THE HAND OF COMPASSION WAS FASTER

THAN THE CALCULUS OF REASON.

—*Otto Springer*

PREFACE

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT LOSS. It is a book about love. It is a book about normal, human decency transformed into extraordinary courage by a political regime so evil it confounds human comprehension. It returns us to those secret, frightening places in our own souls, places we seldom enter, touching only elliptically, late at night and alone, when a loved one has died or we are forced to face the eternal, when we cannot escape asking who we are, what we live for, and whether there is any sense in a world in which life and love and all we hold dear are so fragile.

This is a book about moral choice during the Holocaust, and it suggests the tremendous power of identity[1] to shape our most basic political acts.[2] It argues that how we see ourselves in relation to others significantly—even critically—influences our treatment of them by limiting the options we find available, not just morally but cognitively.[3]

This book grew out of my earlier work on altruism. *The Heart of Altruism* asked what caused altruism and then discussed the implications of this analysis for social and political theory.[4] I found the critical impetus for altruism was psychological, a particular cognitive worldview—I called this the altruistic perspective—in which the actor saw himself or herself at one with all humanity. The importance of this worldview as an influence on behavior suggested the value of further research to sharpen understanding of the psychological process by which our sense of ourselves in relation to others both inhibits and shapes political activity.

The present volume addresses this challenge, moving beyond the identification of the altruistic perspective as a general phenomenon and attempting a fuller depiction of this perspective and its role in the moral psychology. It also expands my earlier theoretical analysis by treating altruism as a lens that can shed light onto moral theory.

Traditional moral theory often begins from first principles, making assumptions about the structure of agency and character; theorists then explain what motivates actors and how people's practical moral deliberations occur without asking whether or not people actually do, or even can, measure up to these standards.[5] In this book, I take a different tack. I focus on the moral psychology and ask what an empirical examination of moral exemplars can reveal about the impetus behind moral action. In doing so, I am influenced by recent work on the behavioral consequences of cognitive factors, such as memories, schema, and organizing conceptual frameworks.[6] Research on human cognition remains in the preliminary stages and the challenge for scholars is to find a methodology that

links experimental findings from laboratory settings to the more complex political world. I found this link in a freely flowing narrative analysis that permits the listener to decipher how the subject's perceptions influence behavior.[7]

I thus begin with the assumption that the human articulation of moral ideals is constrained by the basic architecture of the mind, the mind's development, our core emotions, social psychology, and the limits on human capacity for rational deliberation. To demonstrate how this works in a world far messier and more complex than a laboratory setting,[8] I analyzed the normative effects of such cognitive factors via in-depth interviews with rescuers of Jews during World War II, individuals whom most of us would find morally commendable—regardless of how we define morality—and whose behavior is not easily explained by the dominant schools of Western philosophy. I then ask what a close examination of rescuers' stories reveals about the moral psychology and teaches us about moral theory.[9] What drove these particular individuals? What caused them to engage in their moral acts? And what insight can this empirical examination shed on broader questions of ethics and morality?[10] In answering these questions, the book addresses one of the most basic questions in moral theory—what causes us to do good—but it does so via a close examination of moral exemplars, not through religious or philosophical analysis.

Existing work on altruism and rescuers has moved beyond the level of correlational analyses to focus attention on an altruistic personality or identity.[11] The present analysis confirms earlier findings suggesting the tremendous power of identity and perspective to shape our most basic behavior. The impetus for rescuer activities originated not in religion, reason, or any conscious, contractarian, or utilitarian calculus but rather in how rescuers thought about themselves and about others around them.[12] It thus was not the most frequently cited forces driving moral choice that led rescuers to risk their lives to save Jews; it was their sense that "we are all human beings." To understand rescuers, we therefore need to ask about their moral psychology, to understand what it was about their identities and, more particularly, their perceptions of themselves in relation to others that worked to constrain and shape the choices they found available, not just morally but empirically. We need to appreciate the ethical consequences of how rescuers classified and categorized people—specific individuals and groups, Jews, bystanders, or Nazis—and where they drew the boundaries of the community of concern.[13]

As I explore what I believe will become one of the new frontiers in social science—our ability to map the human mind and understand the importance of how people think about themselves and about others

around them for future behavior—I focus on the manner in which people perceive, comprehend, and interpret the social and political world. Psychologists call these factors cognitive construals.[14] I pay special attention to the construals associated with the actor's self-concept, her categorization of others, the extent to which certain values are integrated into her sense of self, the type and pattern of perspective taking, the actor's sense of efficacy and extensivity, the development of moral salience, and the transformative aspect of altruistic acts for the agent's identity.

