aristotelian tradition***

So far, knowing has been discussed without making reference to the role of the affective aspects - from now on also termed “feelings” or “emotions” - that according to the narratives are often involved in the process of moral conversion.<sup>556</sup> Yet it is clear

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<sup>556</sup> Terminological note: in the sections that follow, the terms “emotions/emotional,” “feelings,” and (the) “affective” will be used more or less interchangeably. The term “affective” is perhaps the most adequate in this context, as the term that complements the sphere of the cognitive. But terms such as “emotions” and “feelings” are more commonly used and refer to the same phenomena, though possibly regarded from a psychological point of view. Added to this, however, the terms “emotions” and “feelings” evoke, legitimately or not, the idea of “anchorless” phenomena, of highly accidental psychic events that occur without much rhyme or reason. Nevertheless some Lonerganians have begun to make use of them, perhaps precisely because of their connections with psychology, or perhaps because in doing so they intend to shake some mental cobwebs, to introduce a fresh view on the philosophical importance of this sphere. In particular Brian Cronin has opted for using the term “feelings” primarily, and since his work is a central

from many of the narratives already considered that emotions not only play a part in the process, but are often connected to cognitive operations in complex causal relationships. Consider the example of Helen John (case #6). Her vision of a devastated Built landscape, an image that generates a sort of “experiential” understanding of the dangers of nuclear war, is accompanied with an intense emotional response – it forces her to stop the car, and cry and feel sick for nearly three quarters of an hour.<sup>557</sup> The emotional response must be understood as intimately connected to the cognitive event, her imaginative vision: the former – the emotional response - would not make complete sense if its connection with the cognitive event – the vision – were left out of the narrative. Sandra’s case (case #5) also indicates a connection of the affective with the cognitive: the process of her moral conversion is prompted by an affective reaction unequivocally connected to the sight of meat, cooked so that “it's burnt [on the outside] and you cut it open and it just sort of bleeds.”<sup>558</sup>

It is necessary then to consider at least briefly the possible role of the affective sphere in an internalist account of morality, and this must be done both in general terms (in this section), and regarding their specific role in moral conversion (in the following section).

The separation of the cognitive and the affective in many (especially historical) philosophical discussions of morality (sometimes made explicit, sometimes the result of a

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source in the sections that follow, it seems necessary to include this option for the terminology used in this chapter.

<sup>557</sup> Haste, "Moral Responsibility and Moral Commitment," 337-341.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

narrow focus on one of these components) has generated some difficulties that need to be addressed in order to make an internalist account of morality feasible. On one hand, externalist accounts often equate the realm of morality to feelings/emotions exclusively, rejecting any connection with the cognitive. On the other hand, a contrary difficulty is frequently encountered in some internalist approaches that attempt to explain the experience of moral obligation as the result of a purely cognitive process. The solution to these complementary difficulties, I submit, lies in the possibility of an account integrating both knowledge and the affective as essential elements of moral decision-making and (consequent) action.

Despite the problem having been relatively overlooked in the course of the history of philosophy - and partly because the seeds of the solution are already in Aristotle -, there is not a univocal solution to be found within internalist accounts, but rather a variety of approaches to the problem, explanatorily successful in varying degrees, mutually compatible to varying extents. In the present section I, will consider how the integration between the affective and the cognitive has been attempted within the Aristotelian tradition – in Aristotle himself, Aquinas, and, through the analysis of Brian Cronin, in the Lonerganian approach to the problem. As in previous instances, the focus here is not on demonstrating that one single approach is superior, but rather to offer “working examples” – prototypes, so to speak, that show or strongly suggest that a solution to this dichotomizing of the cognitive and affective is possible. More than this would exceed the purpose of this work.

Some internalist theories do not integrate in their considerations the affective sphere at all: while knowledge of right/wrong is reached through intellectual activity, whether feelings (when considered) are connected with good or bad actions depends ultimately on purely accidental circumstances. Kant may be cited as an example of this view: our knowledge of right/wrong depends ultimately on a judgment of practical reason, and feelings are systematically excluded from his consideration, though their capacity to sway or foster our moral views or resolve to one side or another is acknowledged.<sup>559</sup> Some contemporary analyses - from the Anglo-American analytic tradition in particular - attempt to ground the motivation for moral obligation in the logical or semantic structure of moral judgments, and so may also be cited as examples of an internalist view of morality in which feelings have no significant relation with the moralness of an act.<sup>560</sup>

Alternatively, there are internalist theories that do consider feelings and emotions as intrinsically related to moral experience, and attempt to integrate this role with that of cognitive operations. In this case, the role assigned to the affective sphere is double: on one hand, it provides the *drive* to act morally.<sup>561</sup> This drive, it is claimed, cannot come from pure knowledge, but must have a different origin (or “be” original in its own right).

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<sup>559</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:440-4:442.

<sup>560</sup> For an in-depth criticism of this approach, see Svavarsdóttir, "Moral Cognitivism and Motivation." My opinion on the matter is that centering the approach on the notion of “motivation” has turned into somewhat of a dead end – the strategy tends to muddle the issues more than it helps clarify them.

<sup>561</sup> The term “drive,” in some contexts, indicates a blind psychological force – blind in the sense that it seeks its objects without concerns for other needs or for potentially harmful consequences for the individual. This is not the meaning given to the term in this dissertation. “Drive” as it is used points to the same entity as the term “desire” does, i.e., an intentional, felt need for something, that orients the person towards action. The reason why “drive” is preferred (despite the fact that both Lonergan and Cronin often favor “desire”) is that “drive” has a stronger connotation as a principle of action, or as motivating energy than “desire” (which can arguably be conceived as not-acted-upon, and therefore as potentially static).

The second role assigned to feelings is that of being “revealing,” somehow, of the moral quality of actions or situations, of value and the good.

### In Aristotle

This line of thought is present unequivocally in Aristotle, and is consequently found in Aristotelian-derived ethical theories all the way to present day. However, perhaps because the nature of the affective sphere is much more elusive than that of cognitive activities, the former has not been paid nearly as much attention as the latter. Only in very recent Aristotelian literature have feelings begun to be the subject of an analysis as detailed and focused as that which cognitive processes received a long time ago.

Aristotle clearly identifies an original drive – the characteristically human desire for happiness – which, though notionally broader, does not seem to be a separate drive from the characteristically human desire to know (which in Aristotle is its ideal culmination). His ethics is grounded on this drive. A “value-revealing” character of feelings is also present in Aristotle: feelings express a natural orientation to the human good, both in terms of our desire to act virtuously and the pleasure or satisfaction that comes from doing good deeds. This orientation, however, does not provide an ultimate, reliable moral criterion: in particular, one’s natural tendencies require an adequate education to be developed properly. Without this education – or if one lets oneself cultivate bad habits - one may learn to like what is bad or dislike what is good. In absolute terms, this possibility is considered an exception against the background of the norm provided by human nature; in practical, everyday terms, this turns out to be an all-too-frequent

exception, because – among other reasons – the right course of action is one among many possible wrong courses of action. “Hitting” on the right course of action is compared by Aristotle to hitting the bull’s eye: it requires training and prudent evaluation.<sup>562</sup> In this manner, feelings and knowledge are seamlessly integrated in Aristotle’s understanding of virtue, which is the fundamental category in terms of which the moralness (or not) of every action and every person is determined.<sup>563</sup>

### In Aquinas

Aquinas’ development follows Aristotle’s general lines, but with a few additions. He grounds the human drive for happiness on a *created* nature that is thought, willed and given being by God.<sup>564</sup> He adds the principle of *synderesis*, the first natural law precept of practical reason according to which

Whatever practical reason naturally apprehends as human good belongs to the precepts of natural law as something to be done or avoided. . . so it is that all those things to which man has a natural inclination, reason naturally apprehends as good and to be pursued in action and their contraries as evil and to be avoided.<sup>565</sup>

A principle, in other words, that articulates the human orientation towards the good (though without establishing in specific terms what is right/wrong); what in more contemporary language is often called “conscience.”<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>562</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 6; 1105b, 30.

<sup>563</sup> Aristotle’s ethics is of course not without criticism – most commonly, for its arguable inability to provide clear, straightforward guidelines for action, or a “really ultimate” criterion for right/wrong. The point here, however, is to show a well-known example of an ethical theory that integrates –quite successfully in my opinion – feelings and reason.

<sup>564</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.93 a.1; I-II (preface); I-II, q.1, a.1, a.8.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*, I-II, q.94, a.2. See also Clifford G. Kossel, “Thomistic Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 387.

<sup>566</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q.94, a.2.



Aquinas like Aristotle acknowledges a positive role for feelings, but feelings for Aquinas are definitely subordinated to the judgment of reason. The notion (as revealed by Christian theology) of a “fallen nature” introduces an additional difficulty in terms of our probabilities of actually recognizing and doing what is right, in part because of a tendency to fail to regulate feelings through reason.<sup>567</sup>

Lastly, Aquinas engages in an extremely detailed, psychologically acute categorization of virtues and their respective vices. Aquinas, however (and there is no room here, unfortunately, to deal with the historical subtleties of the case), did seem to stress the rational aspects of moral action, and to lose to some extent the matter-of-fact recognition that Aristotle gave to the role of feelings in morality. As a consequence, he left the door open to the possibility (or at least, he did not arrest a tendency) to leave feelings out of the picture. This is not to say that the role of feelings was completely lost in Thomist philosophy; it was there for those who cared to discuss it; but for many centuries this potentially integrative view of the cognitive and the affective was negated or ignored. Fortunately, it is possible to find more concerted efforts to illuminate this integration in recent Aquinas scholarship.

### In Lonergan

Lonergan himself, notes Brian Cronin, did not attribute a central role to feelings until relatively late in his career. In *Insight* (1957) he still employed the term in the narrow, pejorative way in which it was understood in Catholic ascetical theology at the

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<sup>567</sup> *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q.24, a.2; q.85 a.1.

time: feelings are “particularly dangerous and in need of control.”<sup>568</sup> Lonergan’s ethics was at that point an emphatically reason-based ethics, appealing to speculative reason alone for the source of moral obligation.<sup>569</sup> The set of conscious operations at the core of moral action/decision (articulated in the expressions “judgments of value” and “level of responsibility”) are understood by Lonergan, says Cronin, as emerging in direct logical continuity from the previous intellectual operations of experience, understanding and judgment.<sup>570</sup>

This perspective, however, changes significantly with Lonergan’s *Method in Theology* (1971), in which he develops some elements inchoate in *Insight* and integrates some ideas from new influences, prominently from Max Scheler and Dietrich von Hildebrand.<sup>571</sup> Here Lonergan develops a distinction between *intentional* and *non intentional* feelings, and distinguishes among the latter between those that respond to the *agreeable/disagreeable* or *satisfying/dissatisfying*, and those that respond to *values*.<sup>572</sup> He introduces the somewhat ambiguous expression “intentional response to values” – which will give his commentators some headaches – and, through a more explicit focus on the function of feelings as *drives*, attributes to feelings a complementary, integrated role in the development of moral judgments. These elements, however, are not fully expounded

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<sup>568</sup> Brian Cronin, *Value Ethics: A Lonergan Perspective*, Guide to Philosophy Series (Langata- Nairobi: Consolata Institute of Philosophy, 2006), 231. “Accordingly, it will not be amiss to assert emphatically that the identification of being and the good bypasses human feelings and sentiments to take its stand exclusively upon intelligible order and rational value.” (Lonergan, *Insight*, 629.)

<sup>569</sup> Cronin, *Value Ethics*, 231.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, 230. “Judgment is an act of rational consciousness, but decision is an act of rational self-consciousness. . . the rationality of decision emerges in the demand of the rationally conscious subject for consistency between his knowing and his deciding and doing.” (Lonergan, *Insight*, 636.)

<sup>571</sup> Cronin, *Value Ethics*, 233-239.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

in his work, and it was up to later Lonergan scholars to identify clearly their significance, “tame” the terminology and assemble the pieces into a consistent, full-fledged theory. Cronin’s recent book, *Value Ethics: A Lonergan Perspective* (2006) is a significant achievement in that sense. From this work, a number of elements can be mentioned that are of relevance to this dissertation.

First, Cronin elaborates on Lonergan’s distinction between intentional feelings that respond to the agreeable/disagreeable (“intentional response to the agreeable/disagreeable”), and those that respond to value (“intentional response to value”).<sup>573</sup> The former he calls *sensitive* feelings; they respond to vital needs of different kinds, and are shared by other animals. The latter he calls a *spiritual* feeling: it is characteristic of human beings, and is similar in constitution to the “unrestricted desire to know,” the desire which in Lonergan’s account sets in motion the dynamism of cognitive operations. In fact, Cronin frequently uses this similarity to the desire to know, with which Lonerganians are quite familiar, to elucidate the nature of the intentional response to value.<sup>574</sup> The point is that the desire to know is not a desire oriented specifically to vital needs, nor does it declare itself satisfied when needs of such kind are met. It is a desire, instead, to know generally, and it declares itself satisfied only when it has understood and when the conditions for a (relatively) certain judgment have been met. Because of the

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<sup>573</sup> The term “intentional” is used here with the meaning familiar in the phenomenological tradition, i.e., the orientation/relation to an object of cognitive and affective acts or states. Some feelings, Lonergan distinguishes, are non-intentional: hunger, thirst, pain, irritability have a cause, and when the cause is removed the feeling commonly disappears. Other feelings, instead, “point at” something, even make their object present psychologically: we are curious *about* something, and not “just” curious; we are afraid *of* something, approving *of* something and so forth. The latter cases are called intentional feelings: the orientation to their object is essential to their constitution as feelings. (Ibid., 259-260.)

<sup>574</sup> Ibid., 275.

object it intends to – truth, intelligibility, *being* insofar as it can be known and understood - it enjoys an independence in its functioning from vital needs. But according to Cronin, the drive to value is of a similar nature: it intends to value, the good, the “worthwhile,” and not to the satisfaction of particular vital needs.

Paralleling Lonergan’s methodology about knowing, “value” is not given a definition, except (in what Lonergan calls a “second order definition”) as *the object of the drive to value*. Just as we get to know about knowledge and its object ostensibly by reflecting on instances of the activity of knowing itself, it is in the personal experience and reflective awareness of seeking value that this drive, and the nature of its object, are identified (this form of inquiry Lonergan terms a process of “self-appropriation”).

Third, it [the intentional response to value] can be thematized, named, explained, distinguished from all other desires. This is the foundation of ethics, the source of value, the beginning of the normativity proper to the person as free and responsible. It is not the work of ethics to prove moral obligation by a deductive syllogism, but to identify it in its operations, to distinguish it from other impulses and obligations. . . . Just as the logician cannot prove the principle of contradiction, because in doing so he has to presume that it is operating; so the moral philosopher cannot prove moral obligation, because in doing so he must presume that it already exists.<sup>575</sup>

Lonerganian methodology determines that the presence of this drive and the objectivity of its object must be established, through self-appropriation, by each person, allowing them, through reflective exercises, to become aware both of the presence and nature of this drive at the starting point (as drive) and at its ending (as indicated by the “resting” of the desire, and accompanying feelings, when it achieves its object).

With the theme of the affective sphere having been introduced in this way, the presence of the affective at the origin and at the arrival point of cognitive operations is

then explicitly discussed by Cronin.<sup>576</sup> While operations at the level of experience (the first level of cognitive activity) may be simply spontaneous, Lonergan's activities of understanding and judgment could not exist without the desire to know that actually drives these processes forward. Additionally, joyous feelings, unique to each level of conscious operation, accompany and enhance (rewarding it) the awareness of the achievement of the proper object of each of these operations. (Cronin notes that the greatest joy of this sort is produced by achieving value, i.e., doing good deeds).<sup>577</sup>

But while the connection between feelings and knowledge in the Lonerganian account is clear in these considerations, a confusion about them must be carefully avoided. Feelings imply a certain form of awareness, they "reveal" something (in a non-thematic way), and this might seem to suggest the possibility of including them among the operations of cognition. To avoid this confusion, Cronin distinguishes between *intentional responses* to value (the affective sphere, "feelings") and *knowledge* of value. An "intentional response to value" is a *response* to value, an attractedness, a being-drawn-towards and just that: it *does not know* value or values. Cronin expresses this point thus:

Feelings point in a certain direction, they guide a process, they are sensitive to values in a situation, they recognize value, but they never know values. It is only when the affective and cognitive aspects fuse together in a deliberative insight that we can know value in the resultant judgment of value. The intentional response to value initiates the process by suggesting, or being sensitive to the value issue. It drives the process forward by the felt moral obligation to assemble information, deliberate about possible alternatives and consequences, judge truly the value of various courses of action, decide wisely and implement willingly. The reward is feelings of a happy conscience.<sup>578</sup>

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<sup>575</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>576</sup> Ibid., 311-312.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid., 308-310.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid., 318.

This distinction between the respective contributions of the affective and the cognitive will be made clearer later in this chapter when we consider it in relation to the process of moral conversion.

The aim of this cursory look at the way in which Aristotelian ethical theories integrate the affective and the cognitive within an internalist view of morality, culminating in Brian Cronin's development of these themes in Lonergan, has been to show that a theory that integrates feelings and knowing into an internalist theory is at least feasible. With this as background, it is now time to ask what is the role of emotions/feelings in moral conversion, and how they relate to the cognitive aspects of moral conversion. As will be seen, only a joined affective/cognitive internalist view does justice to what the conversion narratives studied earlier tell us.

##### **5. A joined affective/cognitive internalist view**

This section will examine the claim that an analysis of narratives of moral conversion points to an account of the relation of affective and cognitive components of the decision-making process along the general lines of the view just expounded and to an internalist view of morality. The combination of these two descriptive theses will be called here a *joined affective/cognitive internalist view*. (The word "view" is meant to distinguish the general tenets being stressed here from more detailed accounts, i.e., "theories" that may develop these tenets in more specific ways. Cronin's reading of

Lonergan on these themes would be a “theory” in this sense.) The main tenets of a joined affective/cognitive internalist view are as follows:

(1) Feelings and knowing, the affective and the cognitive, have both an integral part in the formation of moral convictions, moral evaluation, value judgments, moral action/decision, attitude/commitment to morality and other related notions. (The specific notions to be used will depend on the specifics of the theory being considered).

(2) The role of feelings is twofold. First, feelings act as the driving force “behind” the cognitive operations that result in understanding, judgments, evaluations, etc. This role of feelings should not be understood in the sense that feelings operate exclusively at the “beginning” of the process, i.e., merely “jump-starting” the cognitive process. Rather, this view sees feelings as the drive to know present during the whole process of understanding and judgment. (What comes chronologically at the beginning, in fact, is a question that does not have a simple answer, since it may be the data gathered spontaneously at the level of experience that provokes in certain instances the feeling-response and not the other way around.) The point is not about which comes chronologically first; the point is that feelings act as drives throughout the whole dynamism of cognitive operations.

The second role of feelings is to “confirm” or “crown” the conscious operations that lead to the formation of a value judgment, evaluation, decision or action, either positively (through feelings of joy, satisfaction, complacency, happiness, pride on one’s good actions) or negatively (feelings of unhappiness, uneasiness, guilt, anxiety, shame, self-loathing). The question may be raised regarding how feelings can confirm the

achievements of cognitive operations if they “don’t know” what their object is. The specific answer to this question depends on the specific theory of knowing and valuing under analysis. But roughly, two explanatory paths can be proposed, themselves not incompatible: (a) feelings may express a capacity to “respond” to the achievement of value itself (or its opposite) in a non-conceptual or non-thematized way; or alternatively, (b) feelings are the natural response to the relevant operations having been adequately carried out or not (e.g. a rushed decision does not “feel right,” even if it is a “good” decision in terms of what is decided). On either account, besides the role of feelings as the drive or engine for the cognitive work, including deliberation and decision-making, feelings also support or affirm the value of the result (i.e., positively or negatively).

(3) While feelings play the two roles just described, still it is by cognitive activities that we are aware, in a conceptual or thematized way, of values in general, of particular values in particular situations, of moral obligations, rules, moral convenience, of the moral import of the connection of a possible course of action to its consequences, and of other elements of moral life. Further, since we are looking at this matter from an internalist point of view, this “thematizing” of the affective orientation must not be understood as a mere “filling up” with thematic content of what is actually fixed and determined from the beginning by the feelings themselves. The latter view would ultimately not be different from externalism because the emotions would be “dictating” what is right/wrong out of their own accidental, perhaps unfathomable dynamism, while cognitive functions run to “justify” or rationalize in conceptual terms what is felt as right/wrong.



