

Dialogical Self Theory and the Process of Positioning

Dialogical Self Theory (DST) is extensively presented in previous publications.¹ For readers not familiar with the subject, I will summarize the theory, its historical influences, and some of its tenets that are relevant to the theme of this book. Then, I focus on the *transfer of energy* within the self that reflects the highly dynamic process of positioning that is central to the whole book. This is exemplified by the phenomenon “falling out of love,” which illustrates how the energy of one I-position (I as loving) is transferred to another one (I as hating), leading to a reversal of the relative dominance of the two positions in the self-system. Then I will show how dominance reversal also occurs in the ritual of carnival, where the serious order of hierarchically organized life gives way to the laughter, mockery, and freedom of disorganized life. Both phenomena, falling out of love and carnival, demonstrate the *flexibility* of the process of positioning and repositioning. As a preparation for the following chapters, I will argue that carnival goes one important step further than falling out of love. While the phenomenon of falling out of love represents a sudden dominance reversal from love to hate without any existence of a moral middle ground, the carnival festival creates room for a moral middle ground by creating space for the combination of obscenity and social cohesion or the coalition of insult and playfulness. Finally, I will present and analyze, in a preliminary way, several events in everyday life in which moral good and bad form coalitions in which they work together on a moral middle ground.

Summary of Dialogical Self Theory

DST combines two basic concepts, self and dialogue, in the composite notion of the dialogical self. Traditionally, the self refers to processes that take place “internally,” *within* the self, whereas dialogue is considered to

¹ Hermans (2018); Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010).

happen “externally” – that is, *between* the self and the other. By bringing the two concepts together into the dialogical self, the in-between realm is interiorized into the within realm and, reversibly, the within is externalized into the in-between. Therefore, the self is not an entity within the skin, defined as having an existence separate from the social and natural environment, but is considered as an active participant. The self becomes a “mini-society” or, to borrow a term from Minsky,² a “society of mind.” Society at large is not simply “surrounding” the self, defined as a purely external determinant. Instead, society is composed of a diversity of selves involved in communication with each other, with the immediate implication that the society is confirmed, changed, or innovated by its participants. This means that changes and developments in the self automatically imply changes and developments in the society at large and vice versa. In other words, self and society are mutually inclusive, and they are interwoven in a process of transforming each other.

In essence, the dialogical self can be conceived of as a *dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions in the micro-society of the self*. As a verb, “positioning” refers to the process of receiving, finding, and taking one’s place in a field of relationships. It is the process of placing oneself and being placed by others in a field of connections. In this view, the I emerges from its intrinsic contact with the environment and is bound to the process of positioning in time and space. In the course of time, some forms of positioning are more frequently used than other ones, and they create “traces” in the self so that habitual patterns are formed. In this way, the embodied I is able to move from one position to another in accordance with changes in situation and time. During processes of positioning, counter-positioning, and repositioning, the I fluctuates among different and even opposed positions, and, like in the society at large, these positions are involved in relationships of relative dominance and social power. Positions can be expressed verbally and nonverbally so that dialogical relationships can develop, both with other positions in the self and with positions taken up by other individuals. The voices behave like interacting characters in a story or movie, involved in processes of question and answer, agreement and disagreement, conflict and struggle, negotiation and integration. Each of them has a narrative to tell about their own experiences from their own perspective, and these narratives can be constructed and reconstructed in contact with other individuals, social groups, and the natural environment.³

² Minsky (1986). ³ Lengelle (2021a; 2021b); Neimeyer (2006).

What Is an I-Position?

An I-position is a spatiotemporal act in the context of other I-positions in the self. It is the sediment of processes of positioning, counter-positioning (space), and repositioning (time). As a spatiotemporal act, positioning means placing and replacing oneself vis-à-vis somebody or something else and, at the same time, toward oneself in the metaphorical space of the self. As a relational process, it represents a stance toward the other, either physically or virtually, and addresses the other and oneself via verbal or nonverbal orientations and communications. I can be harsh toward a person I dislike, but when I think about this encounter when I'm alone I can become critical of myself as I consider my behavior toward this person as inappropriate and plan to position myself toward the other in a different way when we meet next time. Positioning and repositioning oneself to another person or group have immediate repercussions for the organization and reorganization of the inner cosmos of the self, and therefore both processes are dynamically interwoven with each other.

