

To Risk One's Life for Another: The Moral Psychology behind Rescuing Jews during the Holocaust in Occupied Ukraine

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*"I do what I think is right, not what others think is right ... What would you have done in my place if someone came at night and asked for help? ... One had to be an animal without a conscience not to help."*¹

- Maria Baluszko, peasant rescuer of Jews

Introduction

My doctoral research is focused on the rescue activities, methods, motivations, and moral psychology of ethnic Ukrainian rescuers of Jewish victims of the Holocaust in Eastern Galicia (the south-eastern district of the General Government) and Reichskommissariat Ukraine (RKU). While a substantial focus of my larger project is an enquiry into the nitty-gritty of "how" people rescued and the various questions that emerge from that understanding, this paper addresses the question of "why," under an occupation where rescuing was punishable by death, some bystanders were able to become rescuers, whilst others, amongst them even ethical, non-prejudiced people, were not. This is arguably the most difficult question I pose in my doctoral research and this paper is a preliminary attempt to both evaluate the applicability of past studies on rescue work to the Ukrainian context and determine whether moral philosophy and selected research on moral psychology can offer a useful framework to better understand the factors that drove rescuers to and through their wartime activity.

Before proceeding to my arguments, I would like to invite the reader to accompany me on a visualization. This scenario will play out in your mind privately, so I implore you to engage with it without moral judgement, to free yourself from any pre-conceived notions of socially-acceptable behaviour, and to make yourself amenable to whichever sequence of events intuitively arises in you.

You are the thirty-two-year-old parent of two small children – a seven-year-old girl and a four-year-old boy – both quietly sleeping. You, your spouse, and your children live with your elderly parents in your childhood home. Night has fallen, but your spouse has yet to return home, having left early in the morning to barter a selection of household possessions, some of great sentimental value, for food and supplies in a village half a day's walk away. The war and the occupation, now raging for the better part of a year, have left your family wanting for basic goods; conditions continue to worsen as the

¹ Tec, Nechama. 1986. *When Light Pierced the Darkness Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland*. New York, NY, United States: Oxford University Press, p. 165.

Nazis and their local collaborators become ever harsher, requisitioning everything from eggs to gardening equipment. There is little you can do to avoid it: your house is visible, just four doors down from the schoolhouse the occupants have transformed into their headquarters. Earlier this morning, all your Jewish neighbours were rounded up and marched by column from the town center into a nearby forest. Your ears still sting from every shot and haunting scream of the ensuing massacre. No one came to their rescue, nobody could without paying a terrible price. You fidget about – the anxiety has become suffocating – when, suddenly, you hear a muted knock. Thank heavens! You rush to let your loved one in, but see instead a stranger, breathing heavily, his cheeks hollowed and body stained with dirt and blood. He reaches out a trembling hand and says: “Please, help me. I beg of you. Please, let me in. Save my soul.” What do you do?

The purpose of this visualization – this exercise in empathy – was to enable you, the reader, to project yourself into a hypothetical situation resembling the moment when a bystander either becomes a rescuer or does not. I crafted this scenario with care to make it factually probable, yet it remains just one of hundreds of diverse templates for the meeting of a charge and a potential rescuer. Deciding to remain a bystander does not necessarily mean that one is a “bad person” or is incapable of empathy. In fact, it is probable that the decision not to rescue is very much informed by empathy, which, though popularly celebrated as a precursor to compassion, by its nature, can actually elicit a wide range of reactions, from altruism to avoidance to depreciation of the other to acts of aggression.² Instead of leading to compassion, sometimes empathy results in empathic distress, which is characterized by a strong desire to withdraw from a situation in order to protect oneself. Having said that, there is much evidence to support what psychologist C. Daniel Batson refers to as *the empathy-altruism hypothesis*, which maintains that empathy, in allowing a person to transcend feelings of indifference, increases the probability that said person will help another.³ In any case, in leading you through this visualization, my hope was to equip you with a slightly more practical perspective to enable you to better evaluate the validity of my scholarly observations.

On the basis of my empirical evaluation of nearly 1,100 Yad Vashem-recognized rescue accounts from the Ukrainian context and countless rescue accounts from across Europe, I now put forth several arguments regarding the moral psychology of rescuers, namely that: 1) most people who chose not to rescue Jews ultimately acted, either consciously or not, against their intuitive understanding that killing, enabling killing, or failing to prevent killing are harmful and, therefore, immoral, while rescuers, by contrast, acted in accordance with said understanding; 2) the decision to rescue was fundamentally emotional and not rational, but was always followed shortly thereafter by both moral rationalism and strategic thinking; 3) as suggested by existing sociological and psychological studies on rescuers, rescuers exhibited a very specific combination of personality traits and attitudes; 4) committed rescuers, regardless of their motive for rescuing, were morally absolutist with regard to the success of the rescue operation, yet morally relativist with regard to the methodology

² Szuster, Anna. 2016. “Crucial Dimensions of Human Altruism. Affective vs. Conceptual Factors Leading to Helping or Reinforcing Others.” *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00519.

³ Bloom, Paul. 2014. “Against Empathy,” *Boston Review*, September 10, 2014. bit.ly/2q7tHWG.

of rescue; and 5) the decision to rescue emerged from and was informed by the existence of a very particular “moral identity” that made acting any other way impossible.⁴

Throughout this paper, I highlight time and time again that rescuers, namely those recognized by Yad Vashem and whose rescue accounts and testimony can therefore be readily analysed, had few common denominators, the principal one being that they all rescued. They were heterogeneous in background, motivation, and methodology of rescue. Nevertheless, these individuals also paradoxically constitute a problematically homogenous sample, at least when it comes to extrapolating for insight into broader human character. Their homogeneity lies in the simple fact that they all followed the same approximate trajectory: they started a rescue operation, rescued over a certain period of time, and eventually brought the rescue operation to successful completion. Even those recognized rescuers who eventually let their charges go always found another rescue situation for the victims before doing so or equipped them with the tools (new identities, new skills, new clothing, etc.) to somehow survive without protection, unless the wards themselves rejected further help.

Therefore, despite operating under the constant threat of death, most of the rescuers in this sample (the only sample we will ever have) never experienced what one might say was the ultimate test of rescuer commitment: the choice to either remain rescuers at gunpoint and die or to betray their charges. Barring several important exceptions, the perspective of those rescuers who passed this ultimate test is seldom represented in Yad Vashem’s Righteous files for the simple reason that they would have died along with their charges; nor is the perspective of those rescuers who started to rescue, did so for some time, and then kicked their charges out or otherwise betrayed them represented for the equally as simple reason that their charges did not nominate them for recognition.

In making this point, I in no way intend to cast doubt on the magnificent altruism and compassion that these rescuers embodied. I simply wish to clarify the characteristics of the sample in question, lest any reader find it informative. Most importantly, even this sample includes some individuals who gave their lives in rescuing (usually nominated by charges from an already completed rescue operation) and numerous testimonies mention rescuers who eventually abrogated their responsibilities, both of which ensure that some insight does exist into both martyred rescuers and rescuers who abandoned their charges.

Rescuing as a form of non-violent resistance

Participants in the Holocaust are commonly divided into perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. Though the neutrality demonstrated by permanent bystanders did little to protect victims, occasionally, the bystander transformed into a less explored, but

⁴ According to my calculations, Yad Vashem recognized 2,621 Ukrainian rescuers (engaged in 1,099 unique rescue operations) from 1963 through the end of 2017. The accounts, all of which I have evaluated for my dissertation (for a chapter titled “A statistical analysis of Yad Vashem’s Ukrainian Righteous), collectively extend beyond my geographic areas of expertise, i.e. regions falling under the German occupation, to include areas under the military administration, Romanian occupation (Transnistria), and Hungarian occupation Carpatho-Ukraine). The majority of Ukrainians rescuers, however, resided in territories occupied by the Nazis.

consequential figure: the rescuer.⁵ The transition to rescuer was not determined by social class, education, or locality, nor could it necessarily be predicted based on an individual's beliefs. Counter-intuitively, known anti-Semites, Wehrmacht soldiers, and Nazi Party members, such as Oskar Schindler, sometimes took pity on Jewish victims, whilst entirely unprejudiced and unaffiliated individuals betrayed them. In other cases, individuals of the same background made antithetical decisions when faced with the option of either saving a life or endangering one, a reality perhaps best exemplified in the memoirs of Rabbi David Kahane, who survived the Holocaust in Lviv after finding shelter in the home of Greek Catholic Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky:

“In the early hours of the morning, trains packed with Jews would pass through Lvov on their way to Belzec. As usual, the Jews traveled in seal freight cars with holes boarded up ... The captives would break open the windows and doors and jump off the speeding train ... They were nicknamed ‘jumpers’ ... Some peasants took pity on the jumpers, fed them, and showed them the way back to the city. Other peasants turned them over to the Ukrainian police or the Gestapo.”⁶

The decision to become a rescuer was, therefore, profoundly personal, and any attempt to save Jews, whilst generally non-violent, was amongst the most powerful resistance mechanisms possible under the German occupation.

In both the General Government and RKU, offering assistance to Jews, whether alimentary, residential, or otherwise, was punishable by death. The third decree of General Governor Hans Frank issued in Warsaw on 15 October 1941, for instance, introduced residential restrictions for Jews, noting that Jews leaving the Jewish Quarter without permission would incur the death penalty. This same decree, which was applicable in Distrikt Galizien, subjected all non-Jews providing Jews with shelter or food to the same fate.⁷ Similar notices were posted across cities in the General Government (see Figure 1). In RKU, the Germans exercised far crueller punishment, killing not only rescuers, but also their families (see Figure 2).⁸ They would execute up to 10 surrounding families if a Jew was found in hiding, stated

⁵ Berenbaum, Michael, and Abraham J. Peck, 1998. “Part 10: The Rescuers (Introduction).” In *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined*. Edited by Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck. Bloomington, IN, United States: Indiana University Press, p. 649.

⁶ Kahane, David. 1990. *Lvov Ghetto Diary*. Amherst, MA: United States. University of Massachusetts Press, p. 75-76. Also partially referenced by Historian John-Paul Himka in Himka, John-Paul. 1997. “Ukrainian Collaboration in the Extermination of the Jews during the Second World War: Sorting Out the Long-Term and Conjunctural Factors.” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 13: 170-189.

⁷ “Handbill in German and Polish issued by the SS and Police leader in the Warsaw district announcing the death penalty for those who assist Jews who have left the ghetto without authorization.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. Warsaw. 5 Sep. 1942. English translation: “I remind you that according to the Third Decree of the General Governor’s concerning the residential restrictions in the General Government of 10/15/1941 (VBL; abbreviation for Verordnungsblatt Generalgouvernement, p. 595) not only Jews who have left their designated residential area will be punished with death, but the same penalty applies to anyone who knowingly provides refuge (a hiding place) to such Jews. This includes not only the providing of a night’s lodging and food, but also any other aid, such as transporting them in vehicles of any sort, through the purchase of Jewish valuables, etc.” Handbill accessible here: <https://bit.ly/2Nz8EUS>.