In a true internalist view, instead, feelings provide an original orientation to moral value, and perhaps some specific way of feeling with regard to a specific issue or situation (which may be corroborated or criticized later by cognitive operations). But the ground of moral truth, the “seal” so to speak of moral truth, the basis of assent to a norm or a criterion as morally adequate and, as such, worthwhile, valuable or even imperative, is given by and in the dynamism of the cognitive operations. Similarly the joy (or sorrow) given by feeling, if it takes place, adds a felt confirmation to the (relative) certainty of the conclusion of the cognitive process. But the certainty itself, the affirmation that this *is* the case, that this *ought* to be done, is provided exclusively in the awareness that one’s decision, evaluation, moral judgment are “solid” in cognitive terms. This is a delicate point, but it needs to be understood properly in order to understand the meaning of a joined affective/cognitive internalist approach to knowing and moral decision-making.

These are the general tenets of a *joined affective/cognitive internalist view*. The aim of this chapter has been to describe the account of knowing and morality that most accords with the narratives of moral conversion. Establishing the objectivity of the moral values that emerge from the process (i.e., their universality and/or imperativeness) is a matter for further discussion, but outside the scope of this dissertation.<sup>579</sup>

The remainder of this chapter, then, will be devoted to examining the patterns identified in the narratives of moral conversion in order to compare them to the joined

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<sup>579</sup> The idea of *authenticity* in Lonergan involves the correct development and exercise of one’s cognitive operations at every level of conscious operation. It is an ever-developing state, that must be maintained through diligent vigilance and the establishment of the intellectual and affective virtues indicated in the “transcendental precepts” (normative ideals for each level of consciousness). It is the achievement of a relative authenticity that grants access (relativized, as it were, by our human limitations) to objective truth and the objective good.

affective/cognitive internalist view just explained. As will be seen, the fit between them is significant and this supports the claim being defended in this chapter that narratives of moral conversion offer important evidence in support of internalist theories of morality.

## **6. *Affective elements in narratives of moral conversion***

The claim that affective elements operate as drives<sup>580</sup> in narratives of moral conversion is corroborated in many of the narratives already considered, where the processes of conversion began with the agent's attention to a particular feeling or emotion. Such is the case of Sandra's affective response to burnt meat (case #5), which in turn prompts a process of reflection regarding the origin of such feelings of disgust, and leads, via a process of understanding this disgust, to a value judgment against eating meat in certain circumstances.<sup>581</sup> Such is also the case of Gandhi's shock at being expelled from the train.<sup>582</sup> But feelings are not only found in the narratives in the form of shocking events; often it is a more "quiet" disquiet that is operating in the back of the agent's mind, so to speak. Such is the example of Russ Fee's becoming aware of his vocational misadjustment (case #22). Many of the cases described in Leuba's collection are similar, subject "L," for example (case #14), who states that "I had no desire for anything good, only at times there would come a longing in my heart for something better."<sup>583</sup>

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<sup>580</sup> For a terminological clarification about why the term "drive" is preferred here over "desire," see Section 4, note 561.

<sup>581</sup> Haste, "Moral Responsibility and Moral Commitment," 335-336.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, 344-346.

<sup>583</sup> Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," 376.

The feelings mentioned in the narratives of moral conversion are of many different kinds, which indicates that there are many affective starting points to a process of moral reflection that may end up in moral conversion. Some of them may be distinctively moral in content, i.e., their object is directly connected with the themes of right/wrong or happiness/meaning/*eudaemonia* (as was discussed in Chapter 5). Russ Fee's persistent, nagging malaise is an affective response to a life situation that is perceived on the whole as unfulfilling, devoid of meaning-giving substance. In the victim-offender mediation case of Elizabeth and Charles (case #23), Charles's frustrated attempt to speak with his victim, which initiated Elizabeth's attempts to set up a mediation meeting, does not seem motivated by selfish motives but by a felt need to establish a healing type of communication, i.e., to tell the other party about his regret. A felt need to apologize, when sincere, fits well with what Cronin characterizes as the drive to value; there is no vital need/sensitive satisfaction to be gained from it; but the agent's feelings will give him little peace until the healing communication has been established, the offense acknowledged and (hopefully) forgiven, the wounds closed.

In other situations, the feelings involved at the beginning of the process may have only a distant relation to what would normally be considered moral content. Sandra's felt shock in seeing the burnt-bleeding meat is not a feeling that one would normally think of as having moral relevance; and, as Helen Haste remarks in her analysis of this case, other people might have dealt with the shock quite differently. It is because of Sandra's

particular dispositions (Haste's explanation uses the theme of "schemas" or "scripts")<sup>584</sup> that the experience develops into an opportunity for moral change; at a certain point the initial affective response ceases to be a main driving force, arguably because in understanding it, Sandra sees larger values at stake, and it is then partially, perhaps completely replaced by the desire to act in such a way that neither her initial aesthetic sensibility nor her moral values are offended by her food choices.

It should be repeated here that in the Lonerganian framework, there is affective energy at work in our cognitive operations too, driving them forward, in the form of curiosity, wonder, the desire to understand adequately, the rejection of inconsistent explanations, the desire to assuage doubt and resolve uncertainty, and to frame our actions in a consistent intelligibility. In this sense, affect, feeling "pushes" conversion forward even in cases in which it was principally following one's desire to know, rather than the drive to value, that a person ended up modifying his/her value structures and way of living. The case of Wayne Bauer (case #2), the marine gone AWOL after discussing the Vietnam war with his friends, seems to fit this profile, since his initial conversations can easily be interpreted as verbal sparring rather than an actual engagement in seeking value (though the limited evidence we have about this case does not allow us to offer this as more than an hypothesis). In fact it might be possible— though more evidence would be needed – to correlate classes of moral conversion with the specific nature of the feelings

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<sup>584</sup> Haste, "Moral Responsibility and Moral Commitment," 332-334. In Lonergan's categories, such divergence would be formulated in terms of "emergent probability": the moral and intellectual substratum – the structures of meaning that Sandra possesses – make it less or more probable that she interpret the event in the particular direction she did. In this respect, Lonergan's framework allows for more contingency about the agent's response than is suggested by the image of a schema or script.

involved in driving the process forward. Conversions regarding content, for example, may more frequently find their beginning in detached inquiry, while a powerful drive to value (a sustained question, for example, regarding the meaning of life) might be correlated with conversions regarding attitude. The narratives employed in this dissertation, however, are insufficient to offer this possibility at this point as more than a plausible hypothesis.

With regard to feelings “confirming” moral conversion, their presence is even clearer in the narratives considered here than that of feelings in their role as initiators of the process. Negative feelings associated with intellectual, rather than with moral flaws, may be found in many of the conversions regarding content; for example, embarrassment or regret for having been thoughtless, close-minded or simply dumb enough to ignore and not see the flaws and the oversights in one’s own thinking. Brian Palmer, for example (case #1) describes his process of reflection (after his wife divorced him) in these terms:

Being a compulsive problem solver, I analyzed the failure. I don't like failure. I'm very competitive. I like to win. So I went back and reexamined where the thing broke down and found that I had contributed at least 50 percent and, depending on the vantage point, maybe 99 percent of the ultimate demise of the institution [of his marriage]. Mostly it was asking myself the question of why am I behaving in such and such a way. Why am I doing this at work? Why was I doing this at home?<sup>585</sup>

In this description there is a clear undertone of self-criticism, of criticism towards his own inability to see rather substantial deficiencies in his previous outlook.

Another type of feeling that appears frequently in the narratives is thankfulness. In the narratives studied here, it is most often associated with conversions regarding

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<sup>585</sup> Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart*, 5.

attitude/commitment, and conversions regarding behavioral coherence when the latter had seemed unattainable for a prolonged period of time. It appears characteristically, for example, in cases of reformed alcoholics. Thus in Dr. Bob's narrative (#30), "it is a most wonderful blessing to be relieved of the curse with which I was afflicted,"<sup>586</sup> and in the words of Subject "M" (#18), "our home changed from hell to heaven."<sup>587</sup> Dave B., one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, entitles his own story/witness "Gratitude in Action."<sup>588</sup> The feeling of gratitude is also present in several cases of reformed criminals (cases #20, 21, 24, 26).

The frequent presence of thankfulness is philosophically interesting for at least two reasons. First, this feeling is an expression of joy – of articulated joy, so to speak. As such, it indicates (and the relevant narratives are consistent in this respect) that the newer attitude, even if externally seeming to be morally more demanding, is appreciated as an enormous good rather than a burden. This phenomenon is of consequence in the philosophical discussion regarding foundationalism, indicating or suggesting that there is something in human nature that responds positively – even joyfully - to moral commitment, and that this is so even when such a joyful response was not originally within the expectations of the convert-to-be, i.e., if it happened that the cultural setting painted moral commitment as a gloomy or rewardless task.

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<sup>586</sup> *Te Ara Whakatika: Newsletter of the Court-Referred Restorative Justice Project*, (Issue 4, September 2001), 180.

<sup>587</sup> Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," 383.

<sup>588</sup> *Te Ara Whakatika*, 193.

Second, thankfulness seems to need to be directed at something or someone; it is, in other words, “intentional” in the sense used above. Thus people who have undergone moral conversion frequently express feelings of thankfulness towards the people that had some role in their conversion. Perhaps in part because of a felt imbalance between the relatively small contributions of those people, and the enormity of the value acquired in conversion, moral conversion is also frequently accompanied by or followed by a sense of gratitude towards an unseen contributor, and so by some form of religious conversion – for example a recovery of the faith received during childhood, as in the cases of Jackie Katounas (case #24), and Antonio Pickett (case #20).

A related phenomenon, perhaps demanded by the structure of thankfulness, is the feeling not only of having received a gift, but of one’s own poverty and incapacity to generate by oneself what was given. Not one of the narratives of moral conversion examined includes boasting or expressions of pride for one’s moral accomplishments; furthermore, often this feeling is complemented with a feeling of a power “beyond” that is operating in oneself, and in many of the narratives this is identified as the power of the divine (see for example, the Alcoholics Anonymous “Big Book”).<sup>589</sup>

A difference appears here between moral conversion regarding content, and regarding both attitude and behavioral coherence. In conversions regarding content, thankfulness (particularly thankfulness directed to a divine power) is less common; the change in moral views is regarded, perhaps, as a “natural” occurrence (in the sense of following one’s natural capacities, and not requiring supernatural help). No “boasting” is

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<sup>589</sup> Ibid., 59.

found in this class of conversion either, but some negative feelings can be found that are associated with having been in the wrong for quite a long time without even suspecting it.

The presence of these positive and negative feelings confirms one of the proposed tenets of a joined affective/cognitive internalist view; namely that the positive/negative response of our feelings act as an immanent confirmation that the objects of desire (understanding and truth in relation to the desire to know, and value, in relation to the drive to value) have been, in this respect, achieved (or not). Such feelings do not entail the truth/falsity or rightness/wrongness of what is achieved in the act of moral conversion. Those conclusions would depend on judgments that would in turn depend on one's understanding and further judgments about very complex matters, including the evidential value of (partial) fulfillment of important desires and the centrality of these desires in the constitution of a human person. But nevertheless it is a very significant pattern that such feelings are experienced as immanent confirmations that the operations of these desires have achieved their completion.

Some philosophers have held that our feelings are operative in recognizing moral value even when our cognitive faculties do not (yet) detect them. Scheler, for example, proposed that we perceive values *directly* through our feelings.<sup>590</sup> This position is at odds with the one that, following Lonergan and the Aristotelian/Aquinas tradition, is proposed here in which, while feelings are an essential component in human moral life, feelings are not considered the last word in moral judgments. The last word, so to speak, belongs to

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<sup>590</sup> Cronin, *Value Ethics*, 236. See also Stephen Strasser, *Phenomenology of Feeling: An Essay on the Phenomena of the Heart* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1977), 46.



reason; or better (since “reason” is nowadays often read only narrowly) to the cognitive dynamism of experience, understanding, judgment, all motivated by desire, that culminates in a moral judgment. This takes us to the next point; to examine the role of cognitive operations in a joined affective/cognitive internalist view.

### **7. *The role of cognitive operations in a joined affective/cognitive internalist view***

At the beginning of this work, the claim was made that an analysis of moral conversion, supported by the empirical data found in moral conversion narratives, could bring support to internalist views of morality. The claim was made at that point in rather general terms, since not much could be said at that point regarding the specific role of cognitive operations in the formation of moral convictions and moral structures. The claim has now been narrowed down by focusing on what has been called a *joined affective/cognitive internalist view*. According to the way in which this view has been defined, the affective sphere (what has been called, following Cronin’s usage, “feelings”) drives the cognitive operations forward, both with regard to purely cognitive endeavors, and to cognitive endeavors that result in the selection and actualization of a course of action. It is within this setting that the role of cognitive operations can be now examined, neither as simply operating towards the attainment of understanding and judgments of truth, nor as only operating towards evaluation and/or decision making regarding a specific action, but also towards a form of evaluation that goes deeper and revises one’s very own structures for moral judgment, one’s own attitude and one’s coherence with

regard to moral matters, and which may result in the actualization of a whole process of transformation at the person's moral core, i.e., moral conversion.

To examine the role of cognitive operations in moral conversion, three topics need specific attention: (a) the connection between desires as drives and cognitive operations in the context of a process of moral conversion (the presence of feelings has already been examined in Section 6); (b) the role of cognitive operations in the process of moral conversion; and (c) the connection between the affective and cognitive operations, and the actual change effected in moral conversion. In all of this, Lonergan's analysis of our cognitive operations will be employed to illuminate crucial points.

#### The connection between desires and cognitive operations

The previous section showed feelings, i.e., affective elements, playing important roles in the process of moral conversion, their role as drives or desires being of especial importance. The next step is to establish the connection between these desires and cognitive operations. In the Lonerganian approach, the way to establish this, as has been mentioned, is through what Lonerganians call an exercise of self-appropriation: this entails recalling, for example, any instance in which you have strained your mind to solve a puzzle, or even just asked a question out of curiosity, or (to include examples that involve judgments of value) honestly wondered or passionately argued about the morality of a past or projected action. Adverting to these inquiries is the first step in self-appropriation; the next is the inference that these inquiries move forward because of immanent drives/desires – because of our desire to know and to be knowers of truth, and

our desire to actualize value(s), to be moral. Whether imagined or reflected on in the actual doing, such inquiries would be incomprehensible if not driven, “energized” by such desires. Thus the connection between cognitive operations and desires as drives is established.

This connection is also made explicit in the narratives that have been offered here, though the feeling-driven questioning in these narratives almost always involves the sphere of value to a certain extent, that is, rarely is about truth only. Brian Palmer (case #1) asks to himself why his marriage broke down, and “mostly. . . why am I behaving in such and such a way.”<sup>591</sup> Sandra (case #5) is “looking for a schema to justify her revulsion [to burnt meat].”<sup>592</sup> Gandhi ponders whether to continue on his trip without minding the insults or whether to dedicate his life to root out the disease of racism. Leuba’s “Subject G” (case #15) is driven to “look within” after a lady shows him kindness despite his wretched situation.<sup>593</sup> Almost every story considered here makes explicit reference, in one way or another, to such feelings being present and *acting as drives* at the beginning of a process of moral conversion. Every one of these narratives makes sense only in the context of such desires, whether they are explicitly named or not. It is therefore reasonable to propose that such desires, especially for truth and for value, are fundamental to the process of moral conversion.

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<sup>591</sup> Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart*, 5.

<sup>592</sup> Haste, "Moral Responsibility and Moral Commitment," 336.

<sup>593</sup> Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," 376-377.

The cognitive process during moral conversion. An application of Lonergan's  
cognitional structure

The next issue to be addressed is, what component operations does this cognitive process – that we gather into a unity under the description of “moral conversion” - involve? Although this task might be accomplished with alternative theories of cognition, Lonergan's theory is particularly useful for this purpose, especially because it articulates cognitive operations in a way that helps differentiate and integrate the component operations from the gathering of data to the formulation of judgments of value. Of course, Lonergan has described the process only in general terms, so some interpretation will be needed to describe the cognitive operations as they take place during a process of moral conversion. (A summary of Lonergan's cognitional structure has been advanced in Section 3 of this chapter.)

It should be kept in mind that in actual instances of moral conversion a person may “fly by” some of these operations; for example, the data may be in the person's awareness without a sense of diverting attention to it or struggling against resistance to “see” it. Or the person may understand what needs to be understood without questions to thematize the inquiry explicitly. Or the judgment about the truth of what is known may be effortless, “obvious,” as we often say. Thus explicit questions to be addressed may only arise at the level of judgments about values, action, responsibility. For example, Gandhi is shocked by the *experience* of being put off the train – the experience (not entirely new for him) of suffering racism on his own flesh. But he does not, in his own account, spend much time pondering *why* he was put off the train, or even the *why* of racism, and

whether his ideas about racism were accurate or not. Rather, the experience stirs up in him – directly, as it were, as if the intervening operations had not taken place - the question, “what should I do now?” i.e., a question regarding action/decision.<sup>594</sup> In the following considerations, then, an effort will be made to find in the narratives examples corresponding to each of the levels of cognitive operations identified by Lonergan, but not all of them will be found to be explicit in every narrative.<sup>595</sup>

Note that among Lonergan scholars, the “standard” explanations of cognitional structure interpret the first three levels as focused on and driven by the desire *to know* solely, introducing the affective orientation to action/decision, value, morality only at the fourth level. The structure presented here differs from this standard treatment of Lonergan in that it presupposes that *the moral orientation of the questioning process can be present from the beginning of the process*, and so energize the first three operations as well, and not only the fourth. This interpretation of Lonergan is grounded on Cronin’s understanding of the function of feeling, though it is explicitly divergent from his view of the drive to value as (merely) a specification of the desire to know, i.e., as merely an unfolding of this desire at the fourth level of cognitive operations.<sup>596</sup> The interpretation of Lonergan offered here is that the drive to value is not reducible to the desire to know, and

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<sup>594</sup> Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, 104; Haste, "Moral Responsibility and Moral Commitment," 346.

<sup>595</sup> A question, possibly of great importance, for theories of cognition is revealed here. Is Lonergan correct to hold that all three component operations – experience, understanding, judgment – comprise every process that yields a judgment of truth, and that these three are also necessary antecedents to every judgment of value (i.e., regarding action, responsibility, morality), when careful descriptions of actual cognitive processes leave some of these operations out? The absence of some of these operations may be explained, as was suggested above, by saying that the process took place with such ease as to be unnoticed in the flow of reflection; but other readings of that data may be possible. The question, however, though important, is far outside the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>596</sup> Cronin, *Value Ethics*, 263.

therefore that the drive to value may itself drive the questioning process forward along with the desire for truth, coloring it to its own specifications, i.e., looking into the data with a view to resources that may solve a question about action, trying to understand the scope of the consequences of a decision, wondering if one has thought of all possible alternatives and so forth; and indeed, in the case of moral conversion, a question about how one ought to live, and about what is of value and what are the proper standards of right action.

The cognitive process during moral conversion: From *experience* to *questions for understanding*

As was mentioned in Section 3, the *level of experience* describes the gathering of data that is examined and judged about in subsequent operations. While there is a meaning of “data” that refers specifically to the raw stimuli received through the senses, this is very rarely the sense that Lonergan gives to the word. For Lonergan, as for many other thinkers, almost all the sensorial stimuli that an adult person receives through the senses are interpreted, understood in terms of concepts and related frameworks as soon as (and even before) attention is directed to them, and only through a reflective (or more properly, reflexive) exercise are they actually able to be interpreted as sensory stimuli. So Lonergan uses the word “data” in a broad sense, as referring to interpreted, meaningful sensorial information (“there is a wagon over there”), to information gathered by others, and (as was mentioned above) also to the non-sensorial information we may gather

through introspection.<sup>597</sup>

It was also mentioned there that while the person is conscious there is a constant, spontaneous gathering of data; but that the gathering can also be focused intentionally by concentrating our attention of identifying the data that is relevant for a specific question or set of questions (i.e., when experience is directed by understanding). Thus, if the driving question is one of discrete action/decision, the data sought or adverted too will be that which is relevant to the action/decision, for example what parties are involved, what resources are at stake, what resources are available to make a solution possible, what is the relation among the parties (tense, hostile, patient, etc.), what feelings I perceive that may be revealing of aspects relevant to the situation, and so forth.

In considering the way in which experience, i.e., data gathering, plays out in instances of moral conversion, *spontaneous* data are reported relevant to the process in the majority of cases. This characteristic is connected to the fact, already examined, that moral conversion (especially in its main analog) is a surprising, unexpected event. That is, the aspect of newness has its origin, according to the narratives, already at the level of experience; thus, the narratives mention experiences that “got them to think,” to reflect, or in some cases to move with urgency from the experience to an understanding of it and to a judgment of value.

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<sup>597</sup> Can *feelings* be categorized as data? Not having found this question dealt with explicitly in the literature, I offer my position on the issue, which is that feelings can be considered “data,” or otherwise we would not know of their existence. Feelings do “inform us” of things; but their nature is to orient us towards that to which they intend. It is not, in other words, the love that we feel for someone that “tells” me how that person is, but in orienting us in a very attentive, loving manner towards that person it allows us to perceive them differently. But the informational value of feelings in relation to understanding and judgment arises only when we reflectively ask the relevant questions, such as “Why do I feel this way?” “What does this feeling mean?” “What is this feeling (to what does it intend)?”