This focus on cognitive construals has several advantages. It adds to our knowledge of the moral psychology and reveals something that is missing in the literature on moral choice. It increases our substantive understanding of the psychological foundations of altruism. It furthers knowledge of the critical self-concepts that lead to humane, moral responses to ethnic differences. And, finally, it advances work on the psychological foundations of moral and political activity.

Basic Argument and Organizational Format. Because of the interest in and the importance of the topic, I have tried to craft a work that is scholarly yet accessible to the intelligent lay reader. To do this, material that buttresses my argument, but which is of a more academic interest, is placed in appendices and notes.[15] The basic text of the book itself has been pared down to provide focus to my essential argument.

What is the basic argument in this volume? Essentially, the stories analyzed here suggest ethical acts emerge not from choice so much as through our sense of who we are, through our identities.

The book opens with a prologue that uses an exchange with one rescuer to address issues of memory and the ethics of interviewing.[16] It then presents the rescuers' stories. Because understanding rescuers' moral psychology means interpreting intricate and subtle cognitive differences, I am careful to document these perspectives. I do so through extensive presentation of the "raw data," the narrative transcriptions of minimally edited interviews conducted between 1988 and 1999. The heart of the book thus presents a cognitive view of moral choice through the use of autobiographical sketches, told in the speakers' own words.

Although I interviewed many survivors and rescuers, all certified by Yad Vashem,[17] this book concentrates on the stories of five rescuers. Margot was a wealthy German whose father was head of General Motors for Western Europe. Margot left the Third Reich in protest against Nazi policies, moving to Holland, where she worked to save Jews despite being arrested many times.

Otto was an ethnic German living in Czechoslovakia. Though offered opportunities both to profit from his German status and to sit out the

war in India, Otto stayed in Prague, joined the Austrian Resistance movement, and saved over one hundred Jews before ending up in a concentration camp himself.

John was a Dutchman placed on the Gestapo's Most Wanted List because he organized an escape network to take Jews to safety in Switzerland and Spain. Arrested five times, John was tortured but never revealed any information. He always managed to escape, even when most of his network was betrayed, and took important information to Eisenhower and the Allies in London.

Irene was a Polish nursing student when the war began. After the partition of Poland, Irene was pressed into slave labor. Yet she hid eighteen Jews in the home of a German major, for whom she was keeping house, and helped other Jews hidden in the woods.

Finally, Knud is an inventor who took part in the extraordinary rescue of 85 percent of the Jews in Denmark. Later turned in to the Gestapo for his acts of treason while in the Danish police force, Knud continued his rescue activities while living underground and in hiding.

These five are not the only rescuers I interviewed.[18] I focus on just these few individuals, however, because I found it necessary to construct detailed and close examinations of individuals in order to convey the rich complexity of any individual's moral psychology. I chose these five because they reflect the wide variety of background characteristics, such as religion, education, and national origin, found in rescuers as a group. Yet each clearly illustrates the critical themes I found in my analysis of all the rescuers: the tremendous power of identity to constrain choice, the complexity of the moral life, and the importance of our perceptions of self for moral motivation. These stories thus fill critical gaps in our understanding of the moral psychology. In particular, their stories suggest that if we can understand how people see the world and themselves in relation to others, if we can decipher their cognitive frameworks, perceptions, and categorization schema, we may begin to determine why identity exerts such a powerful moral influence.

Can a close examination of how these five rescuers thought about moral issues provide insight into the process itself by which identity worked to constrain choice for other rescuers? Can we further assume that rescue behavior during the Holocaust can tell us something of value about how people think about moral issues in general? Can these narratives shed light on other forms of moral political action? About the humane response to ethnic violence and genocide in contexts other than the Holocaust? I believe so, and I invite readers to reflect on rescuers' motives as they think about these stories for themselves and then focus directly on the puzzle that originally intrigued me: the empirical finding that identity

and perspective trump choice. This finding raises many difficult but fascinating and important questions.