⁸ Zamulinski, Brian Edward. 2007. *Evolutionary Intuitionism: A Theory of the Origin and Nature of Moral Facts*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, p. 15.

Holocaust survivor Riva Braiter in her 1994 testimony to the USHMM.⁹ On some occasions, they would even threaten to take measures against entire villages.¹⁰

Historian Richard C. Lukas remarked in his book *Out of the Inferno: Poles Remember the Holocaust* that “estimates of Jewish survivors in Poland ... do not accurately reflect the extent of the Poles’ enormous sacrifices on behalf of the Jews because, at various times during the occupation, there were more Jews in hiding than in the end survived.”¹¹ The same can be said of Ukrainian sacrifices under German occupation, not least of all because not all Jews who were rescued survived; and, of those who did, many, for a myriad of reasons, never submitted their rescuers’ candidacies to Yad Vashem for the title of the Righteous. Furthermore, in practice, hundreds if not thousands of Ukrainians were executed for rescuing Jews, at least one hundred of them in Eastern Galicia alone.¹²

For comparison, the Dutch rescuers of Anne Frank were not even arrested.¹³ In highlighting the fact that Poles, Ukrainians, and select others risked the death penalty for rescuing Jews under the very laws of the occupation regimes they were subjected to, under no circumstances do I wish to belittle the risks incurred by rescuers living elsewhere in Europe. As punishment for their altruism, rescuers from Western Europe were very often sent to concentration camps, where they were likely to perish. The former head of Yad Vashem’s Department for the Righteous, Mordecai Paldiel, singled out France in his essay “Righteous Gentiles and Courageous Jews: Acknowledging and Honoring Rescuers of Jews” as just one of the countries whose gentile helpers were subjected to such treatment, referring specifically to well-known rescuer Daniel Trocmé from the town of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, who died at Majdanek.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the fact that Poles and Ukrainians, whom the Nazis perceived as subhuman, faced certain death if caught is important, especially in the case of those living in RKU, who rescued at great risk to themselves, their loved ones, and their neighbours. Perceptions of risk inform people’s decision-making, and, for most people, increased perceptions of risk act as a stronger deterrent to action. Furthermore, it is much easier for people to engage in one-off or small acts of kindness, than it is for them to commit to continuous strain and sacrifice, especially when operating with the understanding that said strain and sacrifice are likely to culminate in death. Despite this understanding, Poland and Ukraine respectively occupy first and fourth place in terms of rescuer count out of the 53 countries whose

⁹ Oral history interview with Riva Isakovna Braiter, USHMM, Accession Number: 1995.A.1287.2 | RG Number: RG-50.226.0002.

¹⁰ For claim on threat against entire villages, see Lower, Wendy. 2007. *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine*. Chapel Hill, NC, United States: University of North Carolina Press, p. 134, citing SS and Police Leader Heinrich Behrens’ order of 6 Jul. 1942, ZSA, 1182-IC-I.

¹¹ Lukas, Richard C. 1989. *Out of the Inferno: Poles Remember the Holocaust*. Lexington, KY, United States: University Press of Kentucky, p. 13.

¹² Friedman, Philip. 1980. “Ukrainian-Jewish Relations During the Occupation.” In *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust*. Edited by Philip Friedman, 176–205. New York, NY, United States: Conference on Jewish Social Studies.

¹³ Berkhoff, Karel C. 2008. *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule*. Cambridge, MA, United States: Harvard University Press, p. 85.

¹⁴ Paldiel, Mordecai. 2012. “Righteous Gentiles and Courageous Jews: Acknowledging and Honoring Rescuers of Jews.” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 30 (2): 134-149. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3167/fpcs.2012.300208>.

citizens were recognized as Righteous by Yad Vashem.

On harm, moral disengagement, and the usefulness of self-ascribed motivations

This paper starts from two fundamental premises, the first being the following: Due to the particular nature of the Holocaust in the occupied Soviet Union, most non-Jews in Ukraine would have been aware of what was happening to their Jewish neighbours and would have agreed that these actions, from ghettoization to extermination by bullets, were intended to harm the victims, whether this harm was welcome in the eyes of said non-Jews or not. Furthermore, most people living in Europe, of which Ukraine was a part, on the eve of the Second World War, whether due to exposure to the Judeo-Christian tradition, Enlightenment thought, or other sources of moral values, almost certainly agreed that harming another person was not good (in the sense of not being kind, beneficial, etc.) and, therefore, not virtuous.¹⁵ By the law of syllogism, it would, therefore, be reasonable to deduce that most people living in occupied Ukraine understood that the Holocaust was not virtuous and, by extension, that the virtuous action would have been to fight, resist, or protect one's Jewish neighbours from harm. This may all seem obvious, but the point of this syllogism is to establish that, regardless of their political ambitions or their feelings towards Jews, any Ukrainians who chose not to rescue Jews or otherwise sabotage the Holocaust acted, whether consciously or not, against their better moral judgements on the ethical treatment of human beings.

The complex, social-cognitive mechanism that made it possible for people to stand by despite having an acute understanding of the harm that would befall their Jewish neighbors was *moral disengagement*. Psychologist Albert Bandura determined that self-worth is closely tied with human beings' capacities to adhere to standards of personal moral conduct, more often than not to act in a way that does not lead to harm or that minimizes harm, i.e., in the case of the Holocaust, to become a rescuer. *Moral disengagement* is the process by which a human being grows to disengage from the self-regulation that ordinarily ensures moral conduct to the extent that he or she can violate his or her moral standards all the while maintaining a sense of self-worth.

Bandura identified various "psychosocial maneuvers" by which human beings could selectively disengage from moral self-sanction and come to see inhumane conduct as "benign or worthy," including "1) moral justification, sanitizing language, and advantageous comparison; 2) disavowal of a sense of personal agency by diffusion or displacement of responsibility; 3) disregarding or minimizing the injurious effects of one's actions; and attribution of blame to, and dehumanization of those who are

¹⁵ I purposefully avoid using the word unvirtuous, i.e. bad, in this particular context, because sometimes people commit harmful acts unintentionally. For example, a person, out of aloofness or even simple poor coordination, might accidentally knock another person against a metal pole in a crowded subway and cause injury, i.e. harm. Doing so is clearly not good, but it is not necessarily bad in the strict sense of the word, because it is not borne of malice, i.e. the desire to harm. Nevertheless, regardless of whether harm is intended or unintended, morally justified or unjustified, most people, when asked to assess the goodness of the very notion of harm, independently of any context, would agree, whether due to conditioning or an intuitive understanding of right and wrong, that it is not good to harm.

victimized.”¹⁶ Such mechanisms desensitize people to the heinousness of inhumane acts by dulling their perception of the severity of the harm that ensues from said acts. They all informed the actions of both perpetrators and bystanders in the Holocaust.

Returning to the visualization we explored above, you, the reader, would agree that whichever impulse emerged in you – whether to let the Jewish victim in or not – was, by definition, immediate and emotional. Reasoning kicked in later, even if by mere nanoseconds. This understanding leads us to the second premise of this paper: “intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second,” as summed up by moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt in his book *The Righteous Mind*, an idea that I have chosen to draw on because it was and remains consistent with my own empirical observations of rescuer behavior long before I turned to the discipline of moral psychology to better understand it.

Haidt makes the case that “moral intuitions arise automatically and almost instantaneously, long before moral reasoning has a chance to get started, and those first intuitions tend to drive our later reasoning.”¹⁷ This means that moral reasoning is a tool that humans have evolved to further their own “social agendas” and justify their actions after the fact – an idea that is consistent with *moral disengagement*, but also relevant for understanding the decision-making processes of people who chose to become rescuers.

If you are amongst those readers who impulsively decided not to offer the Jewish victim shelter, you may have told yourself that a detected rescue operation would place your children’s lives in danger – something you simply could not do; or felt a sense of helplessness – as if a small cog in a big wheel – ultimately deciding that your efforts would be futile; or convinced yourself that someone else would take the victim in instead. All of these reasons are manifestations of the psychosocial maneuvers identified by Bandura and whatever your particular reasons were, you likely experienced two defense mechanisms: *intellectualization*, in which a person resorts to thinking over feeling to ease the emotional stress of unconscious conflict, and *rationalization*, in which a person makes sufficiently logical and convincing excuses for controversial feelings as to make said feelings tolerable or even preferable. Both *intellectualization* and *rationalization* are intrinsic to *moral disengagement*.

Rescuers, by contrast, did not experience *moral disengagement*, remained conscious of their judgement that causing harm or failing to prevent harm are not virtuous, and proceeded to act in accordance with that judgement. Nevertheless, they too, just like bystanders, engaged in moral reasoning to justify their impulses. Sometimes this reasoning survived the war as self-ascribed motivations for rescue work, which is why phrases like “we were family,” “Jews are people too,” “it was my duty to help,” and “I’m a good Christian” feature prominently in post-war studies on the “why” of rescue.

For me as a researcher, these self-ascribed motivations have proven very useful for two reasons: firstly, they reveal people’s own perceptions of why they rescued or, at

¹⁶ Bandura, Albert. 1999. “Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities.” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3 (3): 193-209. http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303_3.

¹⁷ Haidt, Jonathan. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York, NY, United States: Pantheon Books, p. xiv.

least, the motives they wish to project and, secondly, when supplemented with a case-by-case assessment of the details of each rescue story, they have helped me categorize rescuers thematically – a feat that would otherwise have been very challenging. It was thanks to both rescuer-ascribed motivations and motivations that I inferred as a researcher that I was able to divide rescuers into those motivated primarily by Judeophilia, or pre-existing relations, or faith, etc. Categorizing rescuers is a helpful way to make the voluminous information about them intellectually manageable. Nevertheless, despite their usefulness, self-ascribed motivations (along with researcher-inferred motivations) are problematic for two reasons.

Firstly, it is difficult to determine whether any given rationalized explanations emerged instantaneously after the decision to rescue was made, emerged slightly later to reinforce the decision to rescue, sprang forth after the completion of a rescue operation (sometimes under the influence of collective memory), or were selected and voiced for an audience as the most socially-acceptable explanation after the fact. My interviews with rescuers in Ukraine suggest that those rescuers who were not exposed to extensive media/academic interest were less likely to have rationalized their decision to rescue to the point that their self-ascribed motivations became internalized as “fact.” In practice this means that those rescuers who were unaccustomed to telling their story in a public or rehearsed way showed greater spontaneity and uncertainty in their storytelling and often paused to think when asked why they rescued Jews or revealed a sense of annoyance at the “self-evident” question. This is just one practical reason why self-ascribed motivations should be taken at face value.

Secondly, self-ascribed motivations are simply not enough to explain why people rescued because, more often than not, those people who chose not to rescue had life circumstances that closely resembled those of rescuers (for example, they had a Jewish spouse or a Jewish employer or believed in the Christian instruction of “love thy neighbor”), yet these circumstances failed to push them into action. This second point is especially important.