Can we categorize the experiences found at the beginning of a process of moral conversion? From the narratives considered here, the following categorization is possible:

(a) Vital demands or practically demanding situations are often the source of questions for understanding and a sense of urgency to come to judgment about value and action. Ordinary life is filled with such experiences: What is the nature of this illness that is affecting me? Why are the crops dying? What is the meaning of that alarm? Why do I smell smoke? Similarly, they may prompt serious reflection regarding the need to change. Many moral conversions begin thus. The case of Antonio Pickett (case # 20) is a good example of a conversion prompted by a vital situation that is perceived as intolerable. We find in this narrative that, despite “being enamored of the thrill and payoff of petty crime,” his life came to a point in which he needed to be constantly “looking over his shoulder, watching for police, worrying the next person he saw might try to kill him.”<sup>598</sup> This situation became unsustainable - it demanded understanding and judgment; and so while awaiting placement in a state prison he let his gang know he was stepping down. Although there is not an explicit question formulated in his narrative, i.e., it seems to move straight from the demanding experience to its resolution in judgment, there is nevertheless the suggestion of a period of reflection preceding this resolution when he says, “I knew this was my last chance to turn my life around.”<sup>599</sup>

(b) The presentation of new data prompts, because of the human desire to know, the need to make sense of such data in terms of understanding and judgment of truth/falsity;

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<sup>598</sup> Huppke, "Four Who Watch over the City."

<sup>599</sup> Ibid.



and because of the desire for value, the need to make sense of the new data also in terms of our orientation to value. “New data” should be understood here quite broadly: the expression may refer to empirical observations that the person has never made before, or to an event that brings “experiential knowledge” of what was perhaps known only passively, or perhaps only “in theory,” or there could be a third-party report of some reality of which the person was not aware, or the data may be in the form of a new feeling that provokes reflection regarding its meaning.

Many of the instances of moral conversion examined here exemplify the experience of new data. Gandhi’s experience in the train (case #8) fits into the subcategory of a familiar matter now experienced “experientially,” as opposed to passively or abstractly or theoretically. So do the various narratives about restorative justice (cases #23, 24, 25 and 26), where the experience of meeting their victims face to face causes in the offenders an “experiential awareness” of the nature of their actions, particularly of the harm they have inflicted in concrete, real persons with their actions. In many of these narratives we do not find explicit questions for understanding about the experience, because the meaning of the experience is grasped directly and effectively and the next questions are about what to do and how to live from then on. Jackie Katounas, for example, (case #24), in all her years of stealing “never gave consideration or a thought to the victims”; but her receiving stolen goods belonging to someone she knew became a turning point in her life: she felt shame, immediately understanding the meaning of her own actions and its implications

for action, i.e., she stopped offending altogether, and “began thinking of other people than myself.”<sup>600</sup>

Also belonging under this heading are the numerous cases cited by Leuba (#15, 16 and 17) in which the unexpected kindness of various strangers prompts a new kind of question and new insights in various alcoholics. “Subject H” (#16) mentions how he “*did not understand* why a well-dressed stranger should care for him and be willing to walk with a raggedly-clad fellow like himself”<sup>601</sup>; and in the case of “Subject G” the kindness of a lady “made him look within” to understand himself differently and judge and choose accordingly.<sup>602</sup>

(c) The new data may be symbolic, in which case it typically requires a great deal of interpretive mediation. “Sandra’s” emotional/aesthetic reaction to burnt meat (case #5) is of this kind. Her immediate revulsion to the way her host family cooked their meat did not initially have “anything to do with conscience.” But it prompted a reflection that eventually resulted in her formulating a vegetarian position, the arguments for which were in fact not directly related to her emotional reaction to burnt meat.<sup>603</sup> The presentation of the “new data” may even be imaginative, as with Helen John’s (case #6) vision of a Builth devastated by nuclear warfare. One may speculate about the subconscious processes that may have provoked these images; but the contrast between the beautiful scenery she was driving through and the imagined devastation prompted her

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<sup>600</sup> *Te Ara Whakatika*.

<sup>601</sup> Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," 377, emphasis mine.

<sup>602</sup> *Ibid.*: 376-377. The idea of certain data provoking an “existential” grasp or assent, as opposed to the merely notional grasp or assent, is considered in more detail below, in the section regarding the level of judgment.

<sup>603</sup> Haste, "Moral Responsibility and Moral Commitment," 335-336.

strong emotional reaction, and a “quasi-experiential” awareness of the consequences of nuclear warfare that was powerful enough to prompt serious questioning, then understanding, judgment and action.

(d) Sometimes it is not just the data alone that raises questions, but the perception of a lack of “fit” or correspondence between the data and the framework that has been offered to explain it; or more complexly the lack of “fit” can be between various sets of data (e.g. conflicting accounts from various witnesses). “Being puzzled” is an expression that describes such a perception of incoherence; the reader can probably confirm from personal experience just how rare it is to simply shrug off a puzzling set of data instead of attempting at least a tentative explanation. A similar pattern is found in many narratives of moral conversion. Within this category one may consider cases of a highly argumentative nature, where the revision of moral structures is prompted by articulate discussions on moral issues. An example is found in the story of Wayne Bauer (case #2), who having enrolled in the Marine Corps in the 60’s, took part in many arguments about the Vietnam war with friends over the course of several months, until he eventually “realized that [his] best arguments held no weight.” Bauer’s narrative is very explicit about his awareness of incoherence between data and understanding: he compares the experience with “having his environment shattered,” feeling that he had been lied to and was therefore left without any values.<sup>604</sup>

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<sup>604</sup> Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart*, 17. “Morality became a question to me. It's sort of like I wanted to put everything back together again with more durable material, one that would stand the strain” (ibid., 18). Eventually, Bauer’s efforts at understanding the issues that troubled him put him on more solid ground, mediated through his reentry into the Catholic Church, and from this new understanding and his judgment of its rectitude came his choice for political activism as meaning-giving activity.

(e) Finally, new feelings themselves may be the new data. This is the case for example when the feelings do not act simply as background drive, or as a somewhat predictable emotional resonance to what is already in awareness. Instead, a person's feelings on some matter can become particularly puzzling or insistent, to the point in which there is a demand to pay attention to the feelings themselves and to question their meaning. The case of Russ Fee (#22), the long-time lawyer who left his successful practice in order to become a primary school teacher, exemplifies this possibility. Fee reports feelings of disillusionment with what he had accomplished, in spite of his success at it – i.e., feelings unexpected in that environment. He experienced himself having become “too brittle, too competitive, too self-absorbed.” Fee then reports a slow process of seeking out “what has values that are important to [one] and trying it out,” a process in which he was supported by his wife and adult children.<sup>605</sup> His narrative suggests a gradually increasing awareness of his unexpected disillusionment with his hitherto well-established career choice. Eventually he did understand the meaning of these feelings and made the value judgments and choices they prompted to.

Brian Palmer's case (#1) exemplifies an instance in which the emotional dissonance is nearly as significant as the situation that caused it. Having been suddenly faced with the fact that his well-provided-for wife was divorcing him, Palmer mentions this event as “one of the two or three biggest surprises in my life.”<sup>606</sup> This unexpected experience, and the felt awareness that it could not be explained on the basis of previously accepted

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<sup>605</sup> Anderson, "New Teacher Lays Down the Law... and Picks up the Books."

<sup>606</sup> Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart*, 4.

meanings, led Palmer to reassess his life in fundamental ways, exploring the limits of the kind of success he had been pursuing; but part of his soul-seeking appears to have been prompted by the surprise itself, the fact that such a thing could have been brewing and he was completely unaware of it because it did not fit with how he had been understanding his life.<sup>607</sup>

Thus an examination of moral conversion narratives indicates that an enormous variety of experiences can be found at the beginning of a process of moral conversion. Nevertheless it seems a common feature among them that they throw the person into some sort of felt imbalance – not by the experience’s own characteristics alone, but also because of the person’s disposition (often shaped by accepted categories of meaning and expectations) to be moved or thrown off by the specific experience. This affective imbalance can occur at various levels, but what is relevant to the present point is that an imbalance is also produced at the cognitive level as well. This is demonstrated by the fact that, in the narratives, the report of relevant experiences is almost always followed by an account of the questioning that follows the experience: for most of these persons, formulating questions seems to be a spontaneous way of articulating and addressing the felt imbalance. That is, the next set of cognitive operations involved in moral conversion (though, as was mentioned, this level may sometimes be left out of the narrative, i.e., left implicit) is that of understanding. The following section will consider the role of

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<sup>607</sup> At its lowest level of cognitive differentiation, it is possible to find cases in which the process takes place almost entirely at a subconscious level, or is kept at that level (albeit with some degree of awareness) by a measure of denial or resistance. Such seems to be the case, for example, of Robert Cooley (case #19).

understanding (in Lonergan's sense, as throughout this analysis) in the process of moral conversion.

### The cognitive process during moral conversion: The level of *understanding*

From the various affective scenarios described above, questions emerge for the person experiencing them. These questions are part of and generate in turn a process that, in Lonergan's reading, is *understanding*. This is not a univocal, instantaneous or quasi-magical grasp of the full nature of the object of questioning, but rather the operation of a variety of strategies that bring the intellect closer to full understanding. Such strategies include the gathering of more data to fill in gaps; an intensified focus on the data with the aim of identifying patterns relevant to an answer; a careful attempt to adequately define/describe the object, which may result in further illuminating relevant aspects of the data; reformulations of the question, until a question that properly frames the inquiry is achieved; and finally (if the process is successful) the formulation of theories or explanations, in which, in Lonergan's account, this operation reaches its object.<sup>608</sup> The actual event of understanding ("insight" is one of Lonergan's preferred terms to designate it) might be described as the internal formulation of a definition or hypothesis. But as has been noted, these activities defy formal definition; for Lonergan they are not species of

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<sup>608</sup> Note that while many attempts to understand end up with the formulation of theories or explanations that seem to resolve the question, Lonergan stresses that there is a normative need (driven by the desire for knowledge) to move to the next level, the "level of judgment," i.e., to ask the question "is it true?" "Is it so?" In other words, the questioning process should not end with an *apparently* adequate explanation, but must move forward towards a comprehensive revision of possible objections or alternatives, until a judgment can be issued in which (ideally) the conditions for the truth of the judgment are satisfied. (Lonergan, *Insight*, 300, 306). See the next section for the role of Lonerganian judgment in the process of moral conversion.

other kinds of activities but (some of) the basic building blocks in the description of human activity. Instead, the descriptive and corroborative strategy for explaining what understanding means is ostensive, i.e., to point to examples of understanding, especially examples in the interlocutor's own experience, so that he/she can *self-appropriate* them.

Despite Lonergan's formulation of understanding as a human activity, it is considered by Lonergan to be an event ultimately beyond our control, in the sense that its achievement does not come normally as a direct, "if-then" effect of our willing its achievement. The more the intellectual effort, the keener the description, the more polished and trained our intellect has become, the higher the probabilities of insight arising. But, by the same token, understanding is not guaranteed; on the contrary, Lonergan explains the (relative) fullness of understanding as dependent on a probabilistic model which he calls "emergent probability": our active efforts, skills and accumulated knowledge provide the substratum that makes the emergence of an insight not only possible but more (or less) probable. We can modify to some extent the basic probability (by attention, i.e., staying on a problem more time, devoting more of our cognitive resources to it, etc.) but this does not guarantee positive results.<sup>609</sup>

*What is it that is understood in moral conversion?* The variety of possible questions for understanding is tremendously diverse. Before considerations of possible response/action to a given experience or set of data, questions for understanding may attempt to identify the essence or definition of concrete objects, or of feelings, or of abstract

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<sup>609</sup> In this sense, a similitude with moral conversion can already be found: moral conversion, as was discussed in the previous chapter, cannot be guaranteed either, but seems to be also an event partially beyond our control.

principles, or the dynamism of a group of objects, patterns of behavior, mathematical relations, concrete causal relationships, and the list could go on. One needs only to look at the variety of sciences and disciplines, becoming ever more specialized and subspecialized, to begin to grasp the potential diversity of questions for understanding. A similar open-endedness about possible questions for understanding arises in the context of an orientation towards practical action/decision, although the framework presented in Chapter 5, regarding what constitutes a “moral matter” (or a “matter of moral concern”) provides a useful set of categories for addressing the problem. It was proposed there that, in the modern/contemporary focus of the question, matters of moral concern are those dealing with the question about right/wrong, or what ought/ought not to be done; and in the classical understanding of the question, matters of moral concern are those dealing with the general problem of human happiness, the “good life,” the meaning of life and so forth.

Using this framework, what is understood during the process of moral conversion (or questioned, revised, proposed as a theory, etc.) may be additionally categorized either as a *conflictive* or a *reinforcing* element. In the former case, one’s criteria for determining right/wrong, or for answering the question of happiness and the meaning of life, may come under questioning. The person may identify, in the conflicts generated by the application of one’s criteria to data, either in general or in relation to particular issues (e.g., harmful consequences to particulars or groups, paradoxes or other signs of internal inconsistency), or conflicts generated when applying the criteria to a wider context (e.g., from the local to the national, or incorporating the needs of minorities, etc.), or conflicts



generated by alternative viewpoints (putting oneself in someone else's shoes, attending to another thinker's proposal on the matter) and so on. In the normal dynamism of the "desire to know," conflicts of this kind typically prompt a revision in terms of *content* (e.g., in Brian Palmer's reexamination of his life goals, case #1). If conflicts, however, are perceived as extensive enough to make one doubt that the problem can ever be resolved – if the failure to understand, in other words, devolves into a more general conviction that the realm of morality cannot ever be understood – this may undermine a person's overall conviction or commitment to their existing values and to moral life in general, as currently accepted by them, and thus prompt an attitudinal change:

disappointment, skepticism, etc. We find an example of this in the case of Wayne Bauer (case #2):

And after this [his discussions with friends that had gone to college] went on, to make a long story short, for about three or four months, I realized that my best argument held no weight. And what happened was, all of a sudden, my view of who I was and my environment was shattered. It was like looking in the mirror and having the whole thing shattered on you and seeing all your values, all your beliefs, everything you thought was real just kind of crumble. And it left me without any values and it also left me in a position where I had this terrible feeling of loneliness that there was no one I could go to for help. All the people I had trusted, I feel, essentially, they had lied to me.<sup>610</sup>

Alternatively, the matters understood may not be of the kind that make the person doubt or revise moral/value criteria, but rather of the kind that reveal in deep detail the intelligibility or reasonability of such criteria, i.e., that *reinforce* a person's conviction of the truth or adequacy of criteria already possessed and operative. This may include new arguments supporting their foundation, conflicts and problems solved by the application

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<sup>610</sup> Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart*, 17-18.

of these criteria, harmful consequences to particulars or groups produced by *not* acting morally, the resolution of internal doubts when being presented with a more suitable interpretation of the meaning of the criteria, encounters with people who transmit happiness or satisfaction while embodying these criteria, and so on. Normally such discoveries would not prompt a revision in terms of content, given that the content is being ratified by the new understanding; the process of new understanding may be better associated with a renewed or intensified commitment to moral life. If the renewal involves a significant change, it may be considered an instance of moral conversion regarding attitude/commitment.

Note however that these descriptions of conflictive or reinforcing understanding contain an implicit reference to operations that are better located in the third level of cognitive operations, the level of judgment of truth and falsity. The perception that intelligibility is lacking is closely linked to the operation of judging that one's understanding on the matter is or may be flawed, and false. This move may be blocked occasionally by bias, i.e., by (in Lonerganian terms) a refusal to ask the further questions, but usually not before at least the shadow of a doubt (the product of judgment) makes an appearance. Similarly, reinforcing understanding moves to a reinforcing judgment of the truth of the relevant criteria. Convictions that were open to doubts become stronger, one's certainty becomes fuller and so on.<sup>611</sup>

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<sup>611</sup> Lonergan's distinction between understanding and judgment is not based on an assumption that either operation can be fulfilled in the absence of the other, but rather on the distinction between comprehending coherent meaning and affirming (or denying) that something exists in reality as understood. Further, to repeat an important point, Lonergan describes both of these operations as fallible, but also corrigible in their results, and – as noted – as capable of improvement in their operation.

The frequently experienced swiftness of the move from evidence to understanding to judgment, in many cases makes it seem spontaneous, that is, it is often not experienced as needing to follow the demands of a rigorous methodology. When this takes place, it is possible to confirm in one's own experience the unitary dynamism or integrity of our cognitive operations. This is why Lonergan describes the process as an immanent, dynamic unity of cognitional activity, driven all the way through by the desire to know, and (in the present interpretation) by the complementary drive to value. That is, the cognitive process is unitary from beginning to end, and not some kind of logically complex concatenation of elements.<sup>612</sup>

#### The cognitive process during moral conversion: The level of *judgment*

The third level of cognitive operations (“rational consciousness,” in perhaps Lonergan’s most idiosyncratic terminological choice) is the level of judgment. The desire to know is not satisfied with having reached an understanding of the matter that, for all the illuminating it may be, has not yet been determined to be true. The desire to know is a desire to know *truth*, to be certain (which, in Lonergan, means the certainty relative to the range of questions being presently asked, what he calls the “*virtually* unconditioned”); and this not merely for pragmatic reasons but because the affective component of the knowledge process does not allow one to rest in something less than a relative

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<sup>612</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 300. In this connection, it is interesting to consider that, in many accounts, arguments for internalism seem to be formulated almost exclusively as pertaining to (in Lonergan’s terms) the level of understanding, implying that it is just “understanding properly” that generates conviction, the feeling of moral obligation, etc. This has to be viewed as a very limited approach. In fact, the famous “naturalistic fallacy” argument of G.E. Moore could be said to be focused on this narrow approach which attempts to describe moral cognition as understanding (of moral standards without any other cognitive operations involved).

certainty.<sup>613</sup> The operations of judgment thus consist mostly on revising and weighing: revising whether the compound evidence-theory is conclusive, i.e., whether some gaps or flaws in the theory or explanation have been overlooked; weighing whether the evidence available is sufficient and corroborative enough; and pronouncing judgment regarding truth, falsity, probability or inconclusiveness. Again, the move from the previous level is, in Lonergan's account, effected by a specific type of questioning, the questioning for judgment ("but is it so?"). Similarly, in the context of an orientation towards discrete action/decision, there is a distinctive questioning on the part of judgment, such as: "Is the need real?" "Are the possibilities of success well evaluated?" "Are the parties involved telling all they know, showing their true feelings?" "Are there any aspects of the situation that I have not thought of?" Beyond matters of fact relevant to action, moreover, the questioning may be about whether the criteria to morally judge the situation are appropriate: "Is the problem raised by the difficulty to apply present rules and norms, or is there a problem with the rules themselves?" Obviously such questions are relevant in situations in which moral conversion is a possibility, coming in many forms, depending on the type of moral conversion and the circumstances.

While the normal effect of questions for understanding is to drive the cognitive dynamism steadily onwards – towards further understanding, and towards judgment - the effect of the third level questions of judgment is quite frequently an arresting of the flow, requiring the person to go slower in order to avoid the mistakes that occur when one

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<sup>613</sup> Even if a certain tenet cannot attain more than the category of "doubtful" with the present resources, the knower is often compelled by the desire to know to gauge at least the probability of it being true or false.

rushes into asserting the reality of a theory. And this caution obviously is reasonable in regard to moral conversion as well. Thus such questions may be raised as: “Is this dissatisfaction an effect of my present way of life, or does it have medical causes?” “Is one *really* capable of change?” “Will I be able to go through it?” “Are there any other aspects that I have not thought of?”

Thus, in the process of a conversion regarding *content* the person may feel divided by the struggle of cognitive operations that seem to be working in opposing directions. This felt division is not necessarily caused by a defect of understanding; it may be rather a natural result of the operation of judgment, that moves cautiously in asking if what is understood from the available evidence is convincing enough.

In instances of conversion regarding *attitude*, the role of judgment operations is of particular importance. Consider, for example, the many narratives in which the determining factor seems to be, not a new understanding of things (in the sense of a new theory or explanation), but rather an encounter with, to put it one way, the *existential actuality of the concrete*, or, as was mentioned when considering the level of experience, the newness of the data consists in its being “experiential.” Such cases, it was said, are common in the context of restorative justice and victim/offender mediation; the offender often experiences a sort of existential awakening when confronted with a “real” person as their victim and faced with the fact that their actions have caused actual, real harm to this person.