A useful distinction can be made between social positions and personal I-positions. Social positions (e.g., I as a mother, I as a colleague) are subject to societal expectations and norms. Personal positions receive their configuration from the particular ways in which individual people organize their own lives (e.g., I as a lover of music, I as a dreamer). Many positions, however, are simply outside the conscious horizon of the self, and the person might not or cannot be aware of their existence. As implicit positions, however, they may enter the self-space at some moment in time depending on changes in the situation that take place in the self or between self and other. For example, someone may be entirely unaware of the existence of shadow positions in oneself: I-positions that are warded off, rejected, or suppressed as if not belonging to oneself (e.g., I as envious, I as vengeful, I as hating someone; see Chapter 5 for more on the shadow position concept). Depending on the nature of dialogical processing and the development of those positions over time, they can become accepted and acknowledged as “owned” by the self.⁴

Other-in-the-Self

The self is not limited to processes that happen “within the skin.” Other people, animals, nature, and even physical objects can become part of the

⁴ Stiles (2019).

extended self. Typically, they are felt as “mine,” such as my friend, my child, my dog, my house, my neighborhood, the nature of which I’m a part. The external I-position or the other-in-the-self does not imply that the other as part of the extended self is an exact copy of the actual other’s perspective. Already Cooley⁵ was aware of this when he introduced the “looking glass self,” which does not reflect how others *actually* see us but rather how we *believe* others see us. Research⁶ shows that people’s self-perceptions are substantially in accordance with the way they perceive themselves as being viewed by others. However, there is no consistent similarity between people’s self-perceptions and how they are *actually* viewed by others. I can believe that the other likes me while this is actually not the case. DST assumes that *external* I-positions are, at least in a great deal of cases, constructions produced by the needs, aspirations, and anxieties of *internal* I-positions (e.g., when I’m distrustful, I position the other as dangerous). However, when external I-positions would become *purely* subjective constructions, they would ultimately result in a confusing mixture of phantasy and reality or even in delusions. Therefore, the self, including its external I-positions, needs contact with the actual other in order to maintain or develop a minimally realistic image of the other as part of the extended self. According to DST, this contact is realized via the processes of positioning, repositioning, and dialogue (see Chapter 5).

Self and society are closely interconnected, leading to the conception of the self as a “society of mind.” This society is populated by internal positions and external positions (perceived, remembered, or imagined others) that, in their mutual dynamic relationships, construct and reconstruct each other in reciprocal ways. External positions construct and reconstruct internal positions and vice versa. In fact, external positions are constructions of the other as part of the extended self, and they *mediate* between internal positions and the actual others as “objective” realities in the outside world. Dialogues within the self and with actual others are significant ways to confirm, correct, or further develop the construction of others as external positions in the self. External positions are located in a field of tension between the necessity of maintaining contact with the outside reality and the tendency to structure the images of the other in the self on the basis of the needs and concerns of internal positions. Internal dialogues within the self and external dialogues with actual others need each other in order to achieve cross-fertilization of the mini-society of the

⁵ Cooley (1902). ⁶ Shrauger and Schoeneman (1979).

self and the society at large. (For other central concepts in DST and their definitions, see the Glossary.)

Historical Influences: William James and Mikhail Bakhtin

DST is not an isolated development in the social sciences. It emerged at the interface of two traditions: American Pragmatism and Russian Dialogism. As a theory about the self, it goes back to James's⁷ classic formulations on the self. As a dialogical theory, it elaborates on the fruitful insights into dialogical processes in Bakhtin's work.⁸ Although some of the insights of these authors were crucial in the initial publications of DST, I want to go beyond these authors by proposing a view on judgments of moral good and bad that is based on the consideration that, in the present era, we are experiencing significant historical changes in our human and ecological awareness (see Chapter 6).