Finally, people who decided to rescue, as some of you may have seen in your visualization, experienced a third step that succeeded their intuitive emotional response and their moral rationalism: strategic thinking, i.e. the “how” of rescue, a process I explore extensively in my paper “Carved-out spaces: Holocaust place-making in occupied Ukraine.”

The altruistic personality and the rescuer self

When I first began my academic research on Holocaust rescuers, amongst my many objectives, I endeavoured to chronicle and better understand the lives and decision-making of individuals who I intuitively felt were not only admirable, but exceptionally good: altruistic beings, unique in the depth of their commitment to social responsibility, in their capacity for universalism, in their sheer decency, compassion, and humanity. For what if but a veritably superlative character could bring one human being to risk her life or that of her children for another? Though it was entirely clear early on that rescuers shared few common denominators – they were heterogenous in social class, education, geographic origins, faith, tastes, beliefs, wartime activity, and even self-ascribed motivations for rescuing – my initial

assessment of their collective and individual exceptionalness persevered, story after story, especially as I came to fully appreciate just how difficult it was to become and remain a rescuer in the ruthless historical context in which these rescuers operated.¹⁸

To clarify, I did not naïvely place rescuers onto a pedestal of faultlessness. I acknowledged that rescuers were imperfect inasmuch that they, just like the rest of us, had the potential to make both minor mistakes and even misguided life choices. For example, it seemed unreasonable to assume that rescuers and rescued had spent the entirety of the occupation without having once felt and regrettably expressed some of the commonplace mutual displeasure that is intrinsic to cohabitation.¹⁹ Looking at more extreme examples of “mistakes and misguided life choices,” I even dedicated an entire chapter of my Master’s thesis to fringe case studies of those I dubbed “unlikely rescuers,” i.e. collaborators, auxiliary policemen, nationalists, and other such individuals who, despite the murkiness of their wartime titles, revealed unyielding courage and resolve in rescuing Jews. To be clear, the “unlikely rescuers” I included in that particular chapter were carefully vetted to never have committed harmful acts in their professional capacities, as far as the testimony and historical record showed. They were not unquestionably morally ambiguous figures such as, to take but one example, Kurt Gerstein, a German SS officer who, after witnessing mass murders in Belzec and Treblinka, tried to expose the Holocaust to Western diplomats and Vatican officials out of a sense of great moral anguish, yet continued supplying camps with Zyklon B gas as head of the Hygiene-Institut der Waffen-SS.²⁰ These were far more agreeable “unlikely rescuers” who never directly caused harm and whose collaboration largely involved administrative duties.²¹ Even these individuals, I surmised, must have had an unquestionably humanitarian and moral core to have done such good when it mattered despite their misguided life choices.

The idea that something set rescuers apart from traditional bystanders and perpetrators, not just in action, i.e. the fact of having rescued, but in character, was not unique to me: it was substantiated in significant and extensive sociological and psychological studies on Holocaust rescuers and altruism, many of which I familiarized myself with early on. The most pioneering of these studies include the work of psychologist Perry London, sociologists Nechama Tec, Samuel Oliner, and Pearl Oliner and psychologist Eva Fogelman, all of whom saw rescue work as a form of altruism.²²

In his 1970 study interview-based of 27 rescuers and 42 rescued individuals, Perry London identified three characteristics that rescuers had in common despite their market heterogeneity, arguing that it was these qualities that predisposed them to their altruism, namely 1) a sense of adventure, 2) a strong identification with a

¹⁸ It was difficult to become a rescuer both in terms of volition and logistics.

¹⁹ Though both rescuers and rescued consistently assured me in our interviews that their wartime ordeal relieved them of the quibbles of daily life, maintaining that the threat of hunger and death was too imminent to make room for pettiness, I am inclined to suspect that their memories of minor disagreements were simply short-lived. Despite the occupation, daily life continued, from the agricultural cycle, to schooling, to intimacy, especially as evinced by the children conceived and given birth to by Jews in hiding. So why would the tensions of daily life not make their way into occupied spaces and why would people suddenly cease grumbling about them in quintessentially imperfect human ways?

²⁰ Friedländer Saul. 1969. *Kurt Gerstein: The Ambiguity of Good*. New York, NY, United States: Alfred A Knopf.

²¹ Such individuals constituted a very small minority of both collaborators and rescuers.

²² Nechama Tec and Samuel Oliner are Holocaust survivors. Eva Fogelman is the child of Holocaust survivors.

parental model of moral conduct, and c) and a sense of being socially marginal.²³ London's results were largely confirmed in a subsequent study by sociologist Douglas Huneke, whose interview-based research led him to identify two major categories of rescue operations: 1) rescues as a means to an end other than the rescue and 2) rescues as an end in themselves, each further divided into five sub-groupings.²⁴ Huneke also maintained that rescuers had "a certain worldview that enabled them to interpret and label the persecution of Jews and others as morally repugnant [and] certain skills and experiences that facilitated their taking action." Two critical implications of Huneke's study were that altruistic behavior could be taught and that prejudice could be managed.²⁵

Sociologist Nechama Tec, a Holocaust survivor whose family was rescued by Poles, based her evaluation of rescuers on interviews she conducted in Poland in 1978 – three decades after she and her loved ones relocated to the United States. Tec recorded her interviews on tapes, most of which she "smuggled" out by diplomatic post with the help of an embassy contact.²⁶ In her book, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland*, Tec identified six attributes, communicated here almost verbatim, that rescuers seemed to share, including 1) individuality or separateness from their social environment; 2) self-reliance or independence to act in accordance with personal values; 3) an enduring commitment to stand up for the helpless and needy, even at the expense of one's own safety; 4) a tendency to perceive aid to Jews in a matter-of-fact, unassuming way; 5) an unplanned, unpremeditated beginning to a rescue; 6) and universalistic perceptions that defined Jews not as Jews but as helpless human beings.²⁷ All six attributes are consistently present in the majority of rescue stories I have explored in the Ukrainian context.

Holocaust survivor Samuel Oliner and his wife Pearl Oliner dedicated their academic careers as sociologists to studying rescuer altruism. A cornerstone of their work was the concept of "the altruistic personality." In their eponymous book, the sociologists wrote: "Rescuers, like non-rescuers, worried both before and during the war about feeding, sheltering, and protecting themselves and their families. What distinguished rescuers was not their lack of concern with self, external approval, or achievement, but rather their capacity for extensive relationships – their stronger sense of attachment to others and their feeling of responsibility for the welfare of others, including those outside their immediate familial or communal circles."²⁸ In a nutshell, rescuers felt and acted on a sense of social responsibility that was universalist in nature. Some were propelled by empathy, others by justice and caring.²⁹

²³ London, Perry. 1970. "The Rescuers: Motivational Hypotheses about Christians Who Saved Jews from the Nazis." In *Altruism and Helping Behavior*. Edited by J. Macauley & L. Berkowitz, 241-250. New York: Academic Press.

²⁴ Huneke, Douglas. 1981/82. "A study of Christians who rescued Jews during the Nazi Era," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 9 (1): 144-150.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Tec, Nechama. 1986. *When Light Pierced the Darkness Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland*. New York, NY, United States: Oxford University Press, p. ix.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 188.

²⁸ Oliner and Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality*, p. 249. Oliner, Samuel P., and Pearl M. Oliner. 1992. *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. New York, NY, United States: Simon & Schuster, p. 249.

²⁹ Ibid.

This attitude, in turn, was cultivated through the observation of parents who exhibited caring behavior. Not only did these parents communicate their caring values openly, they also set high standards and expectations for their children to treat others with the same consideration.³⁰ Indeed, many rescuers attribute their altruism, whether to Jews or people in general, to the example set by their benevolent parents. Hundreds if not thousands of rescuers have said this in primary testimony, including from the Ukrainian context. Let us take, for example, the story of Greek Catholic Ukrainian siblings Orest Zahajkewicz and Helena Melnyczuk from Paremsh, who attributed their altruism to taught ethics.³¹ They led a moderately religious life and learned from the example of their parents, who always strove to help people. Their father, a teacher of Polish and Ukrainian literature, had Jewish friends and was often invited to synagogue. As a result of the values imparted on them, Orest and Helena engaged in several rescue operations.³²

In a separate study titled “Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust: A Portrait of Moral Courage,” Samuel Oliner and his team concluded on the basis of 700 interviews with rescuers, bystanders, and rescued survivors from various countries that rescuers “were more likely to endorse pluralistic and democratic values, to reject ethnocentric stereotypes, and to have had friends from different social and religious groups in their youth’ than were non-rescuers.³³ This conclusion is consistent with my own empirical observations on the prominence of what I refer to in my thesis as “pre-existing relations” (including up to two degrees of separation) as a motivating factor behind rescuer work in Ukraine, though it remains far from the only one.³⁴

Rescuers, unlike bystanders, were gifted with the ability ‘to strip away the gauze of Nazi euphemisms and to recognise that innocents were being murdered,’ argued psychologist Eva Fogelman, the child of Holocaust survivors.³⁵ Fogelman maintained that the process of becoming a rescuer involved overcoming “psychic obtuseness” and gaining awareness.³⁶ She also observed that rescuers had an innate sense of empathy and a humane ability to perceive another’s life as equal in value to or more valuable than their own. Regarding incentives, each rescuer had personal reasons for protecting Jews. At the core of most rescuers was the “rescuer self,” argues Fogelman, an altruistic and caring personality likely cultivated from childhood.³⁷

Regarding upbringing, Fogelman argued that imbedded values, as well as warm,

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 249-250.

³¹ Zahajkewicz, Orest, and Helena Melnyczuk. “Oral History Interview with Orest Zahajkewicz and Helena Melnyczuk.” Interview. *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. Oral History Interviews of the Christian Rescuers Project, 18 Feb. 1988. Language: English/Ukrainian.

³² Oliner, Samuel P. 1998. “Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust: A Portrait of Moral Courage.” In *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined*. Edited by Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck, 678-690. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, p. 680.

³³ Ibid, 683. Oliner and his team interviewed 700 rescuers, bystanders, and rescued survivors from various countries.

³⁴ Ostapenko, Raisa. “A statistical analysis of Yad Vashem’s Ukrainian Righteous.” YET TO BE PUBLISHED.

³⁵ Fogelman, Eva. 1998. “The Rescuer Self.” In *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined*. Edited by Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck, 663-677. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, p. 663.

³⁶ Ibid, 663-664. The issue of obtuseness and impediments to emotional intelligence was elaborated upon by psychologist Daniel Goleman.

³⁷ Ibid.

nurturing, cohesive family environments, rendered certain individuals more prone to resist tyranny.²³⁵ Samuel Oliner maintained that the parents of rescuers were more likely to have disciplined their children through reasoning, whilst the parents of non-rescuers were more likely to have relied on verbal or physical punishment, and, therefore, created a precedent for violence.²³⁶ Whilst Oliner's observation may be valid in Western and Central Europe, corporal or verbal punishment is likely to have little effect on the birth of a rescuer in Ukraine for the simple reason that few people were likely to have been exempt from such treatment, whether in the form of discipline (at home or school, etc.) or torture (from the Revolution to the Civil War to collectivization and dekulakization to Stalin's Great Terror, etc.).