A way of explaining this awakening, borrowed from John Henry Newman, is by seeing the distinction between “real assent” and “notional assent” (or “apprehension”), a

distinction that will be translated here into “experiential” and “notional” knowledge.<sup>614</sup> On the one hand, up to this point the offender may have “known” that certain actions are deemed as immoral (or illegal) by many. In the worst-case scenario, the notion itself may be deemed, Thrasymachus-like, as a “noble simplicity” believed mostly by fools, but not binding for those clever enough to see through it.<sup>615</sup> But it also seems possible that a person would maintain only a “notional” belief in the truth of these standards of conduct, separating them from impacting one’s life through rationalization, denial, inattention, mindless habit, so there is no “bridging” between them and what is actually relevant to the person’s life. Yet, as a number of moral conversion narratives attest, experiences can “strike home,” can have the capacity to bridge that gap, making the notion relevant to the person’s life. This is what may be called “experiential knowledge.”

Jackie Katounas (case #24) provides an example. Despite her recurrent history of stealing, her story does not suggest a resistance to the notion that “stealing is wrong,” but rather a disconnection with the existential relevance of this truth. A further example is provided in Gandhi’s story; as has been mentioned, Gandhi was aware of the immorality of racism and discrimination, but this awareness seems to have been kept at the “notional level” until he suffered this specific (for it was not the first) experience of abuse and discrimination in his own person. Finally, Helen John’s roadside “vision” of the

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<sup>614</sup> Says Newman, in his *Grammar of Assent*: “It is in human nature to be more affected by the concrete than by the abstract. . . Real apprehension, then, may be pronounced stronger than notional, because things, which are its objects, are confessedly more impressive and affective than notions, which are the objects of notional. Experiences and their images strike and occupy the mind, as abstractions and their combinations do not.” (John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* [London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903], 37.)

<sup>615</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 348d.

devastated countryside seems to have produced an analogous result, effecting a move from an abstract, irrelevant understanding that nuclear war is something bad to an emotionally charged understanding that seemed to leave her with no option but to address it and to take action. In all these cases there is, at the level of judgment, an affirmation of the reality of the moral standards being violated or threatened; an affirmation that is connected in the cognitive process to the presence of the new, experiential data. This affirmation, in turn, prompts a renewed judgment of value, which in the cases mentioned is extensive enough in what it covers to involve a life-changing attitudinal change.<sup>616</sup>

As a tentative conclusion, an examination of narratives of moral conversion shows that the process of moral conversion can be “mapped” onto the Lonerganian cognitional structure of experience, understanding and judgment in dynamic unity. Therefore, it makes sense to propose that the dynamic unity of cognitional operations in general is attributable to the process of moral conversion. Furthermore, the cause-consequence language, so frequently used in the narratives (explicitly or in the form of imagery about the process), indicates a subjective perception of this dynamic unity of the cognitive operations on the part of those experiencing them. Experience prompts understanding

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<sup>616</sup> Can these attitudinal changes be explained instead in terms of a differentiation in the way one *understands* something? To be certain, it is possible to find some theoretical grounding for this interpretation. Aquinas’ distinction between knowing *per perfectum usum rationis* – a theoretical, methodologically sophisticated knowing – and knowing *per connaturalitatem* – through a deep “familiarity” with the subject - may be applied to illuminate this distinction between the “notional” and the “experiential.” (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q.45 a.2.) The Aristotelian doctrine that we know the universal in the images presented to the intellect can be used to argue that what produces the “renewed understanding” is the presentation - broadly speaking - of a more effective *image* through contact with the real, concrete persons that were harmed. Attributing the differentiation to the level of judgment, however, seems to be conceptually cleaner. One does not need then to be stressing or italicizing the word “understanding” in different ways to make oneself understood: the distinction between notional and experiential is explained in simpler terms by arguing that the “awakening experience” adds to the judgment of truth evidence of a kind that had not been experienced before, solid, concrete, capable of producing “real assent.”

prompts judgment; judgment depends on understanding and understanding depends on experience, in recurrent self-correcting cycles. This is the way in which the process of conversion is reported, and it conforms to Lonergan's careful model of cognitional operations in their dynamic unity.

But to this point only passing reference has been made to *judgments of value* in relation to action and moral life, as a fourth step in the Lonerganian analysis. Clearly this step must be examined to complete our analysis of cognition in moral conversion: and that is the task we turn to now.

#### The cognitive process during moral conversion: The level of *judgments of value*

##### Lonergan's treatment in *Insight* and in *Method in Theology*

In positing a fourth level of cognitive operations, a level of decision/action ("responsible consciousness") Lonergan establishes a continuity between cognitive operations undertaken independently of action, and the sphere of human action, value, moral life. Lonergan's early attempts at establishing this continuity in the final chapters of *Insight* (1957) regarded moral decision and action as simply a next step in logical continuity with previous cognitive operations, without including the idea of an additional drive to value. That attempt, according to Cronin, was doomed to failure because it ran right up against the "naturalistic fallacy" obstacle.<sup>617</sup> In fact, in *Insight*, Lonergan tried many formulations of this matter, without settling completely on one. "Rational consciousness," another name for the operations of judgment, would become "moral self-

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<sup>617</sup> Cronin, *Value Ethics*, 264.



consciousness” in the fourth level,<sup>618</sup> and the “questions for truth” of the third level would become “questions for responsibility” at the fourth. The desire to know became specified at the fourth level as an “exigence for self-consistency in knowing and doing.”<sup>619</sup> These are the seeds of ideas that will receive a fuller treatment some years later in *Method in Theology*, when he proposed, in addition to the desire to know, the drive to value and ways to integrate them in a unified account of human action.

Even though partial and unsatisfactory, Lonergan’s treatment in *Insight* still throws light on the continuity theme. For the idea of a “rational exigence for self-consistency” in particular finds confirmation both in ordinary self-appropriating reflection on action and the moral life and in the moral conversion narratives. Everyone with some experience at examining their own actions will be familiar, for example, with the phenomenon of “rationalization,” e.g. of finding excuses for past deeds that are generally against one’s moral convictions. This phenomenon attests to the difficulty we experience in carrying out actions that are inconsistent or incoherent with our moral standards. Lonergan’s “exigence for self-consistency” is an articulation of this experience, and it highlights the immanent demand of a continuity between what is understood and judged as true, and the operations of judgments of value and decision/action. However, Lonergan’s account in *Insight* leaves this imperative for self-consistency without content. Value, convictions about the moral life are not yet integrated into Lonergan’s system.

Lonergan’s later view, however (here I follow Cronin’s reading) is that the

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<sup>618</sup> Lonergan, *Insight*, 622.

<sup>619</sup> *Ibid.*, 622, 650.

perception of moral values (as opposed to the perception of goods of satisfaction/dissatisfaction, which have their basis in purely organic/biological dispositions) is grounded on a distinct *spiritual* drive, the drive to value. Like the desire to know, the drive to value is an immanent orientation of the person, in this case an orientation to value, and it is fulfilled in the achievement/realization of value. But Lonergan holds this orientation is not thematic, and needs to be mediated by cognitive operations to become thematized, and thus to allow us to achieve/realize values specifically.<sup>620</sup>

The drive to value as limited to a specific level of consciousness, and as driving cognitive processes all the way through

Some Lonergan commentators' explications of the fourth level of consciousness seem to imply that the drive to value only begins to play a part at the fourth level itself; that is, they describe the flow of the first three levels of cognitive operations as driven by the desire to know, and the move to the fourth is described either as a specialization of the desire to know, or as if the drive to value made a sudden entrance, transmuting the process into a dynamism oriented towards a resolution in decision and action.<sup>621</sup> As has been mentioned, this explication, though somewhat common, seems inadequate. It has already been shown in the previous subsections how the whole process can be conceived instead as sometimes oriented towards decision/action from its beginning steps – in which case understanding's attention to the data focuses on the information needed to

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<sup>620</sup> For a more detail discussion of this matter, see Cronin, *Value Ethics*, chapters 5-6, as well as Section 4 of this chapter.

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

make a good decision, and questions for understanding attempt to clarify both the practical situation and the criteria potentially involved in the decision. Similarly, questions for judgment attempt to certify that one's understanding of the practical conditions is accurate. What is distinctive of the fourth level of cognitive operations on this interpretation is not the presence of a drive to value, for this, it is submitted, is also found and operative in other levels of cognitive operations. Rather, what distinguishes the operations of the fourth level of consciousness (and in so doing, makes the moral/value theme especially urgent at this level) is their specific orientation to the question about action: "What should I *do*?"

It is probably not wrong, however (though it should be kept in mind that there is no "canonical" interpretation of Lonergan of this matter – not yet at least), to understand the fourth level of cognitional operation as permeated by the drive to value in a stronger sense than the other levels. That is, in a normal decision-making process the questions raised are not limited to calculations about practical or economic utility, that make abstraction of matters of moral value but for some occasional question about ethics. Rather, the normal decision-making process (i.e., the decision-making process of a person with a normal degree of moral awareness) is permeated with questions of moral value: "Is it worthwhile?" "Is it consistent with who I am?" "How is it going to make me feel afterwards?" "Will I be setting a proper example?" "Am I indulging myself too much?" Lonergan calls it, in fact, the level of *responsible* action/decision, implying that questions of value are persistently present during the process of deliberation and

decision-making.<sup>622</sup>

The process can be illustrated with the narratives of moral conversion. It was discussed how the drive to value, present in those feelings and emotions reported at the beginning of a process of moral conversion, becomes thematized through the dynamism of the first three cognitive operations. In the case of Russ Fee (#22), general feelings of anxiety and dissatisfaction become thematized as it becomes understood that these feelings are a reaction to an unhappy career, that is making him “too brittle... too brittle, too competitive, too self-absorbed. . . racing through life instead of strolling.”<sup>623</sup> A process of discernment begins, which includes attention to the data, attempts to understand what causes these negative feelings, judgments regarding the accuracy of this interpretation, gathering of more data through the concrete experience of teaching, reflection on the feelings produced by this activity and so forth. At a certain point, however, it is clear to Fee that a decision has to be made as to whether to close his law practice and commit himself to the career of a teacher or not: understanding what is wrong and what can be done to solve it is not equivalent to determining it ought to be done and doing it. This kind of decision is beyond the operative effects attributed to third-level operations (namely, judgments of truth or falsity); a further level of operations is needed (at least one) to decide on a course of action and to move to action.<sup>624</sup>

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<sup>622</sup> It may be useful to keep in mind that, in fact, the term “practical,” now used frequently to imply a “value-neutral” or “non-moral,” means-to-ends calculation, has been associated during most of its history to *moral* action.

<sup>623</sup> Anderson, "New Teacher Lays Down the Law... and Picks up the Books."

<sup>624</sup> I have not found in Lonerganian scholarship any particular discussion regarding whether judgments of value/deliberation/moral judgments, decision/choice and moving to action might not be better considered as (two or three) distinct levels of operation. For the sake of simplicity, I will proceed using the standard Lonerganian division that considers all as included in a single fourth level of consciousness, which I will

Exactly how deliberation, choosing and moving to action take place and are related is not a matter to be discussed here. There are many differing accounts and some aspects of this question have already been discussed in Chapter 9. The question under consideration here is whether the proposal that there is a dynamic unity between the first three cognitive operations should be expanded to moral deliberation and choice, i.e., including elements of decision-making that make up this fourth level. When that has been done, the bearing of this analysis of moral conversion on the internalism/externalism debate can be examined properly.

#### Self-appropriation and the dynamic unity of cognitive operations and action

As with the individual cognitive operations, the primary forms of evidence that this dynamic is a reality are self-appropriation and corroboration by communicating with others about their self-appropriation about the same topic. By attending to, understanding, and judging about one's own cognitive and affective operations, i.e., Lonergan's notion of self-appropriation, there is, arguably, significant evidence of such a dynamic unity between the cognitive operations of the first three levels and fourth-level operations. Unless specific obstacles such as bias (i.e., a chosen or half-conscious refusal to ask the relevant questions) or psychological resistance block or somehow short-circuit the dynamism, there is no significant experienced discontinuity between experiencing data,

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continue to call "decision-making" (and occasionally, "the sphere of decision/action"). For an alternative view, not within Lonerganian circles, see David T. Ozar, "A Model of Moral/Ethical Decision-Making: Note on the Distinction between Judging and Choosing," (class notes, Loyola University Chicago, 1985 to present) and also David T. Ozar and David J. Sokol, *Dental Ethics at Chairside*, 2nd. ed. (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 91.

understanding (or trying to) its meaning, judging it to be true/false, and considering it in relation to value and action (i.e., deliberation/choice).

This basic continuity of activities has been found also in narratives of moral conversion. If a narrative lays out a specific content as being the subject-matter in a process of deliberation, such content can be seen to have been previously experienced and understood (at least to some degree) and then judged to be real, though this latter operation may be sometimes skipped in the narratives (i.e., left implicit). Of course, throughout the effort to identify evidence of this dynamic unity of operations, as has been noted often, we must be mindful that the operations do not always go perfectly. A person's awareness is selective, and their understanding may be incomplete in many ways (such as, for example, in comparison with the understanding that may subsequently be gained retrospectively). And judgment, as has been stressed, is fallible, and so is deliberation. But note that such shortfalls do not invalidate the claim of dynamic unity as if they were direct counterexamples. Though the subtlety of the complete argument would take this section along an extended tangent, there is definitely an argument to be made that the fact that these kinds of events are judged to be *shortfalls* from cognition-at-its-best is evidence of the dynamic unity of the four levels of operations (and of what counts as the proper object of each operation, to put this last point in Aquinian terms.)

While the evidence of this dynamic unity is thus readily available, there are a few difficulties specific to this point that require particular treatment. The source of these difficulties is the theme of our *orientation to action*, which Lonergan, Cronin and the present author see as the distinctive newness of the fourth level. *Action* seems to be of a

different nature from cognitive operations. Action is, or at least includes the external, the physical, and as such it is not self appropriated in the same way that cognitive operations are – or so it seems at first look anyway. That is, the flow between cognitive operations of experience-understanding-reflection-deliberation seems to encounter a gap of sorts when it begins to turn “outward,” to require bodily engagement (since self-awareness of the body is more likely to be localized, or at least spatial in a way that self-awareness of cognitive activities is not), i.e., to turn into action. There seems to be a gap here that Humean doubts might easily widen or render uncrossable.

It is possible, however, to corroborate the unity between the operations of cognition and action by recalling our own experiences of deliberation (as the last of the cognitive operations) leading to action, i.e., by retrospective self-appropriation. In the process of deliberation, a decision to act was arrived at, and the decision was value-judged to be reasonable (that is, cognitively appropriate both in terms of factual knowledge and moral/value criteria), and the action taken was *what you decided to do*. An example of this dynamic unity of the operations up to decision/action might run like this: I go to the supermarket and consider buying bread, according to criteria of taste, healthiness, price range, and ad hoc factors such as which members of my family will be there for dinner. Left, let us assume, between two options, I consider buying the one that I like the most or buying the one that the rest of my family prefers. The former option could be said roughly to be better by the criteria of satisfaction, and the latter by the criterion of

value.<sup>625</sup> I opt for the values of generosity and self-sacrifice, and choose the bread my family prefers. In this decision I experience myself as making sense of my decision in terms of values, potential consequences, consistency with how I regard myself in my various social roles, etc. The decision, we might say, “feels” sound; but this “feeling” is, upon examination, a self-reflective evaluation of the adequacy of the data (experiences), understanding, judgment about reality, and judgments about value and action (deliberation) that went into it and that, when I act accordingly, are the full description of *what I am choosing to do*.

Now, in retrospect, with the whole process completed – and judged satisfactory as a decision-making/action process, i.e., “it feels sound,” as just noted - I can confirm the reality (via understanding and judgment regarding the self-appropriated data of my own actions) of the dynamic unity between cognitive operations and action, I need only to look into the grocery bags and corroborate that the bread I actually picked up and paid for matches the outcome of the whole cognitive process. Thus a simple, pedestrian example, judged and evaluated (as a good decision) in self-appropriation can confirm the dynamic unity between cognitive operations. The one implicit requisite is that of selecting an instance in which all cognitive operations are judged adequately and are apparent to self-awareness. In cases of one’s rushing through a decision and in cases of performing actions to which we are habituated, there would often not be enough self-aware data to examine closely.

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<sup>625</sup> The satisfaction/value distinction is simply incorporated here from Lonergan and Cronin for the purposes of this example. Obviously much careful scholarship on both categories and on their connection (or not) would have to be surveyed to comment carefully.



Now externalist authors may well claim that such straightforwardness in accepting introspective evidence is (or at least is likely to be) deceiving. Retrospective and observer-biased analyses of people's narratives of their decision-making processes show them to be riddled with oversimplifications, rationalizations, and even confusion as to the sequence and interrelationship of operations leading to deliberation and decision. The process is better described, it is claimed, as one of preferences, understood as heteronomous directives never fully "available" to self-awareness, which by a balancing of their variably vectored energies direct our actions; and that this process is then later or instantly followed by a process of molding our thoughts to our actions.

It must be granted that rationalization can run rampant in self-reports of human action; there are also many instances in which a person is confused as to what course of action to take (and perhaps anxiously aware of it), and in which a decision is reached via such measures as flipping a coin, following a "gut feeling," or even doing the exact opposite of what one decided the moment after deciding. Such examples may be used to argue that decisions are not made in the way in which internalism describes them, i.e., in continuity with the dynamic unity of the cognitive process.

The answer to this difficulty requires that we examine two methodological points that are key to understanding the internalism/externalism debate. One is the difference between some and all, possible and impossible. The other concerns the selection of examples offered as evidence. Concerning the first point, it was mentioned earlier that, while externalism claims to exclude every instance of internalist decision-making, the opposite is true of internalism, which claims that some decisions have this structure, at

the same time acknowledging the actual, empirical difficulties of making fully reasonable decisions, and the fact that shortfalls frequently occur.<sup>626</sup> So a limited number of instances in which the internalist explanation seems to fail does not determine the falsity of internalism.

Concerning the second point regarding the examples offered as evidence, externalists need to account also for those instances of decision-making that have been internally comprehended with a peculiar, distinct clarity: moments in which we “clearly knew” how we judged what was to be done, as opposed to moments of obscurity, confusion, indecision or impulsive choices. Such moments of peculiar clarity are characterized not only by clarity of feelings (such as enthusiasm for certain values, or an intensely felt desire to act morally), but also by feelings characteristic of cognitive operations arriving at their object: by “eurekas,” the experience of “a-ha moments” and things falling correctly into place. While reflection on the former cases does raise questions about the dynamic unity of cognitive operations and action, reflection on the latter cases (in which self-appropriating them seems to be simply a matter of “looking” introspectively) do not raise such questions, but rather solidify the internalist view regarding the dynamic unity of cognitive operations and action; and these latter cases must also be taken into account in the debate.

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<sup>626</sup> See, however, the comment above (in this same section) about the implication of judging such *as* shortfalls. Externalists who consider them to be the standard thus are generalizing from them, to conclude that the decisions offered as evidence for internalism are being misdescribed. Note also, though this too would take this project far into questions of epistemology, that an externalist who interprets internalist examples as misdescribed, or “shortfalls” as typical, has either already accepted self-appropriation as a relevant form of evidence or is seriously misstating arguments that should properly be formulated only from the observer’s position that externalism privileges epistemologically.

Corroboration of the dynamic unity of cognitive operations and action: The evidence of moral conversion

If moral conversion takes place, and is described correctly as proposed in this study, it is important to ask if the narratives of moral conversion corroborate this claim about dynamic unity. Two of the categories of moral conversion do not result directly in “action” or “behavior,” but in changes regarding the content of the person’s convictions and their attitude to right/wrong and happiness/eudaemonia/ meaning. But as has been explained, such changes then in turn typically result in stable changes in habits of action/ behavior, and we would ordinarily withhold the descriptor “moral conversion” if, in some respect at least, they did not.

Many of the now familiar narratives of moral conversion corroborate this claim. Russ Fee’s narrative (#22) outlines the process with great clarity, even detailing some of his experimentation before the decision was solidified. Gandhi (#8) describes the cognitive steps that produced first the seed and then the mature idea that became his guiding vocation. Wayne Bauer (#2) describes how the change of convictions, the realization that “[his] best argument held no weight,”<sup>627</sup> moved him to action, i.e., to leave the Marines and live in the underground until he could sort things out. These particular narratives are especially useful because they detail the convert’s processes of deliberation. Others are more succinct and leave more of the process implicit in their narratives, but not in ways that support an externalist rather than an internalist

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<sup>627</sup> Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart*, 17.

interpretation: Jackie Katounas (#24) seems to move quite rapidly from understanding to decision, but the dynamic unity can still be corroborated in her case in the coherence between what is understood and the moral implications in terms of convictions, attitude and action that are drawn from the event.