James's Extended Self

For an understanding of the dialogical self and the central notion of the I-position in particular, it makes sense to start with a basic distinction, introduced by William James (Figure 1.1), between the "I" and the "me," considered as a classic one in the psychology of the self.⁹ The I is equated with the self-as-knower or the self-as-subject, whereas the me is equated with the self-as-known or the self-as-object. As such, the self is able, as knower, to reflect on itself as known. This distinction is relevant to understanding the capacity of an I-position to become aware of itself: I can become aware of a position in a particular situation due to self-reflection and imagination.

In his further elaborations of the self-as-known, James made an additional distinction, also highly relevant to DST, between "me" (I myself) and "mine" (that which belongs to me). He was well aware of the gradual transition between me and mine as an extension of the self to the external world. This was well expressed in a frequently cited quotation in which he made clear that the self-as-known is composed of all that the person can call their own, "not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account."¹⁰ As this quotation suggests, people and things in the

⁷ James (1890). ⁸ Bakhtin (1984). ⁹ Rosenberg (1979). ¹⁰ James (1890, p. 291).

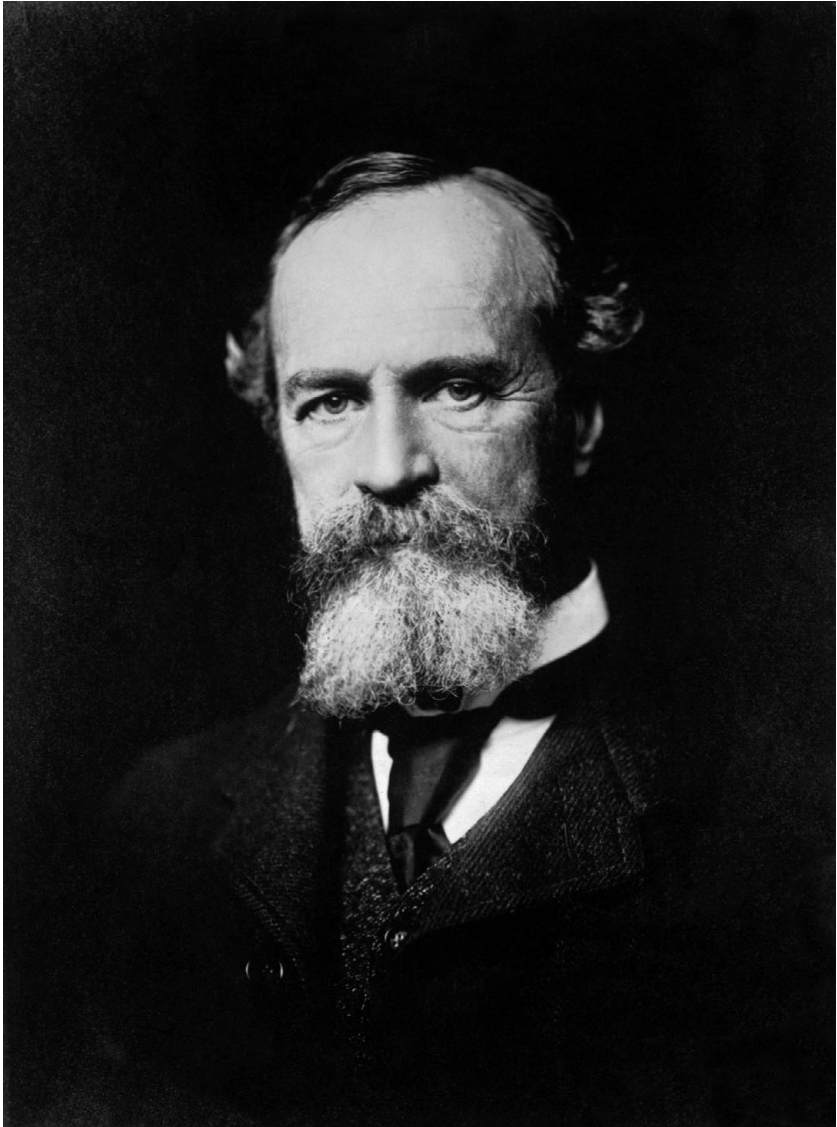


Figure 1.1 William James (1842–1910).