In 2005, psychologists Elizabeth Midlarsky, Stephanie Fagin Jones, and Robin P. Corley, arguing that preceding studies, while significant, presented conclusions that were often "highly impressionistic," undertook a systematic study of a sample of carefully chosen comparison groups. They administered psychometric "measures of locus of control, autonomy, risk taking, social responsibility, tolerance/authoritarianism, empathy, and altruistic moral reasoning" to interviews with 80 verified rescuers, 73 bystanders, and 43 pre-war immigrants to the United States.³⁸ Whilst bystanders and pre-war immigrants differed very little from each other, rescuers, the psychologists concluded, were "more altruistic in that they reason in accordance with internalized standards and values, manifest social responsibility, and display a deep concern for the plight of others."³⁹

Numerous psychological studies on altruism have suggested that true altruism is free from selfishness: it is not motivated by expectations of rewards of any kind.⁴⁰ Tec, the Oliners, and Fogelman held the altruistic rescuers they evaluated to these standards. Whilst their individual assessments of the root causes of this altruism reflected different nuances, the scholars all suggested the existence of a framework – a unique, underlying personality – that predisposed rescuers to their future rescue work – an idea that, as established, was constituent with my intuitive view. It was ultimately this altruistic state of being, embodied either actively or passively, consciously or unconsciously long before the opportunity to rescue even presented itself, that rendered rescuers exceptional.

Questioning exceptionalness: were rescuers superlative, banally good, or both?

In mid-2017, despite generous empirical evidence and secondary literature pointing to the contrary, I unexpectedly entertained the possibility that, to borrow Hannah Arendt's term, some rescuers, perhaps even some recognized as Righteous, were not exceptionally good and consistently altruistic, but were instead "banally good." If Arendt used the phrase the "banality of evil" to refer to the actions of people who ended up doing great evil as a side effect of doing their jobs, then I saw the notion of

³⁸ Midlarsky, Elizabeth, et al. 2005. "Personality Correlates of Heroic Rescue During the Holocaust." *Journal of Personality*, 73 (4): 907–934. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.2005.00333.x>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 3, summing up altruism as "a subcategory of prosocial behavior that is based on concern for the other rather than on self-centered or egoistic motives. Expectations of extrinsic reward, reciprocation, or self-enhancement are not motives of altruistic behavior."

the “banality of goodness” as similar, yet more variable: firstly, that some rescuers could have rescued not because they desperately wanted to save another’s life, but for reasons that were ultimately selfish, self-esteem boosting (such as heroism), or socially-gratifying; and secondly, that some rescuers could have been morally “common” (as opposed to exceptional) or selectively altruistic (as opposed to consistently) throughout their lives and that the rescue operation they engaged in during the war was but a snapshot from their lives, as opposed to a full portrait of their habitual comportment or broader personality.

I was prompted to entertain both notions of the “banality of goodness” after a series of unrelated episodes and observations, which, taken separately, were largely insignificant, but collectively nudged me to entertain the prospect of far greater variability in rescuer character. The first was a series of brief conversations with fellow academics whose specialties lie beyond the Holocaust, but who, nevertheless, expressed to me their skepticism about the existence of the altruistic personality. Instead, they conveyed to me their conviction that rescuers fundamentally existed in a “heroic narrative,” i.e. they rescued out of a desire to be heroes and not out of a sense of unadulterated, intuitive goodness. More specifically, these academics suggested that some people may even have rescued not out of a genuine desire to help a human being in need, but to feel good about themselves or to be celebrated for heroic deeds. These comments are reminiscent of traditional arguments that call the very notion of altruism into question by noting that expectations of reciprocity or a sense of satisfaction from helping another, by their very nature, nullify the selflessness of noble acts.⁴¹

The scholars whose work I cited previously were well-versed in these schools of thought and made appropriate clarifications. Just as Douglas Huneke distinguished between those who rescued as a means to an end and those who saw rescuing as an end in itself, Nechama Tec distinguished between *normative altruism* and *autonomous altruism*, and, in practice, those who rescued with the expectation of being rewarded for their efforts and those who rescued with no such expectations. In this context the term “reward” does not refer to the most obvious forms of remuneration, such as money or, in the most atrocious cases, sex. “*Normative altruism* refers to helping behavior [that is] demanded, supported, and rewarded by society,” wrote Tec.⁴² This definition suggests that normative rescuers could have been people who rescued because of pre-conceived notions of what is socially expected of them or socially celebrated, i.e. those who risked societal judgement were they to fail to act or those who would gain a sense of socially-enforced gratification from acts of altruism. In an essay titled “Righteous Christians in Poland,” Tec refers to “the expectation that a mother should donate a kidney for her child, that a friend should help a friend in need, [and] that a child should support an ailing parent” as just three examples of ideas that could lead to acts of *normative altruism*.⁴³ The term can arguably also refer to the altruism shown by many members of resistance organizations, soldiers, and numerous other individuals whose professional duty entailed helping people in need.

⁴¹ Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland*, p. 150, citing Anna Freud, amongst others.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 152.

⁴³ Tec, Nechama. “Righteous Christians in Poland.” *International Social Science Review*, 58 (1): 12-19, p. 13.

The idea that certain rescuers in Ukraine could have been motivated by pre-conceived notions of socially acceptable behavior and/or a sense of heroism seems entirely plausible on the surface. Some historians, for instance, including John-Paul Himka, have rightly observed that cultural elements such as hospitality and generosity could also have played a role in the transition from bystander to rescuer, as poor social skills could be quite damaging to one's reputation.⁴⁴ Regarding heroism, collective memories of atrocities committed, for example, by the pro-Russian ultranationalist Black Hundreds, who incited anti-Ukrainian and anti-Semitic pogroms in the early 20th century, or literary condemnations of anti-Jewish violence and celebrations of rescue work, such as Maxim Gorky short story "Pogrom," could, in theory, have encouraged pro-Jewish heroism in Ukrainian youth.⁴⁵

But notions of heroism or hospitality as bases for *normative altruism* in Ukrainian rescue work show themselves to be insufficient when one is reminded that, even though most people would have been raised to be generous and hospitable and most youth would have been exposed to heroic literature of various sorts in their schooling, a small minority of the population in any given locality turned to rescue work. In fact, it can be argued that Stalin's repressions, in targeting individuals who stood out as too unruly and uncooperative, would have created a broader culture that did not cultivate courage in the face of oppression, but dulled it. Repressions were a factory for bystanders and people who truly internalized Soviet values in their most sophisticated form were less capable of becoming rescuers, because they lacked a sense of spontaneity and individualism.

The argument for *normative altruism* in Ukrainian rescue work ultimately becomes untenable when one realizes that, save for those who rescued for money, sex, or other material goods – rescue operations that are generally considered to not have been altruistic at all, let alone *autonomously* so – there was no imaginable earthly reward for being a rescuer. Most rescuers are unlikely to have anticipated a German defeat until a point so late in the occupation that most were already in the midst of their rescue operations and no rescuers would have known about the future creation of Yad Vashem's Committee for the Righteous. Furthermore, philo-Semitism and universalist attitudes towards Jews were far from the norm at the time of occupation. Despite the statistical prevalence of pre-existing relations as a motivating factor for rescue work, the societal norm was, at best, to tolerate Jews as different and, at worst, to engage in blatant anti-Semitism. These realities and the threat of death all but guaranteed that the opportunity to rescue Jews was not one universally perceived as worthy of celebration at the time. In fact, behavior that was ultimately disadvantageous to Jews and, therefore, in practice, anti-Semitic, was often rewarded by the Nazis. Furthermore, most rescuers rescued in private, which meant that their altruism benefited from no wider social reinforcement. Most importantly, most Ukrainian rescuers, like rescuers from other contexts, continued to downplay the importance of what they had done for decades after the end of a rescue operation and

⁴⁴ Himka, John-Paul. 1997. "Ukrainian Collaboration in the Extermination of the Jews during the Second World War: Sorting Out the Long-Term and Conjunctural Factors." *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 13: 170–189, p. 183. The concepts of hospitality and generosity (Ukrainian: гостинність і щедрість; transliteration: *hostynnist' i shchedrist'*) are important elements in many East European cultures.

⁴⁵ Maxim Gorky's Pogrom was published in the 1901 anthology *Aid to the Jews Suffering from Famine*.

many took their good deeds with them to the grave.⁴⁶

These observations suggest that most rescuers from the Ukrainian and Polish contexts and those similar to them acted out of *autonomous altruism*, which Tec defined as “selfless help, which is neither reinforced nor otherwise rewarded by society. Indeed, autonomous altruism may be opposed by society and may at times involve grave risks not only of physical injury but of social ostracism.”⁴⁷ In practice, this social ostracism is best exemplified in cases where neighbors denounce rescuing neighbors or disapproving family members denounce their rescuer spouses, parents, children, or siblings.

Moreover, these conclusions are supported by psychologists Peter Suedfeld and Stefanie de Best in their paper “Value Hierarchies of Holocaust Rescuers and Resistance Fighters,” which scored 47 resistance fighters and 50 Holocaust rescuers on eleven major value categories and concluded that the values of benevolence, universalism, and spirituality rated significantly higher amongst rescuers than they did amongst resistance fighters and that the opposite pattern was true for the value of security, suggesting that rescuers operated out of a different mentality from resistance fighters (and similar heroes), a mentality that is strongly reminiscent of the personality types explored by Tec, the Oliners, and Fogelman.

The reasoning delineated above should have been sufficient to dispel any doubts that the majority of rescuers acted out of the same selfless, caring altruism explored in previous studies on rescuers, but my sense that there was something to the second notion of the “banality of goodness” persisted. The second notion was borne in August 2017, when a rescuer I found especially admirable – for the purposes of this anecdote *rescuer A* – spent the last half hour of our interview insisting that the chairman of the local Jewish organization had purposefully and maliciously misspelt said rescuer’s name in correspondence to Yad Vashem, as a result of which the rescuer’s name was then misspelt in his Righteous Certificate of Honour.⁴⁸ While I empathized with this rescuer and felt a great deal of sympathy for him, I recognized

⁴⁶ I strove to focus my research exclusively rescuers acting out of *non-normative* or *autonomous altruism*, as I share Phillip Friedman’s conviction that the term “righteous” can only be applied to those people who perform noble deeds without remuneration (see Philip Friedman’s “‘Righteous Gentiles’ in the Nazi Era”). Nevertheless, in some circumstances, the criteria determining whether remuneration, either material or metaphoric, was present in a rescue operation is quite subjective. For instance, whilst Yad Vashem fastidiously strive to filter out rescuers who helped Jews in exchange for money, the exception being those who used their wards’ money to buy food for the Jews in question, some “bad eggs” have fallen through the cracks. The Righteous are evaluated almost exclusively on the basis of what the rescued said about them and it has been the case that rescued individuals consciously concealed deplorable facts about their rescuers. One of the most scandalous examples of this was the story of twelve-year-old charge Molly Applebaum, then Melania Weissenberg, who, fifteen years after the recognition of her adult Polish rescuer as Righteous, revealed in her memoir *Buried Words* that she had been subjected to sexual encounters with him – a reality that she failed to reveal to Yad Vashem. In one of my interviews in Ukraine, I learned from the child of Yad Vashem-recognized rescuers (who herself was alive during the war, but too young to have met Yad Vashem’s age limit for the Righteous) that her family’s Jewish wards paid a magnificent dowry in gold for the interviewee’s older sister, whose wedding took place in the midst of occupation. Additionally, one can never say whether rescuers truly never felt a sense of satisfaction from their good deeds, never expected reciprocity, or never counted on karmic justice and recompense.