### Discontinuities and subconscious processes

An objection could possibly be raised regarding some narratives of moral conversion in which the process as reported suggests a disproportion between the intelligibility of the specific motivating event (i.e., as opposed as how the event may be read symbolically) and the outcome, i.e., the significant change of life that supports the description of the process as a moral conversion; for example when the process takes place very suddenly, or when a strong outpouring of emotion is involved. In such cases, the cognitive dynamism articulated in the narrative might not seem to be meaningful enough to explain the degree of unexpected changes of direction, or the strength of the person's resolution as evidenced by the subsequent stability of behavioral changes. These cases, in other words, may suggest an important undercurrent of subconscious processes that, prompted perhaps by some form of symbolic association, or having eventually surmounted the resistance that kept them "bottled up," rise to the surface of consciousness and produce rapid, significant changes. And the question arises, therefore, whether such non-conscious heteronomous processes are the engine for the conversion, rather than what is reported by the convert as a series of cognitive operations leading to action.

Many such cases can be found, for example, in the collection provided by Leuba, focusing mostly on alcoholism recovery (some of them admitting, as was mentioned, a theological reading too). Subject “E” (#12) was suddenly struck by a biblical phrase. Subject “M” (#18) experienced a sudden urge to kneel and pray.<sup>628</sup> Helen John’s sudden imaginative vision (#6) also suggests a rather powerful undercurrent of anguished, tortuous feelings, erupting suddenly in her dread-filled vision of nuclear destruction. And Robert Cooley’s story (#19) also suggests a subconscious undercurrent, though of a different kind, in that his struggle seems to be closer to actual awareness. Cooley tells in his autobiography how the conflict between the values represented by his family, and in particular by his father (a honest policeman that had suffered for his unwillingness to compromise with the reigning corruption, and with the mob in particular), and the increasingly more criminal demands of his mob employers had been growing more intense in his conscience; but the risks involved in turning against his employers had been postponing any resolution. In Cooley’s account, he had no conscious intention of visiting the FBI when his feet, almost of their own accord, took him in that direction.<sup>629</sup>

The fact that subconscious processes can have a substantial influence in our convictions and behavior can be raised as a difficulty for an internalist view. This constitutes a difficulty, however, only if one’s conception of subconscious processes is *already* loaded with an externalist interpretation, i.e., if the subconscious is conceived as

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<sup>628</sup> William James has outlined a psychological reading of these cases, using it to explain the relation between the moment of “surrender” that follows usually after a long, unfruitful struggle, and the sudden conversion that often takes place in such context. (James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 171-173.)

<sup>629</sup> Cooley and Levin, *When Corruption Was King*, 181.

a set of processes that fully direct the individual's behavior independently of cognitive activities that are thought (in self-awareness) to shape one's action. (Freud's conception of the Id, for example, though not without its contradictions, fills such a description.)<sup>630</sup> But unless one is from the outset committed to an externalist view, there is no need to conceive of subconscious processes in such a narrow way. In fact, the wide divergence of the various attempts to define or describe the subconscious suggests that it is a mistake to attempt to consider it univocally; that is, in terms of its interrelations with the conscious sphere, subconscious processes seem to run at very different depths, some of them quite independent from conscious thought processes and so far removed from thematic awareness, while others (one can think of Sartre's *bad faith*) take place at a depth just barely removed from thematic awareness by an almost deliberate refusal to look. More importantly, in many psychological accounts, the subconscious is represented as collaborating with, and in a sense being at the service of the needs of the conscious self, rather than the other way around. Thus, more concretely, while Helen John seems to be taken by surprise and practically overrun by a sudden emotional storm, Cooley – in the midst of a growing internal struggle –practically tricks himself into visiting the FBI offices.

In short, the existence of subconscious processes, like the existence of shortfalls in cognitive operations, requires careful consideration by those supporting an internalist

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<sup>630</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere (Edinburgh: R. & R. Clark, Limited, 1927). The "Id," in this description, is a sphere of the psyche characterized by drives and impulses that conflict vectorially, to which the conscious mind has no access. The function of the "Ego" is that of facilitating the realization of these (often conflicting) impulses. See also Wren, *Caring About Morality*, 54-55.

account, but neither of them constitute a proof of externalism in our present state of evidence and understanding of this issue. But the presence of the subconscious does put an additional hermeneutic demand on the reader of narratives of decision-making (and on the process of self-appropriation as well), forcing him/her to do more than a literal, straightforward reading. This, however, is a methodological difficulty akin to that of any discipline that depends to some extent on evidence of the type that Lonergan calls self-appropriation.

### **8. Summary of Chapter 10: The argument for internalism**

The foregoing sections are not a full argument for internalism and certainly do not respond fully to externalist counterarguments. One reason is that the internalism/externalism debate turns in part on epistemological questions related to the value of first-person or introspective evidence (i.e., what Lonergan calls the evidence of self-appropriation), and whether the criterion of third-person corroboration of first-person reports is fulfilled by using as evidence self-appropriation on that third-party's part.

These epistemological questions cannot be explored properly without discussion of a huge scholarly literature about them. But the foregoing sections of Chapter 10, in conjunction with previous chapters' work, indicate that the reality of moral conversion, described as it has been above, offers significant evidence in support of the internalist understanding of human decision-making. The argument to this conclusion – as developed fundamentally in the present chapter - has three steps.

The first step, using Lonergan's account of human cognitive operations, has been to

describe (a) how *the four cognitive operations are interconnected in this account*, especially through the operation of the desire to know and the drive to value, in each of them individually, and (especially) as integrating their interaction; and (b) how these cognitive operations, themselves a dynamic unity, are also immanently connected in this account to *action*, i.e., that there is no gap in the relation between deliberation, decision-making (i.e., choosing), and action.<sup>631</sup>

The second step of the argument was to show, in the relevant sections of this chapter, that *the narratives of moral conversion considered here conform to the pattern of dynamic unity* (of the four cognitive operations themselves, and of the four operations as a unity in relation to action) *thus described*. That is, the reality of moral conversion constitutes important evidence that the dynamic unity claims derived from Lonergan's account correspond to human experience.

The third step of the argument, implicit throughout the foregoing, was to show that, if the affective and cognitive components of the process of decision-making are all intimately interconnected with one another, and if they as a dynamic unity are also intimately connected with the actions they lead to (and explain and justify), then *human actions* (at least those in which these operations are at their best, for frequent shortfalls and complicating psychological factors have been acknowledged as contingencies of the human decision-making process throughout) *are the product of the person's own*

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<sup>631</sup> No attempt has been made here to deal with the complex question of *intention*, which is sometimes treated as an intermediary between choosing and acting and sometimes, as in Aristotle, described as an awareness accompanying the act of choice that what is being chosen is within one's power. A careful examination of intention is beyond the scope of this project.



*cognitive and affective operations*. This last claim is internalism (with the clarification that this particular form of internalism includes explicitly the consideration of affective operations, which is not always the case; therefore the designation of a *joined affective/cognitive internalist view*).

The fact of moral conversion offers significant evidence of the correctness of this internalist description of human decision-making, which more specifically entails: (a) that feelings and knowledge, the affective and the cognitive, have both an integral part in the formation of moral convictions, value judgments, and attitude/commitment to morality; (b) that the affective sphere acts as the driving force behind cognitive operations, and “confirm” their operation in the manifestation of related feelings; (c) that it is the cognitive activities that allow us to become aware, in a conceptual or thematized way, of values in general, moral obligations, rules, criteria for judgment and their application, and other elements of moral life; and (d) that cognitive operations yield (without being the single causal element at play) action immanently informed by the intelligibility grasped in those cognitive operations.

## **9. Concluding remarks**

The phenomenon of moral conversion – the fact that people can significantly change their moral structures, convictions, attitude at any time in their life - has tremendous existential import for those involved; and it is also viewed by many who experienced it personally or at second hand, or who read about it, to be frequently an event of great significance also to the one hearing/reading the story. It is somewhat of a

rarity in statistical terms; however, its exceptional character should not be interpreted as that of an accident or an anomaly, but rather as that of a difficult achievement, one that requires many things to go well for it to happen at all. In this character, its meaning is not restricted to its existential import for those directly involved in it. Many view the fact of moral conversion as a sign, as evidence that human life is not existentially bounded, not determined to take wholly predictable paths, not the result only of forces external to human cognition, valuing, and choice.

As such, a study of the fact of moral conversion appears to have significant contributions to make to ongoing philosophical discussions, specifically the debates about free choice and determinism, and about internalism and externalism. Some of these possible contributions have been proposed here.

Regarding the debate about free choice and determinism, after categorizing various phenomena that are commonly invoked in arguments for the reality of free choice, it was showed how these categories manifest themselves in the context of moral conversion. As an externally observable phenomenon, moral conversion defies the predictability of regular patterns of personal or social behavior, and as such presents difficulties for deterministic views of human action. But apart from what can be externally observed, moral conversion is also valuable to the debate as the source of introspective data that is of potential use as evidence of free choice.

Thus, four categories of experiences were identified as potential (though not unambiguous) evidence of free choice: decisional anxiety, volitional exertion, resolve, and the group of positive and negative feelings that indicate personal moral approval or

disapproval after the fact. Two categories of experiences – *decisional anxiety*, and the category that groups such experiences as *regret, guilt, shame, pride, honor* and *merit*, i.e., positive and negative feelings that follow choice and action - were not found to be sufficiently relevant to the debate, because of the lack of a sufficiently consistent presence of these experiences in all three categories of moral conversion. It was suggested nevertheless that they may point indirectly to elements that have bearing on the debate, i.e., the experience of being morally responsible. On the other hand, the experiences of *volitional exertion* and *resolve* were deemed to be valuable as evidence of the convert's experience as a chooser, the former being found more commonly in the specific context of conversion regarding behavioral coherence, the latter being found quite often in the context of the articulation of a behavioral program following moral conversion regarding attitude or commitment. The argumentative weight of these considerations, however, was deemed to be insufficient without examining the issue of free choice and determinism in much more detail than what is possible for the scope of this dissertation. The point, in short, has been to suggest that there is much material in a study of moral conversion that deserves attention by those engaged in the freedom/determinism debate.

The progressively more refined picture of the process of moral conversion that emerges from the discussion of these experiences strongly suggests that the popular image of moral conversion as that of a person engaging in a dramatic internal struggle, in order to overcome resistant habits of the mind or conduct *through choice alone*, is not entirely adequate. It also suggests that a more organic articulation of the role of cognitive

activities in choice and action will be more adequate to the description of what happens in moral conversion. In this sense, the discussion of the role of moral conversion as potential evidence in the free choice/determinism debate is closely connected in its observations to some of the issues that are key in the internalism/externalism debate.

The debate on internalism vs. externalism is concerned with the determining factors of discrete human moral action and the role of cognitive operations that appear to have influence on such action. Externalism, as discussed here, holds that cognitive operations have at most an instrumental or indirect or derivative role on determining a person's moral convictions, attitude/commitment and actions. Internalism was defined as the position that claims that cognitive operations have a constitutive influence in the formation of a person's moral structures and actions. It was argued that narratives of moral conversion provide important evidence of the presence of such cognitive operations in the revision and change of previous moral structures and in decisions about actions in accord with them. Employing the Lonerganian four levels of conscious operations and accepting Lonergan's notion of evidence by self-appropriation, as well as the value of others' corroborating self-appropriated evidence, narratives of moral conversion were shown to evidence (when at their best) the kind of dynamic unity of cognitive and affective operations and the kind of intimate relation of these operations to action that is consistent with internalism and inconsistent with externalism.

Demonstrating the value of studying moral conversion, however, has required carefully differentiating it from other kinds of conversion and from other kinds of moral change, especially normal moral development. The effort needed for this task is possibly

one reason why the importance of the evidence from the fact of moral conversion, for these and possibly other philosophical questions, has not been seriously explored by philosophers. Perhaps the preliminary work done here will enable other philosophers to pay more attention to this topic.

Despite the length of this work, however, it is still difficult to consider these reflections more than a first look at the potential fruits of a philosophical investigation of moral conversion. The survey of actual narratives, limited here for the sake of clarity and brevity, could certainly be expanded, and could be more easily analyzed now that the necessary categories and other conceptual tools have been developed. A more in-depth examination of the philosophical discussions considered here, crucial to philosophical anthropology and metaethics, could be carried out, incorporating the empirical/existential data yielded by these narratives. Some applications outside disciplinary philosophy may also be suggested: further examination of moral conversion could be of use for areas such as moral education, convict rehabilitation, addiction recovery, moral/spiritual counseling and possibly even psychotherapy. To this must be added the potentially existential relevance that a philosophical study can have, the way in which the methodical philosophical examination of an important human matter can illuminate daily life. An examination of moral conversion certainly provides much to ponder for anyone whose life involves a struggle for moral excellence, and particularly for anyone that struggles daily with resilient imperfections, or persistent, burdensome vices. If nothing else, a study of moral conversion shows that there is gratitude and joy to be enjoyed in moral life, and that in the murkiest depths there is reason for hope.

**APPENDIX: A COLLECTION OF NARRATIVES  
OF MORAL CONVERSION**

**Case #1: Brian Palmer** (Name changed)

**Source:** Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart : Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 3-8.

**Type of conversion:** In Bellah's words, from a utilitarian individualism to an expressive individualism

**Explicit period of reflection:** Yes

**Assessment of values:** Yes

**The Story:** A top-level manager in a large corporation, Palmer expresses to be proud of his rapid rise, but even prouder of the profound change he has made regarding his idea of success.

Brian recalls a youth that included a fair amount of hell-raising, a lot of sex, and considerable devotion to making money. At twenty-four, he married. Shouldering the adult responsibilities of marriage and children became the guiding purpose of his life for the next few years.

Whether or not Brian felt his life was satisfying, he was deeply committed to succeeding at his career and family responsibilities. He held two full-time jobs to support his family, accepting apparently without complaint the loss of a youth in which, he himself reports, 'the vast majority of my time ... was devoted to giving myself pleasure of one sort of another.' (3)

Brian put extremely long hours at work, averaging 60-65 hours a week. He did not question his commitment, which, he says, just "seemed like the thing to do at the time" (ibid.) But while he considered providing for his family important, he overlooked the importance of sharing his time with his wife and children. This, Palmer says, he compensated by saying, "I have this nice car, this nice house, joined the Country Club. Now you have a place you can go, sit on your butt, drink, go into the pool. I'll pay the bills and I'll do my thing at work." (4)

Brian's wife did not share his outlook. She soon divorced him. Palmer found out later that she had been having an affair.

The divorce, 'one of the two or three biggest surprises of my life,' led Brian to reassess his life in fundamental ways and to explore the limits of the kind of success he had been pursuing. 'I live by establishing plans. I had no plan for being single, and it gave me a lot of opportunity to think, and in the course of thinking, I read for the first time in many, many years. Got back into classical music for the first time since my college years. I went out and bought my first Bach album and a stereo to play it on. Mostly the thinking process of being alone and relating to my children.' (4)

The children chose to stay with Brian, which also forced him to examine his sense of himself, and to shift his priorities in life. Being a single parent, Palmer reports, was a humbling experience itself.

'Being an compulsive problem solver, I analyzed the failure. I don't like failure. I'm very competitive. I like to win. *So I went back and reexamined where the thing broke down and found that I had contributed at least 50 percent and, depending on the vantage point, maybe 99 percent of the ultimate demise of the institution. Mostly it was asking myself the question of why am I behaving in such and such a way. Why am I doing this at work? Why was I doing this at home? The answer was that I was operating as if a certain value was of the utmost importance to me. Perhaps it was success. Perhaps it was fear of failure, but I was extremely success-oriented, to the point where everything would be sacrificed for the job, the career, the company. I said bullshit. That ain't the way it should be.*' (5, emphasis mine.)

Brian eventually married a divorcee his age, with four children of hers. In this marriage, he reports, he discovered a new sense of himself and a different understanding of what he wanted out of life:

He has a new sense of what love can be. 'To be able to receive affection freely and give affection and to give of myself and know it is a totally reciprocal type of thing. There's just almost a psychologically buoyant feeling of being able to be so much more involved and sharing. Sharing experiences of goals, sharing of feelings, working together to solve problems, etc. My viewpoint of a true love, husband-and-wife type of relationship is one that is founded on mutual respect, admiration affection, the ability to give and receive freely.' (Ibid.)

The authors assess Palmer's story in these terms:

The revolution in Brian's thinking came from a reexamination of the true sources of joy and satisfaction in his life. . . His description of his reasons for changing his life and of his current happiness seems to come down mainly *to a shift in his notions of what would make him happy.* (Ibid., emphasis mine.)



The authors' assessment contains a certain amount of criticism; their focus is on uncovering how individualism has permeated moral language, and consequently how difficult it is to get away from individualistic formulations:

His new goal - devotion to marriage and children - seems as arbitrary and unexamined as his earlier pursuit of material success. Both are justified as idiosyncratic preference rather than as representing a larger sense of the purpose of life. Brian sees himself as consistently pursuing a utilitarian calculus - devotion to his own self-interest - except that there has been an almost inexplicable change in his personal preferences. (6)

But even when described under this critical light, Palmer's story is still revealing of the moral conversion he has undergone.

In describing the reasons for this change, he begins, 'Well, I think I just reestablished my priorities.' He sometimes seems to reject his past life as wrong; but at other times, he seems to say he simply got bored with it. 'That exclusive pursuit of success now seems to me not a good way to live. That's not the most important thing to me. I have demonstrated to myself, to my own satisfaction, that I can achieve about what I want to achieve. So the challenge of a goal realization does not contain that mystique that it held for me at one time. I just have found that I get a lot of personal reward from being involved in the lives of my children.' (Ibid.)

**Case #2: Bauer, Wayne** (Rent-control activist)

**Type of conversion:** A clear break with his family's working/middle-class traditions and with the "status quo." This break forced him to live many years underground. He went from an unreflective acceptance of traditional/patriotic values to a period of confusion/emptiness, eventually putting his views back together into a community commitment through radical politics.

**Source:** Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart*, 17-20

**Explicit period of reflection:** Yes

**Assessment of values:** Yes

**The Story:** Now a community organizer who works in California for the Campaign for Economic Democracy, Wayne, raised in working or middle class (the text is not clear on that detail) joined the Marine Corps in the 60's.

‘I had come from a background of John Wayne, you know, American patriotism...’ After boot camp he was stationed at Camp Lejeune and would come up to New York City on leave. ‘1965 was when NYU marched and burned the draft cards and all of a sudden there was a political awareness and these people were letting their hair grow a little longer and putting earrings in their ear. And this was a real shock to me. I mean, I didn't understand this. I was in the Marine Corps.’ (17)

During this time, some friends of his who had gone to college in New York began to argue with him about the Vietnam War. ‘And after this went on, to make a long story short, for about three or four months, I realized that my best argument held no weight. And what happened was, all of a sudden, my view of who I was and my environment was shattered. It was like looking in the mirror and having the whole thing shattered on you and seeing all your values, all your beliefs, everything you thought was real just kind of crumble. And it left me without any values and it also left me in a position where I had this terrible feeling of loneliness that there was no one I could go to for help. All the people I had trusted, I feel, essentially, they had lied to me.’ (17-18)

Upon receiving orders to go to Vietnam, Wayne went AWOL, assumed an alias, spent eight years leading an underground life travelling around the country, eventually surrendered to the military in 1972, spent four months in a military stockade, but was spared a court-martial and, finally, released by the Marine Corps with a general discharge. He returned to his parents, found them totally uncomprehending of his understanding of life, and moved from New Jersey to Venice, California. (18)

Wayne's break with the conventions of family and community . . . did not end with a retreat into a preoccupation with profession and private life. ... It was through radical politics that Wayne glued the shattered mirror of his life back together again. After he made his break with his past, ‘morality became a question to me. It's sort of like I wanted to put everything back together again with more durable material, one that would stand the strain.’ Political activism became that durable material. (Ibid.)

The way in which this happened was a bit by accident: Bauer got involved in a dispute of Hispanic tenants with their landlord, and eventually got involved in the Campaign for Economic Democracy. Eventually he got elected, in 1983, to the Santa Monica Rent Control Board. He also gradually reentered the Roman Catholic Church, “drawn by the example of a priest who attempted to apply the insights of the Latin American ‘theology of liberation’ to conditions in the United States.” (20)

**Case #3: Allen, Marie** (Cancer patient, name changed)

**Source:** Byock, Ira. *Dying Well: Peace and Possibilities at the End of Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997) 35-57.

**Type of Conversion:** healing relationships; changes her evaluation of the worth of accumulating material things.

**Explicit Reflection:** not apparent.

**Value Discussion:** some, but mostly implicit.

**Story:** Marie is described in Byock's book as a middle-aged woman who has taken the many bad hands she was given in life with an acid sense of humor. She divorced her husband after finding out that her sister, Kathy, had had an affair with him; and remarried her ex-husband after fifteen years. Not briefly after remarrying him, he died. Shortly after, she found that she had colon cancer in its terminal stages.