Source: Bettmann/Getty Images.

environment belong to the self as far as they are felt as “mine.” An important implication is that not only “my body” but also “my mother” and even “my enemy” (the bad guy) are part of the self as extensions into the environment. The extended self contrasts sharply with

the Cartesian self, which is based on a dualistic conception not only between body and mind, but also between self and other. Through his gradual transition between self and nonself, James paved the way for later developments in psychology, including DST, in which negotiations with the other-in-the-self, in close connection with the actual other, are part of an extended, multivoiced dialogical process.¹¹ James's proposal of the extended self allows the inclusion of a great variety of I-positions as belonging to the mine: my funny friend, my always-competitive colleague, my despised enemy.

Bakhtin's Polyphonic Novel

External I-positions become "voiced characters" in Bakhtin's (Figure 1.2) metaphor of the "polyphonic novel," which assumes the existence of a multiplicity of voices involved in dialogue with each other. He proposed this metaphor after extensive reading of Dostoyevsky's literary productions, which led him to conclude that in these works there is not one single author at work – Dostoyevsky himself – but several authors or thinkers, such as Myshkin, Raskolnikov, Ivan Karamazov, and the Grand Inquisitor. In these novels, the characters figure as the authors of their own ideologies and not as the products of Dostoyevsky's finalizing artistic vision. The characters are not obedient slaves in the service of an omniscient author-thinker elevated above his characters but appear as independent thinkers, each with their own ideology and view of the world. Instead of a unified objective world organized from above, there is a plurality of consciousnesses with a diversity of life views. This is similar to a polyphonic musical work, like a canon or fugue, where a multiplicity of voices accompany and oppose one another in dialogical ways. Along these lines, Dostoyevsky creates a surprising diversity of perspectives, portraying characters as conversing with the devil (Ivan Karamazov and the devil), with their alter egos (Ivan Karamazov and Smerdyakov), with the superior part of themselves (The Double), and even with caricatures of themselves (Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov). In this construction, dialogical relationships allow the author to differentiate the inner worlds of one and the same individual in the form of an interpersonal relationship instead of unifying them in a Cartesian ego. By transforming an "inner" thought of a particular character into an utterance, dialogical relations can be developed between this utterance and the utterances of imagined others. This dialogical construction makes it possible to contract temporally dispersed events into spatial oppositions

¹¹ See Hermans (2018) for an overview. For the other-in-the-self, see also Aron et al. (2005).



Figure 1.2 Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975).
 Source: The History Collection/Alamy Stock Photo.

that are simultaneously present in an act of juxtaposition, thereby creating, in DST terms, a “landscape of the self.” In this landscape, characters function like I-positions that receive a voice so that they can become involved in dialogical communications.

A recent development in DST¹² is the distinction between *I-positions* as individual ways of placing oneself in relation to the world and to ourselves and *we-positions* as ways of placing ourselves, as participants of social groups, communities, and cultures, in relation to the world and ourselves. This distinction is relevant as our individual I-positions are, to a large extent, *organized* by we-positions that are even present before we are born. In the following, I will illustrate the dynamic nature of I-positioning by presenting the phenomenon of “falling out of love” and the dynamic quality of we-positioning by referring to the collective ritual of carnival. In the latter case, the notion of moral middle ground will show up.

¹² Hermans (2022).

Individual Dominance Reversal: James's Exposé on Falling Out of Love

The phenomenon of dominance reversal¹³ that I want to discuss in detail in this section was one of the intriguing topics discussed by William James in his Gifford Lectures on natural theology, which he delivered at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, in the period 1901–1902. His book *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*,¹⁴ which was based on these lectures, can be read as a psychological study of religious conversions and mystical experiences. One of his most prominent examples was the well-known conversion of the biblical figure of Paul, described in the New Testament, who was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus with a mandate to seek out and arrest followers of Jesus. His journey was interrupted when he saw a blinding light and heard a voice speaking that gave him a divine, revelatory message of a miraculous nature that was powerful enough to transform him into an ardent follower of Christ. James also refers to less startling conversions, such as the case of a homeless drunkard who used to pawn or sell everything he owned so that he could buy alcohol. Walking in desperation along the river and sitting there for a while, he felt a “mighty presence” that he later interpreted as the presence of Christ. From that moment, this person felt the power in himself to control his destructive habit. James also describes a young man who started to pray according to the ritual he had practiced from childhood. He was then addressed by his brother, who said: “Do you still keep up that thing?” No more was said. However, after that day, the man never prayed again. As James explains, the words of the brother were like the “light push of a finger against a leaning wall already about to tumble by its own weight.”¹⁵