What is the moral psychology, and what is the psychological process through which identity and perspective influence moral action? What part of moral action can we explain through reference to our sense of self in relation to others? Can we develop a theory of moral action that relies not on religion or reason but on identity and how we categorize ourselves in relation to others? If so, what are the contours of such a theory? And finally, can an analysis of rescue behavior help us rethink our most basic theories of human political behavior by focusing attention on the extent to which moral choices result from our fundamental sense of what it means to be a human being and how we categorize ourselves in relation to others?

I fear I have more questions than answers.[19] But the empirical analysis presented here does provide compelling evidence that identity and perspective—especially the cognitive construals that shape how we see ourselves in relation to others—both set and delineate the range of choices we find available cognitively. My findings underline both the complexity of the moral life and the need for moral theory to allow more fully for the extent to which moral action works through a sense of self and the need for human connection. It is the power of identity to shape action, and the importance of perspective in drawing forth particular aspects of the complex psychological phenomenon we call identity or character, that is the missing piece in the literature on moral choice.

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Stories That Are True

He was about five-foot tall, sturdy, and he had his little cap in his hand and he was turning it. He kept saying— he must have said it about ten times—"I am ashamed to be a German."

Even the Russian prisoners of war were put in that ditch. And the bodies fell on top of others. They made the Jews, the Gypsies, and the Russian prisoners of war to dig a ditch a kilometer long and they made them take off their clothes, their shoes, and their jewels. And then they shot them and they fell into the ditch.

And he kept saying, "I am ashamed to be a German. I am ashamed!"

When I saw that story in the Holocaust Magazine *it was like reliving it again! I didn't tell them. I don't know where they got it. But I was there when he told Mrs. Fisher, after he came to tell her about her brother dying on the Russian Front. And it was all real.*

THE SPEAKER IS MARGOT, one of the German-born rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe interviewed as part of the research for this book. Her words come not from one of our formal interviews but from an ordinary telephone conversation, long after our explicit relationship as subject and interviewer had ended, after we had become friends. I must have been working on the computer when Margot called for I later chanced upon Margot's words, typed hastily and stored in an unnamed computer file.

I include this story because it reveals a glimpse of the shock and pain Margot still feels about the war, her conflicting emotions and her sense of disconnect with that time. Because this story, like the others in this book, are stories that are true. Stories that reveal ordinary people caught up in extraordinary events that forced them to be their big selves, events that left a legacy many have still neither made sense of nor fully assimilated. Stories that reveal the speakers' innermost thoughts about themselves and their lives. Stories that are not mine. And therein lies both an ethical dilemma and a remarkable opportunity to gain insight into moral issues that concern us all.

Margot's story is told in full in chapter 1. Like those of the other rescuers in this book, it suggests the striking extent to which action flows from identity, from our most basic sense of who we are. Margot's story reveals how her sense of self constrained the choices she made by limiting the particular options she found available, not just morally but cognitively. By listening carefully to Margot, we not only learn that identity constrains moral choice; we also discover the moral and political significance of how we see the world, and particularly how we see ourselves in relation to others. It is not just our identities that are critical. It is also our own shifting and often idiosyncratic views of ourselves in relation to others that determine how we treat people.

Listening to Margot forced me to confront the most basic questions concerning ethics and normative politics, and much of my analysis contrasts the major theories of moral choice with what I discovered about moral action through listening to Margot and other rescuers of Jews. Does religion or reason drive moral choices? Are certain groups of individuals—women, the better educated, or people in certain occupations—more likely to "do the right thing"? Were Germans more anti-Semitic than other Europeans? What gives one person the moral courage others lack?

Such questions are perhaps obvious ones and I try to address them in this book. But I also encountered other ethical issues that I had not anticipated when I started my research. Is it fair to publish the intimate details of another person's life, even when that person has given her permission? When bonds of trust—and friendship—are established, what particular obligations does that impose on the researcher to protect someone who is, after all, a human being and not just a subject in a research project? Margot's case is instructive in this regard.

Shortly after Hitler came to power, Margot left a promising life in Germany and moved to Amsterdam in protest over Nazi policies. When the war began, Margot thus found herself in the unenviable position of being on the record as a non-supporter of the Nazi regime. Worse, once in Holland she and her husband divorced, and Margot was left with two young, part-Jewish children to raise. Despite her precarious position, Margot showed no hesitation in working to hide Jews and in helping the Resistance, even though she was told that "if caught, we do not know you." Unfortunately, Margot was caught, and arrested six times. She lost contact with her daughters for a while and, through her Resistance activities, had an affair with the Gestapo commander for Amsterdam, a man she later had killed by the Resistance. Margot spoke freely about all of these wrenching wartime events, including her painful divorce and the separation from her daughters; especially hurtful was a continuing emotional ache from the death of her fiancé, Alfred, who was beaten to death by the Gestapo when he tried to get

Margot released from prison, naively believing that Margot was innocent and that the Nazis would listen to reason.