Instead of being an occasion for despair, this was used as an opportunity to heal her relationship with her sister Kathy, who had been trying for some time to reconcile with her. Her sister and her sister's husband Roger received her in her house and cared for her lovingly during the last year of Marie's life. The wounds from their past were left behind remarkably quickly and with a great deal of pragmatism: once Kathy offered to take care of Marie, and the matter of whether she would be a nuisance (worried mostly about 'smelling') was arranged, the matter over Marie's late husband was soon water under the bridge. Soon after moving with Kathy, Marie found out from her sister that her late husband had been two-timing both sisters, but paradoxically this discovery sealed their reconciliation in a bout of cathartic laughter.

Marie's estranged daughter Cindy at this point also began to get closer, though she had to overcome some denial with regard to Marie's condition. Cindy was about to get married, and

Marie found the strength, with the help of the Hospice staff, to endure until the wedding took place. Marie died shortly after a year of being diagnosed, without pain, and under the care of her family.

Marie, it should be noted, had a tendency to buy and accumulate things, such as a very big collection of shoes. Once she learned of her disease and decided to move to Kathy's, she gave away most of her possessions without much of a second thought. This indicates a re-evaluation of the value of material things in her life. Other than this, her story does not suggest a significant change in her values, but the capacity to quickly let go of life-long resentments.

**Case #4: Gray, Dorian** (fictional character)

**Source:** Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Three Sirens Press, 1931).

**Type of conversion:** Wilde's novel presents in first place an interesting, well-known illustration of a "counter-conversion" (or alternatively, of moral decadence) from an unreflective kindness, to a philosophically-based individualistic (extremely selfish; perhaps 'amoral') aestheticism. In second place, it illustrates a failed attempt at conversion.

**Explicit reflection leading to conversion:** There is explicit reflection in Gray's beginning to move towards counter-conversion/decadence, originated by a book lent to Gray by an accomplished aestheticist. As to the failed attempt to convert, it is not specified what reasons led him to attempt a redeeming act, except being tired of his situation and perhaps fear that something bad might befall him.

**Value Discussion:** Yes in the first movement, not in the second.

**The story:** Dorian Gray begins the story as a youth of such innocence that it captures the imagination of an artist friend, to such a degree that the painting he produces captures Dorian's innocent soul – so that everything that Dorian does will in the future be reflected in the painting

rather than in his own visage. The movement towards counter-conversion/decadence begins when Lord Henry, a friend of the painter, gives the kind-hearted youth a book depicting his aestheticist, selfish philosophy, with the express intention of corrupting the youth. It is interesting to note Wilde's emphasis on the power of *words* to provoke this change:

The few words that Basil's friend had said to him – words spoken by chance, no doubt, and with willful paradox in them- had touched some secret chord that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses. . . Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute. Mere words! Was there anything so real as words? (28)

This encounter initiates Gray's road to moral decadence. A long time afterwards, having performed many dreadful things – mostly unspecified but for murder and numerous seductions. Near the end of his life – and still looking youthful and innocent - Gray attempts allegedly to reform himself by trying to do one good deed, sparing the virginity of a country girl that had fallen for him; but his motives turn up to be less innocent than he thought. While he thinks he is on the road to redemption, his real motive seem to be the thrill of a new or forgotten experience; and indeed, the whole setup for his “good deed” has been fabricated: he had seduced the girl first in order to spare her.

*A new life! That was what he wanted.* That was what he was waiting for. Surely he had begun it already. He had spared one innocent thing, at any rate. He would never again tempt innocence. He would be good.”

“As he thought of Hetty Merton, he began to wonder if the portrait in the locked room had changed. Surely it was not still so horrible as it had been? Perhaps if his life became pure, he would be able to expel every sign of evil passion from the face. Perhaps the signs of evil had already gone away. He would go and look. . .

He went in quietly. . . and dragged the purple hanging from the portrait. A cry of pain and indignation broke from him. He could see no change, save that in the eyes there was a look of cunning, and in the mouth the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite. The thing was still loathsome – more loathsome, if possible, than before . . . Had it been merely vanity that had made him do his one good deed? Or the desire for a new sensation, as Lord Henry had hinted, with his mocking laugh? Or that passion to act a part that sometimes makes us do things finer than we are ourselves? Or, perhaps, all these? (244, emphasis mine.)

Thus end Dorian Gray's short-lived attempts at moral conversion.

**Case #5: Sandra** (conversion to a morally-based vegetarianism)

**Source:** Haste, Helen. "Moral Responsibility and Moral Commitment: The Integration of Affect and Cognition." In *The Moral Domain: Essays in the Ongoing Discussion between Philosophy and the Social Sciences*, ed. Thomas Wren, 315-359 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990); 335-336.

**Type of conversion:** To vegetarianism, based on a moral concern but triggered by an 'aesthetic'/emotional reaction to the way meat was cooked in France.

**Explicit period of reflection:** Yes; after being affected by that aesthetic/emotional reaction there is a period in which Sandra tries to make sense of it in moral terms.

**Assessment of values:** Yes

**The Story:** Haste reports the following interview to a youth identified in the text as "Sandra":

Sandra: "I'm a vegetarian. It started when I went to France. I lived in a butcher's for two weeks. It was then that I realized how you kill things and cook things and that it was a matter of conscience whether I should eat meat or not. I don't eat any at all now. That's the biggest conscience thing I've ever done."

I: "What was the situation that made you change your mind?"

S: "The fact that they cooked meat on the outside and it's burnt and you cut it open and it just sort of bleeds. That put me off for a start and that wasn't really anything to do with conscience, it was the actual idea of it." (Haste, 335)

She began to make sense of her experience, to think. She reflected cognitively upon her affect; she looked for a schema to legitimate her revulsion. She began to see meat-eating as a moral issue and an issue on which she could exercise some personal responsibility.

Sandra: "When I came back to England I still couldn't eat meat because I just couldn't think of actually eating an animal, especially in the way in which they are killed. If you're in a survival position then it's slightly different. But like farming is an industry where it just goes through and they're just killing all those animals, then I think that's wrong."

I: "Why do you think it's wrong?"

Sandra: "Because the animals themselves haven't really had a life. We're just breeding them to kill them. I just can't face eating something like that which has been killed in that way and hasn't had its own life." (Haste, 336)

The author notes that in the interview Sandra invokes a variety of reasons or arguments for her decision, including considerations on the right of human beings to kill animals, the animals' quality of life as a relevant value, and "the additional excepting scenario of the survival situation." (Ibid.)

**Case #6: Helen John** (anti-nuclear proliferation activist)

**Source:** Helen Haste, "Moral Responsibility and Moral Commitment: The Integration of Affect and Cognition." p. 337-341.

**Type of conversion:** First, from indifference to participation in political demonstrations (against nuclear missiles); this change seems to have been triggered by her imagining her land devastated by nuclear war. Second, from part-time participation/commitment, to full commitment, which included living on site, in effect abandoning her regular responsibilities to her husband and five children.

**Explicit period of reflection:** Yes

**Assessment of values:** Yes

**The Story:**

In her interview with Helen Haste, Helen John relates as a key moment her sudden realization of the pressing reality of the nuclear threat:

I was one of those people who knew about nuclear weapons for years, and put it into the backs of their minds. . . because we were assured that we had enough nuclear weapons to stop any country attacking us. The deterrence theory lulled me into a false sense of security for years. And it was on that particular day driving into Builth that I realized that this was nonsense. . . (Haste, 338)

I was driving on my way through beautiful scenery in Wales where I live and it suddenly occurred to me how this would all be altered in a nuclear war. And it just stopped me dead in my tracks. I couldn't keep on driving, I had to stop and I felt really physically very unwell. And I was crying. I sat for about three-quarters of an hour before I could continue the journey. I was scared sick, really scared. And then I felt terribly angry that any lunatic could put so much fear and pressure on people. (Ibid.)

While her values in terms of the legitimacy of nuclear warfare remain the same, there is a change in her assessment regarding the actuality of the nuclear threat, and also a change in her perception of her own *efficacy*:

Prior to that I had never seen the value of marching anywhere. It didn't seem to achieve anything. But I was sufficiently worried on this particular issue to go on the march, and make my own personal statement. And it was during the course of this march that I changed. (Ibid.: 339)

When things do not change, but the nuclear tension instead escalates, the decision is made to stay at Greenham (the place of the demonstration) indefinitely. Then there is a change in her valuation

of her duties to the wider community (and future generations) as compared to her duties to her family. There also seems to be a change in her perception of her own “independence,” that changes “her own definition of herself.” (Ibid.)

“The moment it was suggested [to stay on] I knew that I wanted to take that initiative. . . And it was also really the very first totally independent decision I had made for myself in twenty years. Because I wasn't going to consult my husband or any other person. It had to be my own decision.”

“I remember Douglas [her husband] saying to me very clearly, there must be other women who haven't got five children who can do what you're doing. But it's not true; there's only one me. Nobody can do exactly what I'm doing in the way I'm doing it.” (Ibid.)

Note: This change is described in Haste's text as a shift from “private” to “public responsibility,” even with regard to her duty as a mother. This seems to be an alternative way of dealing with a theme that Bellah, in *Habits of the Heart*, also struggles with, except that the latter deals with it using the categories of “individualism” and “social responsibility.” Note also that in Haste's discussion of these cases there is the implicit assumption that “public” engagement indicates a higher level of moral commitment. (See also cases #7 and #8).

**Case #7: Lenny** (From Republican to left-wing political convictions. Note the similarities with case #2: Wayne Bauer)

**Source:** Helen Haste, “Moral Responsibility and Moral Commitment: The Integration of Affect and Cognition”; 341-344.

**Type of conversion:** By his own description, from “indoctrinated Republican,” to moderately liberal (“the Javits, Rockefeller type”), to “radical.”

**Explicit period of reflection:** Yes

**Assessment of values:** Yes

**The Story:** Lenny grew up spending his summers “going to military conventions,” in his own words a “gung ho Goldwaterite.” (Haste, 342.) He went to college in the mid-60's, and began changing to a moderately liberal position. What made him change his views, he claims, is

the fact that once I started taking some college courses in economics and you can actually see that some of his policies were just completely ridiculous, and as soon as you get away from this one set opinion that dominated our area, as soon as you get professors in the college, they give you another side. . . (Ibid.)



By the time he became a college senior he was describing himself as a “contemporary liberal American.” (The text assumes that the reader knows what is involved in this value shift; but it would be interesting if this were made more explicit.) But then he went to London, at a very turbulent time: the London School of Economics was closed for 25 days, and Lenny took part in the sit-in. (The text describes this as a “triggering event,” for Lenny’s value shift, although this does not come out clearly in Lenny’s quoted words.) Lenny became “radicalized,” in diametrical opposition to his earlier identity as conservative:

I started to do some work under Professor X in political sociology and all of a sudden I saw things not in terms of being harmonious, but I saw a lot of conflict going on in society and I started to think about it in that perspective. . . (Ibid.)

Back in America, he decided to take some time and do some teaching; he was assigned to the inner city schools, and becoming further radicalized. (Ibid. 343.)

Note: An interesting detail about this case is that it belongs to Kohlberg's longitudinal study – a kind of study that involves gathering information on a subject’s moral thinking over successive interviews during an extended period of time. As such it is also analyzed in terms of Lenny's “moral stages.” His modified views thus are mapped in terms such as “cognitive reconstruction,” the “need for new schemata” (not Kohlberg's, but Haste’s terminology), and levels of moral reasoning. At age 20, when describing himself as “moderately liberal,” he is said to have reached Stage 4(3) moral reasoning, beginning to recognize alternative perspectives. At age 24 he is categorized as level 4(5) moral reasoning, having experienced major life crises involving both affective and cognitive reconstruction (Ibid.: 342.) Further analysis might reveal whether this can be considered a borderline case between normal moral development and moral conversion, as considered in Chapter 8.

**Case #8: Mohandas K. Gandhi** (a life-commitment to fight against racism through peaceful means)

**Source:** Gandhi, M. K. *An Autobiography; or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*; translated by Mahadev Desai (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House, 1927), 106-109. Also retold and analyzed in Helen Haste, (1990), p. 345-346. See also Howard, Robert, *Mohandas K.*

*Gandhi: A biography of moral development*; doctoral dissertation (Harvard, 1986).

**Type of conversion:** event-triggered, from a self-centered (though of high-standards, ascetic) “private” morality to a commitment to a social cause against racism. His moral valuation of racism probably was not affected, but he began to see a *personal responsibility* in this matter. His conversion involved the realization that he might be the only person available who could handle this problem.

**Explicit period of reflection:** yes.

**Assessment of values:** yes (though his values in this specific instance are not changed; it is his perception of the need to do something about the issue, after suffering racism himself.)

**The Story:** it is a well-known incident: Gandhi was traveling through Natal (Africa) as a representative of his Indian law firm. He was traveling first-class on a train, when the conductor told him (because of skin color, and maybe because he wore a turban) that he had to travel on third-class. Gandhi refused, and was forced off the train at the next station, in a humiliating manner. He sat in the waiting room, dark and cold, and considered whether to continue on the trip ignoring the insults, or – what would be his choice – whether to dedicate himself to rooting out the disease of racism, suffering hardships in the process.

The hardship he was subjected to in this instance was superficial (and it was not the first time he had experience some sort of discrimination), but the humiliation and shock were enough to make him think about the matter in different terms. Helen Haste remarks that the event itself was not

enough to explain Gandhi's decision as a whole (other people suffered similar humiliation without becoming activists), but that, on the other hand, without this triggering event, Gandhi may never had thought about racism in these terms. (There would be other changes and transitions in his moral and political career, apart from this, so this should not be read as the “only” moral conversion Gandhi went through.)

**Case #9: Judianne Densen-Gerber** (psychiatrist)

**Source:** Helen Haste, (1990) p. 353-354.

**Type of conversion:** Not really a story of conversion – there is no significant changes reported in the contents of her convictions, her attitude or her patterns of behavior; but the story is of interest because it exemplifies how this woman, because of her commitment (as reported) to her *sense of integrity*, she is ready to take action and get involved in many causes that “come her way” - ready to assume "public responsibility" in Haste's analysis.

**Explicit period of reflection:** yes

**Assessment of values:** yes

**The Story:** a psychiatrist who had become involved in fighting child prostitution and child abuse, Judianne decided to found what would be called Odyssey House to help her drug-addicted patients, who had been turned out by New York's Metropolitan Hospital. Judianne justifies her readiness to commit and take action in this way:

Denial didn't seem a possible defense mechanism because I had been profoundly influenced by a scholarship I won in 1952 to study restoration and reconstruction after World War II. In Europe, I talked to the Germans about the Holocaust, the camps and the atrocities. One after another, they defended themselves by repeating, “We didn't know.” I suppose in my work the thing that happened is that I kept hearing of these denials. Once you knew a certain problem, you had the choice of not facing the reality and walking away, or squarely facing an issue no matter how difficult or unpleasant. (353)

Thus, when her drug-addicted patients turned up at her door, she started Odyssey House.

I have never looked for an issue. It literally hit me on the head. I never sought a cause. They've always knocked on my door. I started Odyssey House in 1966 because a group of my drug-addicted patients wanted to be drug-free. Previously I'd promised them that if they kept the faith I wouldn't abandon them. So when New York's Metropolitan Hospital turned them out, they appeared in my doorstep. I did not have an ethical choice. . . I had given my word, and therefore my own sense of integrity was involved. (354)

Judianne's story provides also an example of a "triggering event" situation: Judianne became actively involved in movements against child prostitution and abuse when her husband, a medical examiner, brought home the T-shirt of a twelve-year old child who had died of heroin overdose. (353)

**Case #10:** Dr. J, "the mass murderer of Steinhof"

**Source:** Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985) 154-155.

**Type of conversion:** very little information is provided, unfortunately. This man went from being in charge of the Nazi euthanasia program - fanatically devoted to it - to, once in prison, becoming in terms of a fellow prisoner "the best comrade you can imagine," giving consolation to everybody.

The story is narrated by Viktor Frankl as an example supporting his "Critique of Pan-Determinism." His conclusion: "How can we dare to predict the behavior of man? (...) We may even try to predict the mechanisms or "dynamisms" of the human *psyche* as well. Man is more than *psyche*."

**Explicit period of reflection:** unknown

**Assessment of values:** unknown

**The Story:** As told by Frankl:

Let me cite the case of Dr. J. He was the only man I ever encountered in my whole life whom I would dare to call a Mephistophelean being, a satanic figure. [Coming from a man who spent many years in a Nazi concentration camp, this characterization should not to be

taken lightly.] At that time he was generally called “the mass murdered or Steinhof” (the large mental hospital in Vienna). When the Nazis started their euthanasia program, he held all the strings in his hands and was so fanatic in the job assigned to him that he tried not to let one single psychotic individual escape the gas chamber. After the war, when I came back to Vienna, I asked what happened to Dr. J. “He had been imprisoned by the Russians in one of the isolation cells of Steinhof,” they told me. “The next day, however, the door of his cell stood open and Dr. J. was never seen again.” . . . (154-155)

More recently, however, I was consulted by a former Austrian diplomat who had been imprisoned behind the Iron Curtain for many years, first in Siberia and then in the famous Lubianka prison in Moscow. While I was examining him neurologically, he suddenly asked me whether I happened to know Dr. J. After my affirmative reply he continued: “I made his acquaintance in Lubianka. There he died, at about the age of forty, from cancer of the urinary bladder. Before he died, however, he showed himself to be the best comrade you can imagine! He gave consolation to everybody. He lived up to the highest conceivable moral standard. He was the best friend I ever met during my long years in prison!” (Ibid.)

#### **Case #11: Patrick K.**

**Source:** Conference held at the *Corporate Values Breakfasts Series*, Loyola University Chicago (2005)

**Type of conversion:** From involvement in corruption to warning publicly about the dangers of such involvement.

**Explicit period of reflection:** yes

**Assessment of values:** yes

**The Story:** Patrick K. was a fast-track operator that got gradually involved in a scheme to help corrupt elements of the government of his state earn easy money, earning a corresponding “cut.”

As he reports it, he was never comfortable with his activities; rationalization – convincing himself that this was a common thing to do, even beneficial for the general good - was a very important factor in his gradual involvement. He spent lots of time and effort, for example, devising ways to convince his wife and parents (who had misgivings and suspicions about the ethical aspects of his activities) that what he was doing was in fact ethical. His wife and parents were never actually convinced, it appears, and most interestingly, despite his efforts to convince himself, his own

body reacted in tremendous stress, with ulcers and hair loss. In his own words, “the body *knows* when you are doing something wrong.”

Eventually the scheme was discovered, getting national publicity. The rest of the people involved ended up in jail, but Patrick managed to escape with his family. He became an international fugitive, not able to stay for too long in one place. But eventually he decided that such a way of living was intolerable, and decided to turn himself in to the authorities. He reports significantly that even in the dreary conditions in which he was held before being transferred to the U.S., what he felt at the moment was the most overwhelming relief.

After doing time in prison, he got out with the requirement to do community service. He decided to give talks on his experience, explaining in them the steps by which people like him deceive themselves and end up doing illegal things - arrogance, love of risk-taking, rationalization, etc. He is now dedicated full-time to giving such talks around the country. Curiously (ironically, perhaps), he received as a result a number of honorary titles from various educational institutions. His story illustrates the weight of conscience, though in his case it may have been a conscience focused on the fear being apprehended, rather than on doing unethical things. It also illustrates the common conviction that a clean conscience provides interior peace. As an instance of moral conversion, it needs perhaps to be taken with a certain degree of skepticism, given, first, that a great part of K.'s predicament seems to have been focused on not listening to his conscience and fears, ignoring his own subconscious responses to his bad decisions, and half-convincing himself that nothing was wrong (which indicates that perhaps there was not a significant change in *content*); and second, that the conditions for his change in behavior, i.e. a *requirement* to do community service, there is room to argue about the change regarding commitment about right/wrong.

**Case #12: Subject 'E' [from Leuba's collection of cases]**

**Source:** Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," *The American Journal of Psychology* 7 no.3 (1896), 373-6.

**Type of conversion:** from alcoholism, sudden; the conversion is mainly religiously-grounded; but I copy it because of the "motives for repentance," which are of natural reason.

**Explicit period of reflection:** none is reported - at least not directly leading to the moment of conversion, which took him by surprise.

**Assessment of values:** yes.

**The Story:** 'E' tells his story at age 42, having converted at 33. Though the subject's father was an Anglican clergyman, he started smoking and drinking early; and after graduating from Oxford, the money he made in journalism he would spend it in "continuous carousal." The subject reports being "handsome, of tremendously powerful physique, and was a general favorite with the girls." He would be drunk at times for a week, and then a terrible repentance would come, and would not touch a drop for a month. But he would always eventually go back to drinking and carousal.

His motivations for repentance were not religious:

In all this period, that is, up to thirty-three years of age, *I never had a desire to reform on religious grounds*, but all my pangs were due to some terrible remorse I used to feel after a heavy carousal, *the remorse taking the shape of regret after my folly in wasting my life in such a way* - a man of superior talents and education. I was not much alarmed about the future world; I did not believe it to exist, at any rate. This terrible remorse turned me gray in one night, and whenever it came upon me I was perceptibly grayer the next morning. (374, emphasis mine.)