⁴⁷ Tec, Nechama. *When Light Pierced the Darkness Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland*, p. 152.

⁴⁸ The Chairman included an umlaut over the Russian letter e in the rescuer’s last name, thereby changing the sound of the letter to “yo,” as opposed to “e.”

that most grammaticians or linguists would agree that the error in question was either commonplace, forgivably understandable, or an accidental Russification, yet *rescuer A* was relentless in his conviction that he had been a victim of targeted malevolence.

In August 2018, after another rescuer – *rescuer B* – an acquaintance of, by then deceased, *rescuer A*, having learned that I had interviewed *rescuer A* the previous summer after I identified him in a photograph, she spent the end of her interview denigrating *rescuer A* and insisting that he was not a virtuous person, because he, according to *rescuer B*, used to beat his wife. While I am in no position to pass judgement one way or another on either of the accusations and, ultimately, appreciated that both rescuers felt comfortable enough with me to voice their grievances, I could not help but find myself taken aback.

Most modern humans are socially conditioned to perceive anyone's unprompted readiness to damage another's reputation as impertinent, both in the sense of being irrelevant to the conversation at hand and in the sense of being discourteous. *Rescuer A* and *rescuer B* displayed behavior that deviated from my expectations and arguably broader societal expectations for what constitutes decorum, regardless of the truthfulness of what they conveyed to me.⁴⁹

In truth, a part of me felt immensely displeased with myself for being judgmental. Despite the extent of my empathy for rescuers, I cannot with certainty imagine the breadth of the anxiety that they experienced throughout the war and the lasting, post-traumatic stresses that followed. Perhaps the ability to make petty complaints in the company of a person they trust was just an effective way to let off steam. Or, perhaps, as a result of their hypersensitivity to others' suffering – a state that psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, a great defender of empathy, referred to as empathic *hyperarousal* – these rescuers had simply grown tired, tired of always feeling other people's pain, of always giving other people the benefit of the doubt, and of always acting altruistically to the point of exhaustion. These rescuers could simply be empathically burnt out.

Compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatic stress, is a diagnosable condition that was first identified in nurses in the 1950s, but can affect any person who cares for victims of disaster, illness, or trauma for an extended period of time. Amongst the many symptoms that the condition can cause in caregivers of patients with dementia, for example, are a decrease in empathy and compassion over time, decreased involvement in caregiving, disgust, and resentment, especially when the act of caregiving decreases the time that said caregivers have at their disposal to focus on themselves or foster relationships other than those that require their empathic attention.⁵⁰ It could be the case that the trauma of their wartime rescuer operations combined with a post-war life in a society that refused to acknowledge their experiences and a lifetime of empathy and compassion contributed, with time, to an adapted compassion fatigue in some rescuers.

⁴⁹ Such "deviations" from exceptionally good comportment amongst rescuers are rare in interviews, but still more frequent than I had originally thought.

⁵⁰ Day, Jennifer R., and Ruth A. Anderson. 2011. "Compassion Fatigue: An Application of the Concept to Informal Caregivers of Family Members with Dementia." *Nursing Research and Practice* 2011: 1–10. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1155/2011/408024>.

Whilst *rescuer A* and *rescuer B* exhibited rather minor deviations from expected behavior, other rescuers revealed far more concerning, even deep-seated deviations that could not be explained by compassion fatigue. For example, on one occasion in August 2018, a Seventh-Day Adventist rescuer, despite having partaken in a very impressive rescuer operation during the war, confided to me that she used to read passages from the New Testament to her charges out of proselytical considerations (i.e. with the intention of converting her Jewish charges to Christianity) before openly stating that she considered the Holocaust to be punishment for the Jews' crime of deicide. Similarly, in an interview with political scientist Kristen Renwick Monroe, Margot, a wealthy German-born rescuer who had spent the war in Holland, confided that she took the local Gestapo commander as a lover during the war and considered him a friend, but that when she had the opportunity to save him at the war's end, she instructed the resistance to kill him without a second thought out of a general feeling of spite against Nazis for killing her fiancé and because, in the past, the commander in question had shown little compassion for young Dutch people rounded up on the street for work in German factories in the east.⁵¹

Confronted with numerous such episodes where rescuer behavior deviated, either during the war or after the war, from my expectations for rescuer behavior, I eventually realized that rescuers did not necessarily hold themselves to rigid standards of ethical and altruistic conduct in all circumstances throughout their lives and that even those who did, sometimes, failed to live up to their own expectations. Furthermore, I realized that the fact of having rescued, despite its traumatic and superlatively virtuous purpose, was not so transformative as to permanently put rescuers above ordinary human pettiness, suspiciousness, and even self-righteousness. The same can be said of Holocaust survivors, some of whom exhibited a similar unprompted readiness to criticize neighbours and acquaintances I had never met during our interviews, despite being lovely overall and seeming immensely honourable. While my conclusions may seem utterly obvious to most people, for me they were eye-opening at the time and ultimately healthy, because they revealed to me that, despite believing that I did not put rescuers on a "pedestal of faultlessness" as I claimed earlier in this paper, I was guilty of idealizing them to some extent.

So I dismissed both of my notions of the "banality of goodness," but not without coming to the important conclusion that, despite the heavy burdens that they carried during the war, some rescuers were imperfect in their day-to-day lives. This in itself was quite reassuring, because it suggested that rescuers could slide into great acts of altruism without necessarily embodying altruism as an ontological state on a regular basis. Whilst these conclusions may seem of little consequence, to me they are significant, because they remind me that a person's daily behavior is not necessarily a reliable indicator of said person's capacity for virtuous behavior or sacrifice in a time of crisis. The converse is also true: a person who partakes in little acts of kindness on a daily basis may not be capable or willing to make sacrifices when it truly matters.

Holocaust rescuers' human failures did nothing to take away from the truly altruistic act of having saved a victim's life during the Holocaust and the fact of having rescued is, ultimately, the only thing that rescuers have in common with each other: regardless of their motivation, regardless of the constraints they find themselves in,

⁵¹ Monroe, Kristen Renwick. 2006. *The Hand of Compassion: Portraits of Moral Choice during the Holocaust*. Princeton, NJ, United States: Princeton University Press.

these rescuers made the decision to rescue and saw it through. It is the action of transitioning from bystander to rescuer that, in practice, makes rescuers exceptional.

Akrasia: When thoughts and actions clash

Growing up in New York City, I always found solace in the understanding that New Yorkers, despite the many assumptions about them, have a tendency to be there for each other when it matters most. Whilst this mentality was best exemplified in the city's unity in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, for me it manifested itself in many different ways throughout my life, from heart-warming stories of police officers offering homeless people clothing in the winter to the near certainty that someone will come up to ask if you are okay if you look sad. One of the most memorable examples of this mentality in action is the story of the "Subway Samaritan," Wesley Autrey. On January 2, 2007, Autrey, a construction worker and Navy veteran, saved the life of film student Cameron Hollopeter, who fell onto the tracks of the 137th Street – City College subway station after suffering a seizure. In an incredible act of altruism, Autrey dove onto the tracks, but, realizing that he lacked the time to get both Hollopeter and himself to safety, threw himself over the student's body and held him down as the train passed over them. Both men survived.

Similar stories of subway heroes grace the papers on a yearly basis, but sadly, even in New York, there is no guarantee of a rescue. On the afternoon of December 3, 2012, for example, when fifty-eight-year-old Ki Suk Han of Queens found himself desperately struggling to climb back onto the platform of a subway station after being pushed onto the tracks, nobody came to his rescue. Instead, "onlookers screamed, shouted and frantically waved their hands and bags in a bid to get the downtown Q train to stop," read a *NY Post* article written about the incident the following day. The train did not stop quickly enough and Han tragically lost his life. Whilst, the inaction of the bystanders was striking and incited great outrage, the most shocking aspect of this story was the fact that seconds before the collision, *NY Post* photographer R. Umar Abbasi, who happened to be on the platform a short distance from Han, managed to snap a photograph of the victim's final moments clawing his way to safety on the path of an oncoming train. In widespread indignation, Abbasi was accused of prioritizing an image over Han's life.

We, as human beings, know that there is often a dissonance between theory and practice, or thought and action, and namely between believing in a value and acting in accordance with that value when the time comes to do so. As evidenced by the failure of bystanders in the story of Ki Suk Han, this dissonance is arguably never more pronounced than in situations of life and death. In a city where there are countless precedents of people risking personal injury to help others in crisis and an unspoken rule that helping someone is always the right thing to do, no one even tried to pull Han off the tracks. Similarly, millions of people stood by during the Holocaust, despite claiming to espouse humanitarian Christian values, whilst their Jewish neighbors were led to their deaths.

Looking beyond the mechanism of moral disengagement, what causes otherwise perfectly ethical and moral beings to reject the very values they often swear by? Is it ultimately fear, sheer hypocrisy, laziness, convenience, selfishness, a combination of them all?

Sometimes, despite being prepared to act in accordance with one's judgement, a person is limited by physical or logistical challenges. For example, a person incapacitated in a wheelchair might wholeheartedly want to pursue a thief that has run off with the handbag of an elderly woman but find himself physically unable to do so, or a child might be desperate to help an aging parent pay a daunting medical bill but find his capacity to do so inhibited by his own overwhelming student loans. Similarly, some bystanders who were not only capable of becoming rescuers, but were eager to rescue, found themselves inhibited by physical and logistical constraints during the war. I explore the limitations of such "unactualized rescuers" in my paper "Carved-out spaces: Holocaust place-making in occupied Ukraine," noting that, in some instances, the decision not to rescue ultimately seemed more virtuous than the decision to rescue, particularly when there was strong reason to believe that the methodology of rescue would have been profoundly and irreversibly detrimental to one's charge.⁵² My observations on "unactualized rescuers" who never transitioned to active rescue work echo the suggestions of psychologist Elizabeth Midlarsky that only those individuals who perceived themselves as competent and resourceful could become rescuers.⁵³ Such "unactualized rescuers," however, were an infinitesimal minority of the bystanders who chose not to rescue.