I had sent Margot a copy of the transcribed interviews and asked her to delete anything she felt was too personal before giving permission to have them published. Margot returned the legal form granting permission to publish, but I had the gnawing suspicion that she had not actually read the transcripts.

Was Margot aware of how much of herself she had revealed during our conversations? Had I somehow taken advantage of the friendship we had established? Was I now violating Margot's trust by publishing information that was so personal, even though the friendship had evolved and the interview material was obtained within the clearly defined context of the research project? I agonized about the tension surrounding scholarship, privacy, and friendship, and mentioned my dilemma to one of Margot's daughters. "Does your mother realize some of the things she had told me?" I asked. "Are you sure she's okay with my publishing these interviews?"

Margot's daughter assured me her mother knew what was in the transcripts and that it was all right to publish them. I have taken Margot and her daughter at their word even though I suspect the selfishness peculiar to scholars has swayed my judgment in this instance. I remain conflicted about this and hope the unusual opportunity to share Margot with the reader has justified my decision to publish her personal recollections of this time.

Margot's story raises many other important issues. One of the most significant concerns the reliability of memory, especially the retrieval of traumatic events so long past. How dependable is memory? How self-serving? Is the past reconstructed to make the speaker look good to herself? To others? To help the speaker make sense of what went before?

All the rescuers I interviewed were certified through the rigorous procedures of Yad Vashem, the Israeli agency established after the war to verify and certify genuine rescuers. Hence, I am confident that the rescuers I interviewed actually did perform the extraordinary deeds that originally brought them to my attention.[1] Since I am a political scientist, not a historian, my primary intellectual interest is in understanding the moral psychology, not in documenting the past. The concern to verify specific events is thus lessened somewhat, although it does not entirely disappear. But we are still left to contemplate the particular nature of memories of searing, traumatic events.[2]

In *Holocaust Testimonies* (1991), Lawrence Langer argues that oral testimonies present a far more complex and nuanced aspect of the Holocaust than written work can, precisely because oral testimonies do not contain a central narrative. They amble. They exhibit contradictions and

display ambivalence. Oral testimonies, such as Margot's, thus include multiple stories, portraying a range of experiences that happened to the same person. Perhaps, as Langer argues, their very contradictions do more accurately capture the contradictory aspect of complex reality than any written narrative that follows a central and directed plot line.

In another important regard, however, Margot contradicts one of Langer's central claims. Langer makes a credible case that the Holocaust represents a plane apart from life as described in contemporary moral theories. This contention is at odds with the basic premise underlying my book. My approach contrasts traditional scholarly wisdom on ethics with an empirical examination of moral exemplars. I ask how ordinary people—people like Margot—respond in situations that require moral courage. When I find that their actions do not correspond to what the literature on moral choice tells us, I conclude that we need to supplement existing moral theories with a theory that *can* account for the empirical reality of rescue behavior.

For Langer, who analyzed oral testimonies of concentration camp survivors, the Holocaust constitutes an arena in which the normal conceptualizations of the self simply do not hold because victims of the camps were robbed of the agency necessary to make it meaningful to speak of moral choice. They lived in a moral vacuum "[b]ecause the moral systems that we are familiar with are built on the premise of individual choice and responsibility for the consequences of that choice" (Langer 1991: 125). Traditional moral systems, Langer thus contends, cannot explain the Holocaust because the agent had no control over the results of his action. Langer further argues that the Holocaust often broke the connections to and with the self, leaving a prewar, a wartime, and a postwar person, with little to connect these selves. The integration necessary to return someone to the world of ordinary moral discourse was impossible for camp inmates. Langer constructs a compelling case that it is oral testimonies, not written works, that most effectively capture these contradictions in the face of a bewildering series of events.[3]

I found some of this to be true of my conversations with Margot. I had written to Margot asking to interview her and had received an invitation to come to her house one day during the summer of 1988. I arrived around 11:00 in the morning and was welcomed by Margot and her husband, Ted. "Come in. Come in, and have a little lunch," Margot said, leading me to a table piled high with Dutch cheeses, pâtés, and other delicacies. As we followed Ted into the dining room, Margot whispered to me, "Don't say anything about why you're here. He doesn't know what I did during the war."