He would always, however, recover from these episodes.

His conversion came one day in which a friend asked him for an opinion regarding a book, Professor Drummond's *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*. He met with the biblical phrase "He that has the Son has life eternal," and could not proceed further, all the while feeling there was another being in his bedroom.

It was unquestionably shown me, in one second of time, that I had never touched the Eternal, that is, God, and that if I died then, I must inevitably be lost. I was undone. I knew it as well as I now know I am saved. . . What could I do? I did not repent even; God never asked me to repent. All I felt was, 'I am undone,' and God cannot help it, although He loves me. No fault on the part of the Almighty. (374-375)

After this experience, he told all his family about it, but only his older sister seemed to understand it. He came home drunk once more (he had not promised to abstain from drink) but having met his sister on his way back, he prayed for the first time in twenty years, and had an experience of self-surrender, after which, he claims, "from that hour drink has had no terrors for me; I never touch it, never want it. (375)

### **#13 - Subject 'L' [from Leuba's collection of cases]**

**Source:** Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," 381.

This is another case reported by Leuba - an alcoholic, converted at 44, who became himself, at the age of 54, superintendent of a Rescue Mission. Like in Case #12, above, this case illustrates a conversion in which the person differentiates between religious elements and elements of natural reason. Thus, "I did not realize that I was a sinner, only that I was a drunkard." (381); "I had no desire for anything good, only at times there would come a longing in my heart for something better." (Ibid.)

### **#14 - Subject 'T' [from Leuba's collection of cases]**

**Source:** Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena," 378-380.

This is another case of conversion from alcoholism reported by Leuba. This also illustrates the a case in which, although religious elements are present, the person distinguishes between elements of natural reason and religious elements. Thus, the convert reports:

I wanted to escape from the evil effects of my sins in my physical life, but I do not specially recollect any desire to seek deliverance from all my sinful nature.. Conversion had no special meaning to me. I entered the home hoping that I would escape from drink, recover good health and get back to my family. (379)



**Case #15: Subject 'G' [from Leuba's collection of cases] [Alcohol addict turned Mission director]**

**Source:** Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena", 376-7.

**Type of conversion:** from alcoholism, with religious background. It is significant in this case the presence of a "trigger event," a lady showing him sympathy.

**Explicit period of reflection:** no

**Assessment of values:** no

**The Story:** Narrated at age forty, converted twenty months before, now working as Superintendent of a "mission" (for recovering alcoholics). The story is told to Leuba by the subject himself.

The convert reports having lived until the age of twenty-one in a Christian home, and having taken his first glass of whisky at that age. He gradually became an alcoholic after that. His addiction caused him to lose his business establishment and two jobs. He reports having "signed enough abstinence pledges to cover the wall of a room." (376)

Disgusted and tired of life, he left Canada to go to W. Here he arrived intoxicated. He secured a position, but was soon dismissed for drunkenness, and then found himself once more without money, without friend and without home. Gladly would he have welcomed death. As he was in this wretched situation, a lady showed him sympathy and invited him to a mission. Her kindness made him look within. For years no one had ever cared about him; this unwonted kindly interest went to his heart.

He went to the meeting, and there was invited to "give himself to the Lord Jesus Christ with the assurance that He would save him." He received a bed, tried to read, but was too disturbed; he finally experienced peace after asking God to take him as he was.

The anguish of the night had passed, and he found himself calm and peaceful. That very morning he told a companion that he was converted, that he had given his heart to God. Terrible were the temptations that day as he passed before the saloon doors; but he was kept. They recurred day after day for more than a week. The lady's continued sympathy was a great comfort to him. . .

Three months after his conversion he opened a mission, which progressed rapidly, and is now doing very good work among drunkards and other outcasts. (377)

**Case #16 – Leuba’s Subject ‘H’ [From Leuba’s collection of cases]**

**Source:** Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena", 377.

This story has similarities with Case #15, in the sense that it also illustrates a “triggering event,” a conversion process triggered by the kindness of, in this case, a young man. Leuba reports:

. . .while he was seated in Central Park, N.Y., a young man entered into conversation with him, and invited him to go in his company to a religious meeting. The kindness of the stranger moved him deeply; he did not understand why a well-dressed stranger should care for him and be willing to walk with a raggedly clad fellow like himself. (377)

**Case #17 – John B. Gough, “the famous temperance orator” [From Leuba’s collection of cases]**

**Source:** Leuba, "A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena", 343-344.

Another story of a conversion prompted by an unexpected act of kindness. Says Leuba,

It is practically the conversion of an atheist: neither God nor Jesus Christ is mentioned. The sense of his degradation and worthlessness does not involve in his mind responsibility for his sin to other; he is absorbed in his own self. He battles against himself, poor slave and outlaw, to conquer, if possible, the place he has lost in society. When the stranger spoke to him on a public street in Worcester, kindness, sympathy, the proof that all bonds between him and mankind were not cut of, and that men still had confidence in his manhood, lighted up the redeeming flame of Faith. (343)

Leuba quotes from Gough's *Autobiography*:

It was the first touch of kindness which I had known for months; as simple and trifling as the circumstances may appear to many, it went right to my heart, and like the wing of the angel, troubled the waters in that stagnant pool of affection. (343-4)

**Case #18: Subject 'M' [from Leuba's collection of cases]**

**Source:** Leuba, “A Study in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena,” 381-3.

**Type of conversion:** from alcoholism, with very marked religious elements; the interesting aspect of this case is that the moral and spiritual battle, though clearly carried in a religious context, seem to arise without his seeking specifically a religious activity or response.

**Explicit period of reflection:** no

**Assessment of values:** no

**The Story:** The only child of well-off, non-religious parents, the subject received a good education but was, he reports, too pampered. At age fifteen “a religious wave swept over the land. I rose for prayer at a meeting and soon began to lead a different life, but did not continue over one year.” (381) At eighteen he left his home and began drinking hard. He got married, but continued nevertheless with his bad habits:

I sought for peace and satisfaction in almost every kind of worldly pleasure, but could not find it. . . Soon after my marriage I became an infidel, many of my relatives are such. As I saw myself drifting down, and friends who at one time would have gladly recognized and courted my company shunned me, I sometimes was almost at the point of asking God to forgive me and make me a better man. . . I signed pledges, made promises, and broke them as fast as I made them, until my health was impaired, my intellect affected. I became a wreck, separated from wife and children. Poverty stared me in the face almost always. (381-382)

Eventually the subject was even joined by his wife and children in drinking! But one, the subject reports, he “behaved badly” to his wife and children (it is not further specified), and suggested her to take the children and go to visit someone. He spent a few days alone at home, without drinking. Three days later he was feeling very lonely; “the house was quiet. I had not been in bed twenty minutes before I became perfectly conscious of God on my right hand. . .” and began experiencing for a while a sort of spiritual battle between God, asking him to kneel and pray, and the devil, suggesting that “if you want to do right, go ahead, that is all right, but do it in a manly way; give up drinking and swearing, but don't ask God to help and save you; you are so bad, He

will not help you.” (382) The following day, while praying, the subject reports having had a vision, hearing words “that at that time I did not know were in the Bible.” (383) After this episode, the subject left his old life, never going back to his old ways and habits; eventually his wife converted too, about ten months afterwards, “and our home changed from hell to heaven.” (Ibid.)

**Case #19: Robert Cooley** [attorney for the mob]

**Source:** Robert Cooley with Hillel Levin, *When Corruption was King: How I helped the Mob Rule Chicago, then Brought the whole Outfit down* (New York: Carrol & Graf Publishers, 2004).

**Type of conversion:** from involvement in corruption to putting his life continually on the line - eventually sacrificing his way of life for the purpose of ending corruption.

**Explicit period of reflection:** implicit; the critical decision seems to have been taken by letting his subconscious take the reigns.

**Assessment of values:** yes.

**The Story:** Cooley was a very successful criminal attorney in the 70's and 80's in Chicago. His success was in part due to his ability to make friendships, and to the wide range of his social contacts, some from his background as ex-policeman, some from night life and gambling circles (a preeminent part of his life, moving at times enormous sums). His particular lifestyle, together with the fact that he was quite able to handle himself, made him look like a trustworthy character for some of the mob bosses, at a time in which they ran everything from Chicago to the west coast.

What was deceiving about his character - a strange combination of 'dolce vita', bully and principled man - was that Cooley was at heart a man of principles, even if his moral habits were borderline with criminal activity. His principles crystallized in the image of his father, an honest policeman that had suffered from his unwillingness to compromise with the corrupt environment.

While Cooley's activity was overtly corrupt (particularly with regard to a number of cases that he "fixed," bribing judges and others), under the surface Cooley was very unhappy with what he was doing, trying at every turn to minimize the damage. Eventually the pressure became too much, and he turned on his masters. He went to the FBI and for a few years worked with them, gathering evidence, taping his previous "friends," and devising cases and opportunities to later incriminate them.

While some people at the FBI and state attorneys kept making his work difficult and even more risky (in Cooley's own view, though the co-author dispels some of that impression in the notes), Cooley kept pushing forward and devising ways to incriminate his previous associates. He then took part in the trials and brought many important mob bosses down. Apart from the specific people that were convicted, the whole affair brought attention to many holes in the judicial system that enabled corruption to endure – this then underwent profound reforms. Cooley was during the process criticized and slandered (the state lawyer's association, for example, conducted a hearing and disbarred him, even though he was not planning on practicing again; most media did not report accurately the impact of his investigation, and in many cases made up stories regarding his motivations for becoming an informant); and he had to live a low-profile life afterwards, hiding and changing his identity at least three times.

**Assessment:** In Cooley's case it is possible to trace some deeply-set values regarding life and honesty, despite his unorthodox, "borderline" values regarding night-life and gambling activities. His falling into unethical patterns of behavior was gradual, and to some point common in lawyers living in those times. But it is interesting to see that his deeper values regarding honesty and life survived - more so, they remain active, as he put his life on the line a few times while he was working for the mob to save a client or a friend, or to support an honest judge. Thus, this cannot be considered a conversion in which Cooley "changed" his values, but rather one in which deep-

set values that were obstaculized, or pushed down by fear, rationalization and convenience, eventually pushed to the surface,

This case is also a good illustration of the “subconscious pressure” factor: when Cooley decided to turn against his bosses, he was still masking his decision from himself, and it was practically his legs that took the initiative:

Getting a corned beef sandwich was my only purpose in life. When I turned the corner onto Dearborn Avenue, I happened to pass the Federal Building. It seemed to draw me like a magnet. Suddenly I thought, “Maybe I should see who's up in the Strike Force office.”  
(181)

**Case #20 and #21: Antonio Pickett (‘Lil’ Tony) and Evans Robinson (‘Chip’) [ex-gangsters]**

**Source:** Rex W. Huppke, “Four who watch over the city,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 10, 2004.

**Type of conversion:** from a life of crime to working to get people out of gangs.

**Explicit period of reflection:** yes in the case of Tony; not explicit in the case of Chip.

**Assessment of values:** Yes

**The Story:** “Chip and Tony grew up four blocks apart in a modest but deteriorating section of West Humboldt Park. They were raised in strict homes where grace was said at the dinner table and swearing was forbidden.” They, however, “quickly grew enamored of the thrill and payoff of petty crime.” Starting as barely teenagers, stealing bikes in Oak Park, they later joined a gang and stole cars.

“It was living the life of a gangster,” Chip says, “and it was lovely at the time. Anything we wanted, we could get it.”

They eventually they got into drug dealing and began rotating in and out of jail and prison. Until 1996, when Tony found himself facing a 12-year sentence for possession of a stolen vehicle and delivery of a controlled substance.

He was 32. He'd spent much of his life looking over his shoulder, watching for police, worrying the next person he saw might try to kill him.

“I was tired, man. I knew this was my last chance to turn my life around.”

Through it all, Tony's mother, Shirley Pickett, a loving but stern evangelical minister, had never stopped praying for him, and the faith she always preached finally took hold.

“My mom, she was there, always,” Tony says. “She's the reason I'm here today.”

He was still in the County Jail awaiting placement in a state prison when he let his gang's leadership know he was stepping down.

Tony went on to prison. Chip, by his own admission, ran wild. He became a menace, robbing anyone he wanted, making enemies at every turn.

In 1998, those enemies struck back. As Chip left the home of a gang associate on the West Side with his cousin, shots rang out. Chip survived the hail of bullets, but he says his cousin was gunned down and bled to death in his arms. Chip has never gotten over that moment, but the tragedy only slowed him down.

In prison, Tony heard what his friend was doing on the streets. He prayed Chip could hang on until his sentence was up. With good behavior, Tony was released in 2001, but for the first time, the two friends didn't immediately come together. Tony couldn't risk getting pulled back in; he needed some time to get his feet on the ground.

Tony's mom heard about an initiative called CeaseFire. She got the contact information, gave it to Tony, and before long he was hired.

(CeaseFire workers make contact with high-risk individuals, help them find jobs and educational opportunities, and counsel them about the pitfalls of street life. The program has been credited in past years as a significant factor in the reduction in homicides in Chicago.)

Chip became one of his first clients. Chip's own weariness over living in constant danger, the grief over the death of his cousin were never enough to get him to stop. But once he saw Tony heading in a new direction, he didn't want to be left behind. So he took a factory job Tony lined up. He steered clear of people and places that might lead him back into the game.

In 2002, CeaseFire hired Chip. The slick-talking duo found themselves together and back out on the streets. . .

Chip and Tony still have street clout from their criminal past--today's gangbangers look up to them as O.G.'s, original gangsters. “These guys are for real,” one of the teens says.

“Anybody else don't know what they're talking about.”

As Chip and Tony roll away, both confide that they love their jobs, that they still live for the adrenaline, roaming the streets, scheming now on ways to make things right.

But they carry regret with them, always. They know they hurt people, lied to their families. They know they influenced others to live a life of crime.

“We were part of these guys turning out to be what they are,” Tony says. “We have to take some responsibility.” They pay their penance every day now, still facing up to criminals who try to lure them back. But Chip and Tony swear they'll never stray.

“The air smells different. The sun seems brighter. Things aren't so bleak all the time,” Chip says. “We're on a positive track.”

Tony keeps it simpler: “I can't ever break my mama's heart again.”

The article reports evidence that their change is stable.

Officer Sheila McFarland of the Harrison District says the once-notorious Chip and Tony have shown they've changed their ways. "They've done some things in the past that we wouldn't be proud of, but in the same sense they've turned over a new leaf," she said. "I believe their experience out on the streets and interacting with gangs at one time has given them the ability to go out and communicate with current gang members. They're taking these people under their wings."

**Assessment:** while the article mentions a specific religious background (a strong evangelist family in both cases, and in particular the role of Tony's very supportive mother), this is not a case of religious conversion; Tony's words suggest there has been also a religious re-awakening, but the motives mentioned are essentially moral (in the sense of not-specifically-religious).

There is regret for the things they have done – people they have actually hurt; the decayed situation of their neighborhood, for which they feel partly responsible; the violence they have seen, particularly Chip's cousin dying in his hands, and their responsibility in younger gang members having learned from them. All these motivating factors are explicitly mentioned. There is also love for their new way of life, compounded because their job still has an "adrenaline rush" aspect, but also (probably more significant) because they see their part in keeping kids out of the street, in school and jobs, etc.

It is not clear, however, that the factors mentioned have been the most important in determining their conversion. In Tony's case, the most important motivating factor at the time of conversion seems to have been a sort of weariness – tired of ending up in jail, having to look over his shoulder all the time, etc. Another important factor is the model presence of his mother, "praying all the time," and supportive, present. It might be speculated that through her influence, also, the religious faith "took hold" in Tony, giving him a moral structure to fill the emptiness of the previous structure. Her suggestion to look into CeaseFire also provided Tony with a meaningful activity into which he could put his energy, and put to use his previous experience.



As to Chip, it is possible to see that he had accumulated a number of traumatic experiences, but these spun him out of control, instead of setting him in the direction of conversion. It was the presence of the friend (again, also as role-model) that helped him find a positive direction. The testimony of the police officer is useful in this case to assess the stability of their conversion.

**Case #22: Russ Fee** [Primary school teacher]

**Source:** Hilary Anderson, “New Teacher Lays down the Law... and picks up the books,” *The Catholic New World*, January 22-February 4, 2006 – p. 23

**Type of conversion:** “Career” conversion, from long-time lawyer to school teacher

**Explicit period of reflection:** yes

**Assessment of values:** implicit

**The Story:** As provided in the article:

Russ Fee, a former civil rights and employment attorney, voluntarily gave up 27 years of practicing law to work with young people. Today he’s a third-grade teacher at St. Bruno School.

The decision to change careers was not a quick one, but Fee said he knew in his heart that the practice of law no longer was giving him a sense of accomplishment. “There were several reasons for my about-face,” Fee said. “I had become too brittle, too competitive, too self-absorbed. I was involved in the adversarial system and became disillusioned with what I had accomplished as a lawyer. I wasn’t achieving what I had intended. I was racing through life instead of strolling.”

Fee began winding down his practice, unsure of which road to take next. Finally, as time became more available, Fee began work as a substitute teacher in Berwyn’s District 100.

Fee substituted through every grade, and liked elementary the best. “Children that age are enthusiastic and energetic,” he says. “Being a substitute was a delight. It’s not what you think.”

Though already qualified to teach in high school, he took the courses for certification at the elementary level. While doing an assignment that involved observing children in public places, three boys approached to ask what he was doing, and when he told he was studying to be a

teacher, they “recruited” him, asking him to apply at their school. He did, and was hired as full time.

“My biggest challenge now,” says Fee, “is answering questions from parents and others who wonder how I could give up law to teach third grade.” He has even written a book of poems out of his experiences.

He credits much of his career change to the support of his wife and his three adult children.

“Changing careers can’t be a forced decision,” he said. “One must go at it slowly and seek out what has values that are important to them and try it out. Changing careers is not necessarily a panacea for what’s wrong in one’s life. It has to be a decision of the heart and mind.”

“I feel better about what happens in a single day in the classroom than I ever did during my years in law,” Fee said. “The children are enthusiastic, unafraid even with all the problems that occur in their lives.”

**Assessment:** This is one of the rarely reported cases of “progressive” conversion, not sudden or marked by a triggering event, but showing a careful discernment of options, consultation with other family members, etc. There is not enough information on Fee's previous motivations, that drove him to seek a career as lawyer (though the fact that he was a civil rights attorney suggests his motivations were 'altruistic' or community-oriented). So it is possible to interpret his change not so much a change in moral structures, but as the discovery of a more appropriate way of channeling his original ideals and motivations.

**Case #23: Elizabeth and Charles [not their real names]** [A victim-offender mediation case]

**Source:** Kenneth Melchin, "Insight, Conflict and Justice"; paper read at the Lonergan Workshop, Boston College (2005). The story was told by Wendy Keats of MOVE, Inc., an organization in New Brunswick, Canada, devoted to victim-offender mediations.

**Type of conversion:** Elizabeth's is mostly a "psychological" type of conversion (of closure regarding a traumatic event); Charles' is one of awareness of the harm done to victims, and a potential change in his attitude towards life and towards rehabilitation.

**Explicit period of reflection:** yes in the case of Elizabeth, no in the case of Charles.

**Assessment of values:** not explicit.

**The Story:** Elizabeth, a worker in a convenience store, was robbed by a man who threatened her with death while holding the knife to her throat. The 21 year-old offender, Charles, was captured and went to prison, condemned to serve a five-year sentence. But Elizabeth was seriously traumatized by the experience: she wet herself for many months after the experience, she was teased without mercy by other people; fear and shame began evoking haunting memories of other traumatic events in her past. She had nightmares, and became terrified whenever she closed her eyes. She lived in terror that he would come back to harm her. Friends and family became impatient with her; her marriage broke down and her relationship with her children deteriorated. To make matters worse, she did not technically qualify to be considered a victim according to the courts; the storeowners were the official victims. Apart from her victim impact statement, she was excluded from the procedures altogether.

After two years of counseling with little results, she realized she needed to give closure to this event in order to move forward. She attended Charles' parole hearing. Though she wasn't allowed to communicate with the offender, at one point Charles turned and attempted to speak to her, though he was prevented by an officer. After this event, Elizabeth contacted the Parole Board and requested a meeting with Charles, and was referred to a victim-offender mediation program. She was asked for the reasons to meet with Charles, and told the mediator: "I have to find out whether he is coming back to get me or my family. I have to tell him how I feel. I have to look him in the face and tell him how he has changed my life."