It is possible that the reason that *most* bystanders failed to become rescuers despite understanding just how harmful the Holocaust was can be reduced to the Greek concept of *akrasia*, or the state of acting against one's better judgement through weakness of will. *Akrasia* exists, as clarified by moral philosopher Donald Davidson, when an agent genuinely believes that *a* would be the better course of action than *b*, but, whilst knowing that there is nothing preventing him from doing *a*, *intentionally* does *b*.⁵⁴ Banal examples of *akrasia* include succumbing to the desire to buy a 300-euro vacuum cleaner when 300 euros constitutes $\frac{3}{4}$ of your monthly food budget despite judging that the better course of action would be to hold off on the purchase to avoid going hungry or binge-watching an entire season of your favorite television show during finals week despite judging that the better course of action would be to prepare for exams. *Akrasia*, as Davidson interpreted it, can lend itself to self-sabotage and/or regret, including in the case of those bystanders who failed to act in accordance with their moral standards and refused to rescue, overcoming their *moral disengagement* only when it was too late. "Weakness of will," however, does not appear to have been a factor in all situations where bystanders refused to become rescuers.

Some bystanders, despite strongly believing that *a* was the best course of action in theory, ultimately decided, when the choice presented itself, that *b* was better for them, i.e. that they were willing to sacrifice *a* and could still live with themselves having done so. In practice, this decision was strongly facilitated by *moral disengagement*, but that did not make said decision any less real and consequential.

A categorical imperative through relativist means: a case for Kantian consequentialism?

⁵² For example, rescuing a child in a dark box and having no secure means to allow said child to go for walks or even stretch his or her limbs for a period of two years.

⁵³ Fogelman, "The Rescuer Self," pp. 664 and 666.

⁵⁴ Stroud, Sarah, and Larisa Svirsky. 2019. "Weakness of Will." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, October 4, 2019. <https://stanford.io/336Egl2>

One evening in June 2019, I found myself evaluating the applicability of the ideas explored in the previous section to several relatively minor episodes in which perfectly kind and generous acquaintances of mine from various countries across the world chose to act in ways that contradicted what they professed to be their better judgements. I quickly understood that my evaluation could only go so far, because I had limited insight into their moral reasoning at the time of action. So instead, my mind turned to the alternative: to instances in which other acquaintances of mine from across the world acted precisely as they always said they would when presented with situations where doing so caused substantial inconvenience or even necessitated great sacrifice.

I was struck by four realizations: firstly, that most of these individuals – let us refer to this majority as *group A* – happened to consistently act in accordance with the *particular values in question* in all situations that required it and, secondly, that they treated *these particular values* as sacrosanct and unbreachable. For them, acting in accordance with said values was a question of fundamental decency, even honor, where doing otherwise would not only be unconscionable, but unbearable. Thirdly, I realized that a few of these individuals – perhaps a mere two or three, henceforth referred to as *group B* – *always* acted in accordance with *all* of their professed values in all circumstances, even to their detriment, without showing an ounce of regret. For members of *group B*, the same logic applied: they treated *all* of their values as sacrosanct and unbreachable and were especially absolutist with regard to their moral conduct, all the while being surprisingly pluralistic, i.e. respectful of others' diversity.

Thinking back to interview after interview in which rescuers told me that they “didn’t have a choice” but to rescue Jews, “simply couldn’t have acted otherwise,” “had a moral, Christian, and human duty to help a soul in need,” or “couldn’t bear the thought of not rescuing,” my fourth realization was that rescuers, regardless of their self-ascribed motivations or the extent to which they were perfectly good on a daily basis, treated the “value” of rescuing or of being altruistic in the same way as the selection of my acquaintances who comprised *group A* and *group B*.⁵⁵ It then dawned on me that, if the only thing that truly united rescuers and made them exceptional was the fact that they transitioned from bystander to rescuer, it was because, for them, the need to “love thy neighbor” (or whatever other fundamental principle it was that drove their altruistic rescue operation) seemed to be an integral, indelible part of their very identities as humans. These values were integrated into the core of each rescuer’s essence, which made it impossible to default to any other course of action, regardless of the death penalty and other risks. Most interestingly, rescuers too, based on the conclusions I reached in my discussion of the “banality of goodness,” could be divided into a *group A* and a *group B*, where those in *group A* integrated selected values to a “point of no return,” including those values that made rescuing unavoidable, and those in *group B* integrated all of their values to a “point of no return.” *Group B* rescuers, to use the language of the sociological study cited earlier, can be considered embodiments of the “altruistic personality” or Aristotelean moral exemplars. Also as concluded in my discussion of the “banality of goodness,” neither group is necessarily relieved of day-to-day human pettiness.

⁵⁵ Oliner, Samuel and Pearl Oliner, p. 250. The Oliners also observed that rescuers were “more sensitive than others to violations that threaten their moral values, they may seek out opportunities to help.”

These thoughts reminded me of several important ideas from moral philosophy, including the notion of the *categorical imperative*, introduced by Immanuel Kant in his 1785 *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Perhaps the quintessential iteration of ruled-based, deontological ethics, Kant's *categorical imperative* denotes an unconditional moral obligation to act in a way that one would will to become universal law. Holocaust rescuers perceived the act of rescuing as a *categorical imperative* and held themselves accountable to morally absolutist standards of behavior when it came to becoming a rescuer, remaining a rescuer, and completing a rescue operation successfully. In practice this meant that, whilst a rescuer could anxiously doubt the success of his rescue operation or question the wisdom of having put his family in harm's way, he would never doubt that righteousness of the decision to rescue because, from a deontological perspective, it was the right thing to do.

The applicability of Kant's *categorical imperative* to rescuers is, nevertheless, limited, because, in restricting behavior to rules that could be instituted as universal laws of nature, the principle does not tolerate actions such as lying or theft. For example, if a rescuer were asked by a German whether he was hiding a Jew, the *categorical imperative* would obligate said rescuer to tell the truth. In practice, however, rescuers readily lied for their charges and engaged in a wide breadth of other behaviors that Kant would have philosophically found intolerable, from prostituting themselves for food to harmlessly (relatively speaking) cooperating with the Nazis in order to secretly steal resources that could prove useful in the rescue (such as blank passports).

It can, therefore, be said that rescuers were morally relativist with regard to the methodology of rescue and operated in a framework of situational ethics – a form of consequentialism that takes into account the context of an act and allows for ethical flexibility in light of it, as opposed to judging said act in absolutist terms and limiting its development to universal codes of conduct.

Having thus realized that rescuers inadvertently reconciled two schools of moral philosophy that are traditionally considered to be incompatible, I wanted to explore these notions from a scientific perspective. But, unfortunately, not being a psychologist or sociologist by education, I did not immediately know where to start.

On moral identity and the integration of values

Later that same week, I found myself perusing the stacks of Columbia University's Butler Library, specifically those of the 12th floor, which is home to several hundred books on Holocaust rescuers and related subjects. I selected a few books at random, picking each of them off of its shelf for no other reason than that it attracted me, and checked them out to read. Most, whilst interesting, ended up offering summaries of rescue operations, some already familiar to me, but one book was entirely unique and, as if by divine intervention, was the first book I had ever come across to directly engage in a scientific discussion of the impressionistic conclusions I had made earlier that week. This book – a veritable masterpiece – was *The Hand of Compassion* by political psychologist Kristen Renwick Monroe.

Monroe's six major findings, as beautifully and comprehensively summarized in an essay published two years after the publication of her book, were as follows:

(1) Self-image is the central psychological variable, with rescuers, bystanders, and Nazi supporters revealing dramatically different self-concepts. (2) Identity constrains choice for all individuals, not just rescuers. Understanding identity helps decipher the speaker's ethical perspective and reveals how values provide content and moral specificity to a general perspective and empathic world view. (3) Character and self-image are not all. A critical ethical aspect of identity is relational, having to do with the speaker's sense of self in relation to others and to the world in general. Hence, we need to decipher the speaker's worldview. (4) The ethical importance of values works through the fashion in which values are integrated into the speaker's sense of self and worldview. (5) Personal suffering, in the form of past trauma, heightens awareness of the plight of others for rescuers; for bystanders and Nazis, however, it increases a sense of vulnerability manifesting itself in a defensive posture and heightened ingroup/outgroup distinctions. Finally, (6) speakers' cognitive categorization systems carry strong ethical overtones. The dehumanization that accompanies genocide works through the reclassification of 'the other' and is closely related to a sense of moral salience, the feeling that another's suffering is relevant for oneself.⁵⁶

Whilst all of Monroe's findings were consistent with my own empirical observations and the many ideas explored thus far in this paper, point four is especially important for my present analysis of moral identity. Monroe based her conclusions on the "integration of values" on the research of psychologists Anne Colby and William Damon, as delineated in their 1992 book *Some do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment* and 1993 paper "The Uniting of Self and Morality in the Development of Extraordinary Moral Commitment."⁵⁷ With the help of 22 "moral philosophers, theologians, ethicists, historians, and social scientists," Colby and Damon summarized "moral exemplars" as people who show: "1) a sustained commitment to moral ideals or principles that include a generalized respect for humanity, or a sustained evidence of moral virtue; 2) a disposition to act in accord with one's moral ideals or principles, implying also a consistency between one's actions and intentions and between the means and ends of one's actions; 3) a willingness to risk one's self-interest for the sake of one's moral values; 4) a tendency to be inspiring to others and thereby to move them to moral action; and 5) a sense of realistic humility about one's own importance relative to the world at large, implying a relative lack of concern for one's own ego."⁵⁸ The 22 scholars also named 84 individuals they believed to be moral exemplars, 23 of whom Colby and Damon both interviewed and presented with two standard dilemmas traditionally used to assess stages of moral judgement as identified by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg – the father of the study of moral development.

⁵⁶ Monroe, Kristen Renwick. 2008. "Cracking the Code of Genocide: The Moral Psychology of Rescuers, Bystanders, and Nazis during the Holocaust." *Political Psychology* 29 (5): 699-736. 10.1111/j.1467-9221.2008.00661.x.

⁵⁷ Bergman, Roger. 2002. "Why Be Moral? A Conceptual Model from Developmental Psychology." *Human Development* 45 (2): 104-124. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1159/000048157>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Colby and Damon found, as summed up by Monroe, that moral exemplars differed from others not in their moral beliefs, but in the *extent* to which said beliefs were a part of their sense of self, where the self and morality intrinsically linked.⁵⁹ “When there is perceived unity between self and morality,” Colby and Damon wrote, “judgement and conduct are directly and predictably linked and action choices are made with great certainty.”⁶⁰

In an essay titled “Why be Moral? A Conceptual Model from Developmental Psychology,” psychologist Roger Bergman offers a useful clarification of Colby and Damon’s conclusions, writing that “when self and morality are so closely intertwined ... the Thought/Action problem is, one might say, dissolved ... It is not a question of ego strength overcoming temptation, for when self and morality are so united as in these exemplars, temptation, in the normal sense of giving in to self-centered desires, simply ceases to be a factor.”⁶¹ Indeed, Colby and Damon noted that *none* of the moral exemplars they interviewed saw their moral choices as an exercise in self-sacrifice. “They do not seek martyrdom. Rather than denying the self, they define it with a moral center. They seamlessly integrate their commitments with their personal concerns, so that the fulfillment of the one implies the fulfillment of the other ... In the end, it is this unity between self and morality that makes them exceptional.”