Totally taken aback by this request, I sat down at the table, noticing

1

Margot

You don't walk away. You don't walk away from somebody who needs real help.

The wealthy only child of the head of General Motors for Western Europe, Margot trained for the German diplomatic corps before moving to Holland in protest against Hitler's policies.

2

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Otto

The hand of compassion was faster than the calculus of reason.

At the end of the war Otto (pictured on the left) was interned in a camp for refusing to divorce his Jewish wife. Ironically, this arrest may have saved Otto's life since his incarceration for so-called crimes against the race closed other Gestapo investigations into activities that carried the death penalty.

3

John

I have to help those in need, and when people need help, then you have to do it. . . .

Q. When you say you had to do it, that implies to me that there wasn't a choice for you. Did you . . . [John interrupted.]

No. There is no choice. When you have to do right, you do right.

NETHERLANDS SECURITY SERVICE

This is to certify that: Ser. Nr.: 112

Surname: Weidner   Christ. Name: J. H.
                    Personal nr.:   Grade: Captain

belongs to the Netherlands Security Service.
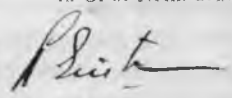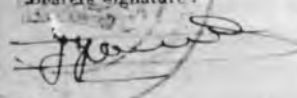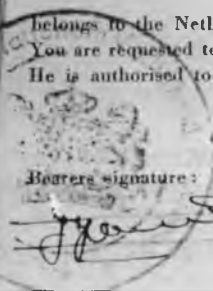You are requested to give him any help and information.
He is authorised to wear civilian clothing.

Date of issue:
25-7-'45

Bearers signature: C. O. of Neth. S.S.:

John worked in the Resistance during World War II and organized an escape network to take Jews and political refugees to Spain or Switzerland.

4

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Irene

I did not ask myself, Should I do this? But, How will I do this? Every step of my childhood had brought me to this crossroads. I must take the right path, or I would no longer be myself.[1]

Before she was forced into slave labor during World War II, Irene (pictured here at age seventeen) studied nursing in Poland.

5

Knud

I'm often asked why we in Denmark reacted so humanely and positively against the discrimination and arrest of the Jews. I don't know why. But maybe it was . . . respect for our fellow man and humanity in general.

As a wartime policeman, Knud took part in the extraordinary national effort that saved 85 percent of the Danish Jews.

Winner of the 2005 Robert E. Lane Award for Best Book in Political Psychology, American Political Science Association

Honorable Mention, 2005 Giovanni Sartori Book Award in Qualitative Methods, American Political Science Association

THROUGH MOVING INTERVIEWS with five ordinary people who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, Kristen Monroe casts new light on questions at the heart of ethics: Why do people risk their lives for strangers, and what drives such moral choice? Monroe's analysis points not to traditional explanations—such as religion or reason—but to identity. The rescuers' perceptions of themselves in relation to others made their extraordinary acts spontaneous and left the rescuers no choice but to act.

Monroe's analysis of these stories draws on philosophy, ethics, and political psychology to suggest why and how identity constrains our choices, both cognitively and ethically. Her work offers a powerful counterpoint to conventional arguments about rational choice and a valuable addition to the literature on ethics and moral psychology. It is a dramatic illumination of the power of identity to shape our most basic political acts, including our treatment of others.

KRISTEN RENWICK MONROE is Professor of Political Science and Philosophy at the University of California, Irvine, and the author of the prizewinning *The Heart of Altruism*.

"*The Hand of Compassion* is a compelling and powerful read, a terrific book filled with moving narratives of risk, loss, and sadness, and at the same time, the rescuers' affirmation that all human beings deserve the right to decent treatment. It is an analysis that takes social and political theory out of the text and places the reader in the midst of human suffering and courage."
—James M. Glass,
   Perspectives on Politics

"The autobiographies of the rescuers are substantial additions to the body of Holocaust testimony. To her credit, Monroe is an unobtrusive interviewer and a light-handed editor who allows the stories to unfold in illuminating detail."
—*Choice*

"Infrequently does one read a book that clearly stands as a major contribution to its field. Even less frequently does such a book manage to speak lucidly and intelligibly to two worlds—academia and the general public. This is an extraordinary achievement."
—David Easton, author of *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*

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