Charles had a story of his own: he was raised in a family environment of violence, drugs and abuse. He began committing minor offenses as a juvenile. The robbery was his first major offense, and he had committed it while under the influence of alcohol and drugs: “to him, the event was the result of a very bad acid trip.” He was not aware of the impact of his actions on Elizabeth, and only learned of them when he was told she insisted on submitting a victim impact statement. He had spent two years in prison - a brutal experience; he lived in constant fear - and felt his sentence was a heavy price to pay.

When the mediator told him of Elizabeth’s fear of him, he showed astonishment:

“Doesn't she know I wouldna’ never hurt her? Don't they give them convenience store clerks some training that tells them to just hand over the money and nobody will get hurt?”  
 “Doesn't she know that every robber says 'don't call the cops or I'll come back an' git ya'? That's just the way it's done. Gee, I'm really sorry about this... I had no idea.”

Under the control of the mediator, both parties told their stories in turn. At one point they even began to chuckle together about a detail and this released a lot of the tension. They began speaking from the heart.

Elizabeth learned that the real Charles was not the Charles of her nightmares and fears. She learned that he had no intention of returning to hurt her. She learned that his sorrow was genuine. She learned something of his own suffering.

They even came to a decision on how they would speak to each other if they ever met on the street; they shook hands and wished each other well. Elizabeth told Charles that she forgave him and told the mediator, “It’s over. It's closed. It's done.” She asked that a letter be sent to the Parole Board requesting that she no longer be used as a reason for keeping Charles in jail.

Elizabeth no longer has nightmares and her fear is gone. Charles’ case manager reports that he is getting along well and that he is maturing after the mediation experience. Staff members feel that he will respond better to treatment and that he is developing a better attitude towards life.

**Assessment:** Melchin himself - in the second part of his paper - derives many conclusions from this case, using a Lonerganian framework. He examines the case in terms of the effect of *insight*

in Elizabeth, after meeting “the real Charles.” As she begins to understand Charles’ humanity, his own history of suffering and his genuine sorrow, Elizabeth can de-link this image from the images and feelings arising from her earlier traumas. As she begins to forge a relation with him that is free of fear, she is freed from the fear that arose the “aberrations in feelings and in the patterns of valuing.” These considerations, however, may be more directly applicable in a study on insight’s effect on psychological healing than on moral conversion.

Of more consequence to my study is the effect of meeting Elizabeth face-to-face for Charles. The case study does not follow his progress too far, but reports a change in his attitude that is promising. Perhaps the most important change is that now he has an experience of what it is to be the victim of a criminal action - there was a certain naïveté in the way he imagined victims reacted, or it may have to do with the tougher skin he had to develop while living in an environment of violence; but his encounter with Elizabeth may have dispelled some of that naïveté. The change may not be so profound, in that it seems Charles had somewhat of a good heart to begin with; it seems that it was more through ignorance of the consequences of his actions (not to mention that he was under the influence of drugs and alcohol) that he committed the crime. But the change in behavior may be, on the other hand, very significant.

**Case # 24: Jackie Katounas** [‘Restorative Justice’ mediator]

**Source:** *Te Ara Whakatika: Newsletter of the court-referred restorative justice project.*

September 2001, Issue 4.

**Type of conversion:** abandoning a life of crime. Triggering event: discovering that she was harming *someone else*. (There is some “de-centering” in this case)

**Explicit period of reflection:** yes

**Assessment of values:** yes

**The Story:** A heroin addict, Jackie Katounas “clocked up” 138 convictions and spent 12 years in prison over a 25 year period. She went into her first maximum security unit at 12 years, and was in Mt. Eden prison [in New Zealand] at 16.

"In all that time I was never aware I was hurting anyone. I never gave consideration or a thought to the victims," says Jackie.

Jackie's change came about when she received some stolen goods, and realized that she knew the owner of these goods personally. “It was the first time I ever felt shameful,” says Jackie. “I phoned the victim and went and explained my involvement.”

She then sought the rest of the stolen goods and return them to the victim.

“It was a raw form of restorative justice, but I never offended from that day on. It was a powerful turning point because I began thinking of other people than myself. For 25 years I had wreaked havoc on the community, and then restorative justice changed my life.”

She abandoned her life of crime, but the move was difficult. “I had to learn to speak to people without speaking about crime and drugs. I had to learn how to build rapport with people who weren't criminals.”

Some time later she heard a speech by restorative justice advocate Jim Consedine. It helped her put her experience in a framework, that of *restorative justice*. Jackie trained to be a facilitator [in the Restorative Justice program], and now her work offers a unique perspective to prisoners.

Jackie works as a facilitator for the Hawkes Bay organization's restorative justice project.

Working at Whakatikatika Prison [Restorative Justice] Project. In the first 13 months of her work there, Jackie has had 82 referrals from prisoners wanting to make amends with their victims. She also runs a new initiative for the group, a community-based initiative known as Hawkes Bay Restorative Justice Te Puna Wai Ora Inc. She also features in a training video being produced for the court-referred restorative justice project.

Jackie has managed to facilitate 15 conferences. For others, she has asked victims if they would be willing to accept a letter from an offender. This has gone ahead in about nine cases.

Sometimes when I talk to them about the harm of their offending it is the first time they have ever heard that. I know it sounds bizarre that they don't think about the harm they have caused people or the ripple effect. Some of them still try to justify what they did or dispute the facts, but some begin to see what their offending has done. I know they have no idea of the effect because I used to be just like that.

I challenge them to make change in their life. They need to address the stuff in their past to have a bright future. I can establish a real rapport with the prisoners.

Prison officers have been very supportive and have embraced the concept. If a prison officer believes a prisoner is showing some remorse, they often make a referral to Jackie.

**Assessment:** This narrative provides strong evidence that it was the lack of a certain insight that kept Jackie committing crimes and offenses, namely, that there was another side to those offenses: the victim. Realizing that she was doing harm to someone else was the insight necessary for her to change her behavior. That she went from self-involved heroin addict to restorative justice facilitator may indicate that she was potentially a generous person – there is not enough information to gauge how much of a change this was. But going from 138 convictions in 25 years to none, certainly indicates a deep change, and this is further supported by the fact that she devoted her energies to other-regarding, healing activities.

Note: A later article in the same publication, written in first person by Katounas herself shows her Christian faith being at work (though it is not clear whether this was a factor in her moral conversion, or whether it came about later).

This intimate knowledge of what it is like to be an “inmate” reminded me of how far the Lord has brought me by his grace. . . . When I witness these miracles happening is it any wonder I’m so passionate about my work? I feel privileged and honoured to be an instrument as God administers his wonderful Grace. (*Te Ara Whakatika*, August 2004)

**Case #25: The Remorseful Burglar** [Another Restorative Justice case]

**Source:** “Face to Face,” *Te Ara Whakatika: Newsletter of the Court-Referred Restorative Justice Project*; July 2001, Issue 2, p.3.

**Type of conversion:** Remorse after committing a crime - Repayment

**Explicit period of reflection:** implicit.

**Assessment of values:** Not mentioned.

**The Story:** A burglar broke into a house and took, among other things, a cellphone and a camera, the latter not property of the house owners. The burglar was captured, pleaded guilty, and agreed to take part in a community-based restorative justice process as well as the official criminal justice system. Mary (not her real name) had a chance to face the offender, ask questions, tell him how deeply his actions had affected her family, hear how remorseful he was and have some input into helping him move on and make positive changes in his life.

“We heard through his probation officer that he got a job two weeks later, and we’ve had the first repayments for the damage. It was good to see he really responded, and from what I could see learnt a lot.”

After the offender was arrested, Mary was telephoned by a facilitator to see if she would consider a restorative justice meeting:

“I knew the offender was young -- not a hardened criminal. There were so many questions. I hoped the conference would make a difference for him and us.”

Mary’s youngest son, who had been badly affected by the break-in, didn’t want to attend, but “benefited greatly by us coming back to tell him what went on.”

At the conference it was “obvious the offender would have rather sunk through a hole in the ground than have been there. He looked nervous and embarrassed. He gave us the odd glance, but kept his head down mostly.” The offender

“kept on trying to look at me but his head was getting lower and lower as he began to understand what effect ‘a simple in and out job’ had on me and my husband. I told him I



was so sad to see a young guy getting involved in crime. I wanted him to pay us back for the damage done and return the camera and cellphone.”

Mary then forgave him and said the “slate was clean, but I really hoped in the future the slate would tell a story of someone who had made a terrible mistake but had learnt from it and pushed on to do good things with his life.” When Mary said she forgave him, the young man -- with tear-filled eyes -- apologized.

**Assessment:** Simple remorse may be a form of conversion, when it implies that the “offender” realizes the wrongfulness of his/her previous acts. In this case, the burglar was faced with his victims, and realized that “a simple in and out job” is a euphemism; behind such a “job” there are people getting hurt, left in fear and anger and frustration. Again (as in Case #23, above) a lacking insight was brought to light by the simple procedure of making the criminal face the victims.

**Case #26: Alan and Corry - Aggravated Robbery** [Another Restorative Justice case]

**Source:** Consedine and Bowen, *Restorative Justice: Contemporary Themes and Practice*, (Lyttelton, New Zealand: Ploughshares Publications, 1999) 112-118.

**Type of conversion:** remorse and straightening-out after an attempted robbery

**Explicit period of reflection:** yes.

**Assessment of values:** some is mentioned.

**The Story:** Alan Marr, age 20 and Corry Barrett, age 18, went into a dairy armed with a replica pistol, and demanded money. Rosemary, owner of the dairy, reacted by telling them to “stuff off,” after which they left immediately. When later apprehended by the police, they each admitted being involved. A restorative justice process was suggested after the co-accused had indicated a desire to apologize to the victim. (The process, usually called a "Community Group Conference (CGC), is separated into three stages: one that allows the parties to address what in fact happened and why; another to allow them to speak of the consequences of what happened, and the third part

to look at possible outcomes for the offenders to be recommended to the court. Those outcomes usually involve alternatives to imprisonment, and indicate ways for the offenders to repair the damages caused to the victims.)

In the first stage (addressing what actually happened), the offenders explained that they had been unemployed, broke, hungry and in need of money. (Alan had obtained employment after the incident). The youngest, Corry, explained that he was having trouble with his family, and not communicating with them. They also explained that they had chosen this shop because the girlfriend of one of them lived down the road.

The victim explained how scary the situation had been; and how now she took notice of every one who was coming in, and that they had now installed some security devices. She and her husband were now in fear and thinking whether they should sell the shop, although after meeting the “boys” they were not afraid anymore. They also explained how hard they had to work every day to keep their dairy, which they had owned for 14 years, and how if someone were hungry and asked for help, they might give them bread, milk and butter.

The offenders acknowledged that it had been a stupid thing to do; and Alan added it was good that they hadn't got away with it, since then they might have done it again. Corry added that he had been taking Prozac, after diagnosed with clinical depression, and that he felt his home was not his home. After the event, his family and him had been brought together. “Before, I wasn't spending much time at home, I couldn't talk to my parents. Since then I have learned to, I am living back at home; *I have a different value system altogether.*” (Emphasis mine) Alan said that he also found it easier to come to his mother and father with questions, to get advice and even ask them for money.

The offenders' families were present. Each acknowledged the private hell they had gone through during the last days, and thanked the victims for coming to meet them.

In the third stage, the boys formally apologized, and offered to pay for the cost of the surveillance system, or work, but the shop owners turned those offers down, saying they had come to tell them that they could do better and be better boys. In closing the meeting, the shop owners no longer feared that the offenders would come and seek revenge, and that they hoped the boys would get a lesson out of this. The offenders were given a sentence of two years' suspended imprisonment.

**Assessment:** it appears from the case that “the boys” were not really criminals, and felt shame and guilt about their deeds perhaps even before they were apprehended, and certainly before meeting the victims. In this sense, it does not seem that the meeting itself produced a conversion. The episode as a whole, however, seems to have been beneficial in helping them “put it together,” rather than a “change in values.” Nevertheless, putting the offenders in the same room with their victims probably solidified their already positive attitudes and judgments. Said Corry, “We didn't know you. For us you had no personality. Now I have met you.”

*Note: I have selected only a few cases of victim-offender mediation within the 'restorative justice' context, those that provide sufficient details to sustain a reasonable belief that there was some sort of moral conversion. There are many more cases in the literature, that also suggest at least some minor form of moral conversion, but that are presented in terms too brief. See for example Consedine and Bowen, Restorative Justice: Contemporary Themes and Practice, 96-123.*

**Case #27: New Zealand's “Black Power” Gang** [A case of “social” moral conversion?]

**Source:** Consedine, Jim, *Restorative Justice: Healing the Effects of Crime* (Lyttelton, New Zealand: Ploughshares Publications, 1999) 83-84.

**Type of conversion:** group moral conversion

**Explicit period of reflection:** yes.

**Assessment of values:** yes.

**The Story:** Information on this case is sparse. It involves specifically a group's explicit change of views towards the acceptability of rape. As told by Consedine:

There was a time when belonging to a gang almost certainly meant having to be involved with rape in order to be seen as “staunch.” Such was the case with Black Power, probably New Zealand's best-known gang. For years women were treated as objects to be enjoyed at gang members' behest, and no amount of imprisonment for rape and other charges of violence made any difference. Prison was seen as a place to recruit new members. The traditional retributive justice process could not stem the violence towards women. In effect it increased it.

Then came a dramatic shift in attitude. At their 1978 national convention, Black Power, led by their president Rei Harris, banned rape. Rediscovery of traditional Maori justice and values had a significant part to play in this conversion. So too did the strength and integrity of the president and some chief supporters.

But for some old habits die hard. There were subsequent cases that Black Power dealt with themselves. Bill Maung, former judge and legal adviser to Black Power, has talked about how the gang dealt with such violations of their moral code.

The text goes on to describe the incident of a woman raped by three of their members; she preferred not to go to the police, and it was dealt with on a *marae*, a trial according to traditional Maori customs. The members were judged and condemned in front of their tribes and peers.

Shame would be their principal punishment; they were also placed under close supervision and ordered to pay a weekly sum to the woman out of their meager incomes for six months.

According to the text, none of them re-offended (one, however, committed suicide later, though no definite connection was made with his rape offense). The young woman forgave them. Later, explaining why, she said that for once in her life she had felt in control of a major situation, so she felt she could afford to be generous to them given the sorrow they had expressed.

**Assessment:** group responsibility is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but this case provides a useful bit of evidence to begin considering the possibility of communities explicitly revising their moral contents and attitudes *as communities*.

### **Case #28: Arun Gandhi and Jackie Besson**

**Source:** Arun Gandhi's talk during the *Peacemaking in an Age of Terror Conference*, Loyola University Chicago (2007).

**Type of conversion:** content; conceptual

**Explicit period of reflection:** yes

**Assessment of values:** yes

**The Story:** told by Arun Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi's grandson) as an example of the transforming effect of non-violence. Jackie Besson was a "confirmed racist" in South Africa, one of the architects of the apartheid, under which Arun suffered during his youth. It so happened that, when Arun was living later in India, a ship experiencing some difficulties came to shore from South Africa, and Arun was charged with providing hospitality to the passengers. The first person he met was, surprisingly, Besson himself. Arun repressed his impulse to insult him and "tell him go throw yourself into the ocean," and greeted him politely (though not amicably). He made a conscious decision to be polite rather than berate him, and let Besson stay with them for a few days, during which he showed him the sights (good and bad). Their conversation recurrently turned on the apartheid, and they often had harsh arguments over and over again, changing the subject when the discussion grew too heated. But in spite of this, Arun and his family continued in their polite kindness and eventually made some headway in lessening the harshness of the exchanges. According to Gandhi, their departure after those four days was very emotional; Besson, with tears in his eyes, expressed he had seen things in a new light and claimed he had renounced his racist views and would now fight for a change in the system in South Africa. Gandhi did not believe it at first, but found confirmation later, when Besson actually got involved in fighting against the apartheid in South Africa.

**Case #: 29 – Donald Gelpi** [conversion from racism]

**Source:** Donald L. Gelpi, *The Conversion Experience* (1988: Paulist Press, New Jersey) 28-31.

**Type of conversion:** Conversion regarding content, about right/wrong

**Explicit period of reflection:** Yes

**Assessment of values:** Yes

**The Story:** As told by Gelpi,

Of the five forms of conversion, I experienced personal moral conversion first of all. I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, and grew up in the section of the United States known as the Deep South. In the 1860s the Deep South seceded from the union over the issue of slavery. Prejudice distorts every society, and ethnic prejudice and bigotry mar every culture. In the United States black people and Native Americans, for example, suffer from racial bigotry, and in the Deep South racial bigotry focuses especially on black people. Because I grew up in the Deep South, I grew up a racial bigot. I did grow up believing in their essential racial inferiority to myself and to other white people.

No one challenged my racial bigotry in a systematic way until I went to high school. The Jesuits who taught me waged ceaseless war on my racism and on the racism of my white classmates. I resisted them for two years, but eventually I conceded that they had the right of it. I recognized the immorality of racism and renounced it in my own heart.

I look back on that experience as a personal moral conversion. I regard it as an initial moral conversion because, for the first time in my life, I took personal responsibility for disagreeing with the conventional morality taught me by my society. By disagreeing, I took personal responsibility for my own conscience.” (29)

**Case #: 30 – “Doctor Bob”** [one of the cofounders of Alcoholics Anonymous]

**Source:** *Alcoholics Anonymous : The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism* (Online Edition). 4th ed. (New York City: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001) 171.

**Type of conversion:** from alcoholism.

**Explicit period of reflection:** yes.

**Assessment of values:** yes.

**The Story:** The story of “Doctor Bob” is one of the classic testimonies compiled in the A. A. “Big Book”; the birth of the society is dated from “his first day of permanent sobriety,” in June 1935. Doctor Bob got into drinking during his college years, drinking as much as his money permitted. By the time he took up medicine, he was drinking enough to have morning “jitters.” His addiction was already compromising his capacity to go to class; he would not dare assist to class if he had those jitters, and in the Sophomore year he almost quit school. He had to convince the faculty to let him take his exams (he had turned many examination books empty because he

could not hold a pencil), then passed them, then got into drinking again, eventually pulled himself dry, graduated, and remained sober during a couple years of residency during which he was too busy to leave the hospital frequently. After this, however, once he got his own practice, he fell into drinking again; he even developed a phobia to running out of liquor (176). He needed to manage his addiction carefully; he needed to be sober enough in the morning to practice medicine, in order to have money for liquor in the evening. He also developed tremendous cunning for acquiring and keeping alcohol at home, even during the times of prohibition and living with a vigilant wife.

In his narrative, Bob does not specifically censure his drinking in terms of right/wrong, whether from a religious or a social point of view. Rather, drinking is decried as a continuous obstacle to his fulfilling his aspirations, and achieving happiness, and as the cause of many miserable moments and of living under the constant threat of downfall and shame. A felt contrast with people who could live free from these binds is reported as one of the factors initiating a change (though not per se powerful enough to accomplish it). Says Doctor Bob

About the time of the beer experiment [a catastrophic attempt to replace stronger drinks with beer] I was thrown in with a crowd of people who attracted me because of their seeming poise, health and happiness. They spoke with great freedom from embarrassment, which I could never do, and they seemed very much at ease on all occasions and appeared very healthy. More than these attributes, *they seemed to be happy*. I was self conscious and ill at ease most of the time, my health was at the breaking point, and I was thoroughly miserable. I sensed they had something I did not have, from which I might readily profit. I learned that it was something of a spiritual nature, which did not appeal to me very much, but I thought it could do no harm. I gave the matter much time and study for the next two and a half years, but I still got tight [i.e. drunk] every night nevertheless. I read everything I could find, and talked to everyone who I thought knew anything about it. (178)

It was about this time that a woman recommended Bob's wife that he talk to a friend of hers. This man – unnamed in the story – managed, after many hours of talking, to get Bob to remain sober for a few weeks. After this, however, in the course of going to a conference, Bob drunk severely for many days and woke up at a friend's house without remembering much. The unnamed man

then took care of Bob again, and the following morning Doctor Bob was able to cease drinking permanently. He was able then to regain both his health and self-respect, and the respect of his colleagues. Bob asks himself the question, what did this man do or say that was different from what others had done or said? In his opinion, a key factor seems to be the fact that this man had been an alcoholic too, and had had “most of all the drunkard’s experiences known to man, but had been cured by the very means I had been trying to employ, that is to say the spiritual approach.” (180)

With the help of this person, Bob was able to recover from his addiction, and to use his medical skills in the help of others with similar problems. To the day of his death, in 1950, he had helped more than 5,000 alcoholics, men and women, giving them sometimes medical assistance without charging them.

*Note: The current edition of the Alcoholics Anonymous book features a section with forty-two selected stories of recovered alcoholics (these stories are periodically revised and rotated so as to maintain both a collection of “classic” narratives and more contemporary ones). Many of these have similarities to the story of Dr. Bob, above. Doctor Bob’s is however particularly useful and representative because of the degree of detail it goes into.*



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## VITA

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