Monroe found further support for her empirical observations in the work of moral psychologist Augusto Blasi, amongst the first scholars to propose that moral identity could be a motivating factor for moral action.⁶² Blasi had found an explanation for the gap between moral thought and moral action in the work of social psychologist Leon Festinger, who is famous for developing the theories of cognitive dissonance and social comparison. Monroe referred specifically to Blasi’s 1983/1984 *Self Model*, in which he maintained that human beings’ tendency towards self-consistency dynamically supports “the transition from a judgement of responsibility to action,” whereby not acting “according to one’s judgement should be perceived as a substantial inconsistency, as a fracture within the very core of the self, unless neutralizing devices are put into operation.”⁶³

“For Blasi,” Monroe summed up, “it is the drive to have consistency among beliefs, thoughts, and action that becomes the engine that drives moral action. Where moral beliefs are integrated into the self, immoral action threatens to render the self incoherent.”⁶⁴ Psychologist Daniel Lapsley’s saw in Blasi’s conclusions a suggestion that acting against one’s judgement would be a betrayal of the self, rather than a betrayal of a moral principle, as per the viewpoint of psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Monroe, *Hand of Compassion*, p. 223. See also Colby, Anne, and William Damon. 1994. *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment*. New York, NY, United States: Free Press, p. 301.

⁶⁰ Bergman.

⁶¹ Bergman, p. 116.

⁶² Blasi, Augusto. 1980. “Bridging moral cognition and moral action: A critical review of the literature.” *Psychological Bulletin*. 88 (1): 1-45. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.88.1.1>.

⁶³ Blasi, Augusto. 1983. Moral cognition and moral action: A theoretical perspective. *Developmental Review*, 3 (2): 178-210, p 201. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0273-2297\(83\)90029-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0273-2297(83)90029-1).

⁶⁴ Monroe, Kristen Renwick, *Hand of Compassion*, p. 223.

⁶⁵ Bergman, p. 120, citing Lapsley, Daniel K. 1996. *Moral Psychology*. Boulder, CO, United States: Westview Press, p. 86.

Lapsley's clarification of the importance of responsibility and fidelity to oneself in Blasi's theory validates the conclusions reached in our earlier discussion of normative and autonomous altruists, with rescuers falling into the latter category, whose good deeds are "neither reinforced nor otherwise rewarded by society." Not only was external reinforcement absent because rescuer operations were often secret, but the need for external reinforcement was entirely nullified, because the opinions of outsiders would have ultimately had little effect one way or another on rescuers' self-perceptions had they failed to rescue (and thereby achieve self-consistency.) It is here that Blasi's hypothesis on self-consistency is well complemented by Albert Bandura's idea that self-worth is closely tied with one's capacity to adhere to what one has designated as standards of moral conduct.

Rescuers, as morally mature individuals with well-integrated values were their very own judge, jury, and executioner. For them, conscience was an ontological state (a state of being) and social responsibility (a sense of responsibility for others) was reinforced by accountability to themselves. Their rescue work was, therefore, propelled by self-accountability and an understanding that who they truly were as human beings was only as good as the ethical decisions they made when no one else was watching.

Colby and Damon clarify in their 1992 book that integration is something that all human beings experience, but that moral exemplars differ in terms of the strength of integration.⁶⁶ The fact that there is a spectrum of intensity of value integration suggests that this mechanism is well-adapted to produce the differences between those rescuers I identified as belonging to *group A* and those I identified as belonging to *group B*, whereby values are integrated selectively in *group A* and comprehensively in *group B*.

It is important to note that while Colby and Damon, Blasi, and Bandura all offer crucial insights into the mechanisms that enable people to act in a manner that reflects their moral principles, they do not necessarily offer insight into the permanence of value integration (i.e. whether values can be de-integrated), especially when the moral actions that ensue from values are not isolated incidents or short-term commitments, but long-term projects, requiring perseverance, consistency, discipline, and relentless adherence to one's principles even under threat of death, which was the precise conditions in which most Holocaust rescuers operated in the east of Europe. It can be argued, for example, that for a truly altruistic personality to experience *compassion fatigue* would require either a gradual de-integration of values or a loosening of expectations to act in accordance with integrated values.

As I implied earlier in this paper, because of the paradoxical homogeneity of the heterogenous sample of rescuers, it is difficult to fully explore questions of perseverance and discipline, because it cannot be said with certainty that absolutely all of the rescuers in the sample would have remained committed to their course if their perceived risk became an actual and imminent threat. Even so, these rescuers demonstrated their commitment to their rescuer operations amidst many other grave and tangible threats and stresses, from hunger to disease to anxiety from perceived risk, which is why it is reasonable to conclude that the integration of their values was

⁶⁶ Colby and Damon, p. 301.

strong enough to motivate them and fuel them through the rescue operation.

Psychologist Bergman provided a use analysis of what insight Blasi's theory provides into the links between moral motivation, moral action, and moral identity. Bergman wrote:

Blasi's difference from Kohlberg would seem to lie in his insistence that moral understanding *acquires* motivational power *through its integration into the structure of the self*, into one's moral identity, and not simply because such motivational power is intrinsic to morality ... According to this theory or model, moral understanding gives shapes to personal identity even as that identification with morality shapes one's sense of personal responsibility *and* unleashes moral understanding's motivational power to act in a manner consistent with what one knows and believes. In this way, the objective and the subjective, the universal and the personal, the rational and the affective and volitional, are integrated ... The best answer to the question, Why be moral?, may thus be, Because that is who I am, or, Because I can do no other and remain (or become) the person I am committed to being.⁶⁷

Returning to the work of Nechama Tec, Samuel and Pearl Oliner, and Eva Fogelman, it is likely that successful rescuers possessed the necessary commitment, perseverance, and discipline to see their rescue operations through completion because of their specific personalities and, in particular, because of the traits they cultivated in themselves through observing the same traits in moral exemplars, such as parents. It is perhaps in this way that an aspect of Aristotelian virtue ethics joins the ranks of deontology and consequentialism in informing the morality of rescuers: character can be developed through habituation to the right ideas.

Nevertheless, because of numerous examples of rescue accounts in which one sibling rescued and another sibling did not rescue or even betrayed the rescuing sibling despite having had the same upbringing, it is certain that neither the values that one integrates nor the extent of integration can exclusively be informed by example or other types of nurture.

Both the moral values that rescuers integrated into their sense of self and the strength of integration were likely the result of a combination of what they observed in the people who surrounded them and what emerged from an intuitive understanding of right and wrong and who they were as humans.

On transcending the limitations of empathy and enabling "rehumanization"

Samuel Oliner maintained that eight-seven percent of rescuers interviewed in his study "cited at least one ethical or humanitarian consideration in their actions."⁶⁸ Amongst these considerations were justice and compassion. Nechama Tec

⁶⁷ Bergman, pp. 121 and 123.

⁶⁸ Oliner, Samuel P. "Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust: A Portrait of Moral Courage," p. 679.

maintained that ninety-five percent of rescuers in the General Government claimed to have helped due to “the need of the Jews,” twenty-six percent – because it was a Christian duty, and fifty-two percent – in protest against the occupation.⁶⁹ Non-rescuers, by contrast, often felt exempt from civil responsibility and were more “unaffected by the suffering of others, more detached, and less sensitive to other people’s helplessness,” she wrote.⁷⁰ The overall picture is that rescuers empathized with Jewish victims (and showed compassion on the basis of that empathy) more than did bystanders.

As discussed earlier in this paper, empathy is a very powerful mechanism that enables human beings to transcend feelings of indifference by imagining themselves in the shoes of another. In recent years, neuroscience has even come to show that some of the neural pathways that are activated when we feel pain ourselves are also engaged when we observe another’s suffering.⁷¹ But, whilst empathy is an entryway to action, by itself it is simply not enough. It is compassion that enables an empathetic person to move from the passive state of consolation to the active state of helpfulness.

Several psychologists, whilst acknowledging the importance of empathy, have made the argument that empathy can even be detrimental, especially as the basis of public policy, because of its significant limitations. Psychologist Paul Bloom, for example, argues that “empathy is biased; we are more prone to feel empathy for attractive people and for those who look like us or share our ethnic or national background. And empathy is narrow; it connects us to particular individuals, real or imagined, but is insensitive to numerical differences and statistical data.”⁷²

It is these limitations that lead us, to take one example, to feel profound sorrow at the death of a person we barely knew in our own community and feel nothing upon reading a new story about the death of hundreds in a tragedy thousands of miles away. It is also these limitations that lead us to justify seemingly benign decisions that enable those in our inner circles to flourish at the expense of others. Empathy can also be selective to the extent that we choose to feel empathy for those whose plight we identify as our own or similar to our own, which very often leads us to miss both the bigger picture and the shades of grey.

The Oliners referred to people who “reserve[d] a sense of obligation to a small circle from which others are excluded” as *constricted* and to people with “strong attachments and a sense of inclusive obligations” as *extensive*.⁷³ I have always been fascinated by news stories of constricted individuals suddenly and permanently becoming extensive, including those of former neo-Nazis and white supremacists Angela King, Michael Kent, and Keith “Duke” Schneider, all of whom either fell in love with or befriended black woman, despite previously feeling hatred for black people and other non-whites, Jews, homosexuals, and other marginalized groups.

⁶⁹ Tec, Nechama. “The Rescuer Self,” p. 655. These figures evidently intersect, with some rescuers citing more than one reason.

⁷⁰ Oliner, Samuel P. “Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust: A Portrait of Moral Courage,” p. 680.

⁷¹ Bloom, Paul. 2019. “The Baby in the Well.” *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, May 20, 2013. [bit.ly/34mlRqO](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/05/20/the-baby-in-the-well).

⁷² Aron, Nina Renata. “She Was There to Protest the KKK. She Ended up Saving a White Supremacist’s Life.” *TIME Magazine*, March 26, 2018. [timeline.com/keshia-thomas-photo-nonviolence-kkk-d3dc6832c4b6](https://www.time.com/time/magazine/2018/03/26/she-was-there-to-protest-the-kkk-she-ended-up-saving-a-white-supremacist-s-life/).

⁷³ Oliner, Samuel P. and Pearl Oliner, p. 251.

In all of these cases, exposure to the women who would eventually become an object of affection produced either cumulative moments (or one single big moment) of “rehumanization.” Upon reaching a threshold, that rehumanization resulted in what Eva Fogelman would likely call a moment of “awareness,” a *prise de conscience*, a registered turning point in perception, an epiphany when moral disengagement was reversed and the “other” was pulled into the constricted individual’s orbit.

It is important to note that one does not need to be a neo-Nazi or a member of any extremist group to be guilty of withdrawing empathy and, to some extent, of dehumanizing the other. We all make this mistake, sometimes daily, sometimes even in seemingly benign circumstances, often in moments of self-righteousness and sometimes even in our fight for pluralistic justice, despite our very best intentions. The most fascinating aspect of this tendency is its intensification with social reinforcement, i.e. when we find ourselves part of a mob.

One of most famous incidents of this nature transpired in June 1996, when a group of locals from Ann Arbor, Michigan gathered in protest of a Ku Klux Klan rally. Though initially peaceful, the protest erupted in violence when a participant yelled that there was a “Klansman in the crowd” into a megaphone. The protestors attacked the man, who wore a Confederate flag on the back of his vest and an SS tattoo on his arm, knocking him down and beating him. Suddenly, eighteen-year-old Keshia Thomas, an African American woman and fellow protestor, jumped in to protect the “Klansman” from the blows, shielding the man lying in fetal position on the ground with her very own body (see Figure 3).⁷⁴ Thomas was one of a crowd of many experiencing *moral disengagement*; whether she was momentarily guilty of it and became “aware” or never experienced it in the first place is beside the point: Thomas saw the victim’s humanity and acted on that understanding to protect him.

The process of rehumanization of a dehumanized other is profoundly transformative, because it enables a person to shatter the limits of empathy and show compassion to an individual whom he previously considered to be unworthy of compassion or, perhaps, forgot was worthy of compassion due to moral disengagement. In its most limited application, rehumanization extends compassion to the single rehumanized representative of any excluded group, but in its fullest application, rehumanization can lead to genuine universalism – where the life of another is considered to be equal in value to one’s own – and pluralism – where a person tolerates and even embraces the existence of a wide breadth of tastes and beliefs and does not feel the need to impose his own tastes and beliefs on others.

Tec, the Oliners, and Fogelman all identified universalism and its complement of pluralism as important rescuer personality traits. In withstanding moral disengagement and avoiding dehumanization, rescuers always retained a clear vision of the victims’ humanity, which ensured that they would always treat their charges in accordance with their integrated judgements on the treatment of other human beings.

Whilst strength of integration of values cannot necessarily be taught, regular exposure to universalism, pluralism, and other such virtues throughout one’s life can

⁷⁴ Aron, Nina Renata. “She Was There to Protest the KKK. She Ended up Saving a White Supremacist’s Life.”

increase the probability that these particular values will be the ones that people choose to integrate into their moral identities. The conclusion is that to maximize the likelihood that one will do the humane thing, one needs to regularly be reminded of what the humane thing is, be encouraged to act humanely, and be held accountable.

Conclusions

This paper endeavors to determine why, in a landscape where rescuing Jews was punishable by death, some bystanders chose to become rescuers, whilst others did not. Having, in a separate paper titled “A Statistical Analysis of Yad Vashem’s Ukrainian Righteous,” empirically evaluated 1,100 Yad Vashem rescuer accounts from the geographic areas that collectively constitute modern Ukraine and conducted interviews with a selection of rescuers, I have concluded that 1) most of the people in occupied Ukraine who chose not to rescue Jews ultimately acted, either consciously or not, against their intuitive understanding and better judgement that killing, enabling killing, or failing to prevent killing are harmful and, therefore, immoral, while rescuers, by contrast, acted in accordance with said better judgement; 2) the decision to rescue was fundamentally emotional and not rational, but was always followed shortly thereafter by both moral rationalism and strategic thinking, where the former often transformed into self-ascribed motivations for rescuing and the latter informed the methodology of rescue; 3) as suggested by existing sociological and psychological studies on rescuers, rescuers exhibited a very specific combination of personality traits and attitudes, which, in most cases, were the result of nurture vs. nature, whereby rescuers observed the application of these traits and attitudes in the actions of moral exemplars; 4) committed rescuers, regardless of their motive for rescuing, were morally absolutist with regard to the success of the rescue operation, yet morally relativist with regard to the methodology of rescue; and 5) the decision to rescue emerged from and was informed by the existence of a very particular “moral identity” that made acting any other way impossible, sometimes even to the detriment of both rescued and rescuer. This moral identity was internal and received no reinforcement from social assessment, despite being informed by the example of others’ good conduct. It was, instead, propelled by a sense of perseverance and accountability for the rescue operation by making specific moral actions and “the self” indistinguishable and transforming the rescuer’s conscience into a judge.

My assessment supports previous literature on Holocaust rescuers pointing to the existence of an “altruistic personality” and a “rescuer self,” but suggests that not all individuals who rescued were altruistic exemplars throughout their lives. Some may have selectively integrated specific moral values fully, including those that made a successful rescue operation possible whilst being laxer with other values.

Moral philosophy offers a useful framework to better understand the factors that drove rescuers to and through their wartime activity, as rescuers embody what, at first glance, may seem like a philosophically incoherent state in which rescuing is treated as a categorical imperative, having become one in part due to the influence of Aristotelian moral exemplars, but its realization is facilitated by consequentialist reasoning.

Maximizing the probability that the “right” values are integrated into the essence of

one's being can be achieved through regular reminders of the importance of universalism, where people are encouraged to always challenge themselves to constantly endeavor to rehumanize the other in conflict. Pluralism, however, does not equate to moral relativism, whereby violence or harm are tolerated as healthy variations of human tastes and attitudes.

<p style="text-align: center;">Dritte Verordnung über Aufenthaltsbeschränkungen im Generalgouvernement.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Vom 15. Oktober 1941.</p> <p>Auf Grund des § 5 Abs. 1 des Erlasses des Führers vom 12. Oktober 1939 (Reichsgesetzbl. I S. 2077) verordne ich:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Artikel 1.</p> <p>In der Verordnung über Aufenthaltsbeschränkungen im Generalgouvernement vom 13. September 1940 (VBIGG, I S. 288) mit den Änderungen der Zweiten Verordnung über Aufenthaltsbeschränkungen im Generalgouvernement vom 29. April 1941 (VBIGG, S. 274) wird nach § 4 a folgender § 4 b eingefügt:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">§ 4 b</p> <p>(1) Juden, die den ihnen zugewiesenen Wohnbezirk unbefugt verlassen, werden mit dem Tode bestraft. Die gleiche Strafe trifft Personen, die solchen Juden wissentlich Unterschlupf gewähren.</p> <p>(2) Anstifter und Gehilfen werden wie der Täter, die versuchte Tat wird wie die vollendete bestraft. In leichteren Fällen kann auf Zuchthaus oder Gefängnis erkannt werden.</p> <p>(3) Die Aburteilung erfolgt durch die Sondergerichte.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Artikel 2.</p> <p>Diese Verordnung tritt am Tage der Verkündung in Kraft.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Warschau, den 15. Oktober 1941.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Der Generalgouverneur Frank</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Trzecie rozporządzenie o ograniczeniach pobytu w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Z dnia 15 października 1941 r.</p> <p>Na podstawie § 5 ust. 1 Dekretu Führer'a z dnia 12 października 1939 r. (Dz. U. Rzeszy Niem, I str. 2077) rozporządzam:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Artykuł 1.</p> <p>W rozporządzeniu o ograniczeniach pobytu w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie z dnia 13 września 1940 r. (Dz. Rozp. GG, I str. 288) ze zmianami drugiego rozporządzenia o ograniczeniach pobytu w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie z dnia 29 kwietnia 1941 r. (Dz. Rozp. GG, str. 274) wstawia się po § 4 a następujący § 4 b:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">§ 4 b</p> <p>(1) Żydzi, którzy bez upoważnienia opuszczają wyznaczoną im dzielnicę, podlegają karze śmierci. Tej samej karze podlegają osoby, które takim żydom świadomie dają kryjówkę.</p> <p>(2) Podżegacze i pomocnicy podlegają tej samej karze jak sprawca, czyn usiłowany karany będzie jak czyn dokonany. W lżejszych wypadkach można orzec ciężkie więzienie lub więzienie.</p> <p>(3) Zawyrokowanie następuje przez Sądy Specjalne.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Artykuł 2.</p> <p>Rozporządzenie niniejsze wchodzi w życie z dniem ogłoszenia.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Warschau, dnia 15 października 1941 r.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Generalny Gubernator Frank</p>
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Figure 1: Third Regulation for Restrictions of Residence in the General Government, 15 October 1941.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Third Regulation for Restrictions of Residence in the General Government, "Verordnungsblatt Generalgouvernement," 595. *Polish History Museum, Cracow, Poland*. Translation of articles I and II of decree (as provided by Yad Vashem): 1) Jews who leave without authorization the district assigned for their residence will suffer the death penalty. The same penalty will apply to persons who knowingly give shelter to such Jews; 2) Instigators and helpers will be punished like the culprits, and attempted acts as though they had been completed. In less serious cases prison with hard labor or prison may be imposed.

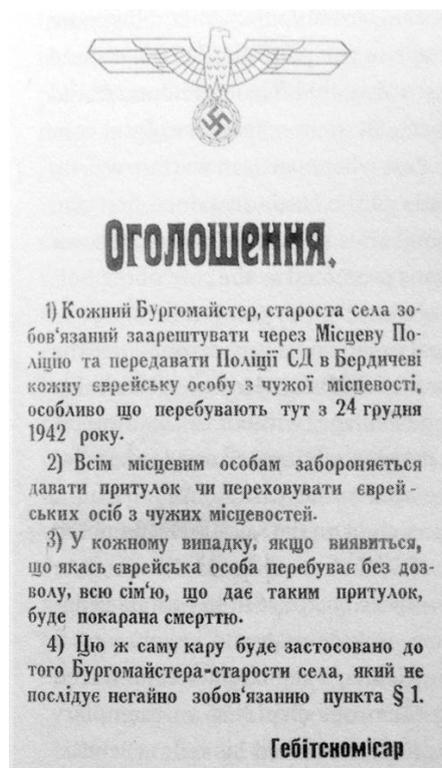


Figure 2: ‘Announcement of the Gebietskommisar of Berdychiv forbidding the sheltering of Jews.’⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Anti-Jewish Nazi and Collaborationist Leaflets and Announcements Made and Posted during the Nazi Occupation of Ukraine, 1941-1943, RG 31.023, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of the Judaica Institute, Kiev. Translation: ‘1) Every mayor and local elder with the help of the local police must arrest and hand over to the SD-police in Berdychiv each Jewish person from another locality, especially those who remained here after 24 December 1942. (2) All local persons are forbidden to shelter or hide Jews, especially those from other localities. (3) In each instance in which it is found out that Jewish persons stayed without permission, the entire family that sheltered them will be punished with death. 4) The same punishment will be applied to any mayors or village elders who do not immediately fellow the obligation under point 1.’ (provided by Lower in *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005), 135.)



Figure 3: Photograph of then eighteen-year-old Keshia Thomas shielding a white supremacist with her body from an angry mob. Ann Arbor, Michigan. June 22, 1996. Photographer: Mark Brunner.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Aron, Nina Renata. "She Was There to Protest the KKK. She Ended up Saving a White Supremacist's Life." *TIME Magazine*, March 26, 2018. [timeline.com/keshia-thomas-photo-nonviolence-kkk-d3dc6832c4b6](https://www.time.com/timeline.com/keshia-thomas-photo-nonviolence-kkk-d3dc6832c4b6).

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