The phenomenon “falling out of love,” the opposite of the more familiar falling in love, serves as a proper example of dominance reversal of I-positions and the transmission of energy in the self. Let's listen to James's report of a man who was desperately in love with a woman who functioned as another I-position in his tormented self. James presents this case as an instance of a latent process of unconscious preparation preceding the sudden awakening of a sharp insight that irrevocably enters conscious awareness:

¹³ A case study on dominance reversal was extensively presented and discussed by Hermans and Kempen (1993, pp. 80–88).

¹⁴ James (1902/2002). ¹⁵ *Ibid.* (p. 141).

For two years of this time I went through a very bad experience, which almost drove me mad. I had fallen violently in love with a girl who, young as she was, had a spirit of coquetry like a cat. As I look back on her now, I hate her, and wonder how I could ever have fallen so low as to be worked upon to such an extent by her attractions. Nevertheless, I fell into a regular fever, could think of nothing else; whenever I was alone, I pictured her attractions, and spent most of the time when I should have been working, in recalling our previous interviews, and imagining future conversations. She was very pretty, good humored, and jolly to the last degree, and intensely pleased with my admiration. Would give me no decided answer yes or no, and the queer thing about it was that whilst pursuing her for her hand, I secretly knew all along that she was unfit to be a wife for me, and that she never would say yes. Although for a year we took our meals at the same boarding-house, so that I saw her continually and familiarly, our closer relations had to be largely on the sly, and this fact, together with my jealousy of another one of her male admirers, and my own conscience despising me for my uncontrollable weakness, made me so nervous and sleepless that I really thought I should become insane. I understand well those young men murdering their sweet hearts, which appear so often in the papers. Nevertheless I did love her passionately, and in some ways she did deserve it.¹⁶

In this case we see a clear example of admiration and uncontrollable attraction, but it is not pure love, as the man suffers, at the same time, from self-accusation, expressed in his lament “my own conscience despising me for my uncontrollable weakness.” Apparently, this positioning was, during that phase, not strong enough to change his behavior and his emotional attachment to his girlfriend. However, in what follows, we see a moment of radical change, even a reversal:

The queer thing was the sudden and unexpected way in which it all stopped. I was going to my work after breakfast one morning, thinking as usual of her and of my misery, when, just as if some outside power laid hold of me, I found myself turning round and almost running to my room, where I immediately got out all the relics of her which I possessed, including some hair, all her notes and letters, and ambrotypes on glass. The former I made a fire of, the latter I actually crashed beneath my heel, in a sort of fierce joy of revenge and punishment. I now loathed and despised her altogether, and as for myself I felt as if a load of disease had suddenly been removed from me. That was the end. I never spoke to her or wrote to her again in all the subsequent years, and I have never had a single moment of loving thought towards one who for so many months entirely filled my

¹⁶ Ibid. (p. 142).

heart. In fact, I have always rather hated her memory, though now I can see that I had gone unnecessarily far in that direction. At any rate, from that happy morning onward I regained possession of my own proper soul, and have never since fallen into any similar trap.¹⁷

Strikingly, this description does not refer to any *external* stimulus that triggers the sudden change. Maybe there was a thought, an imagination, a memory, but the man's report does not explicitly mention it. Apparently, some internal process took place, not gradually but suddenly and rather unpredictably. James understands it as "an unusually clear example of two different levels of personality, inconsistent in their dictates, yet so well balanced against each other as for a long time to fill the life with discord and dissatisfaction."¹⁸ In that context, he introduces an intriguing concept, "unstable equilibrium," which may account for the *internal tension* that precedes the sudden reversal: "At last, not gradually, but in a sudden crisis, the unstable equilibrium is resolved." This happens so unexpectedly that it is as if "some outside power laid hold on me."¹⁹ In DST terms, there was a sudden change in his positioning toward the woman: from admiration to hate, preceded by an internal positioning of self-accusation. Apparently, these emotions were growing in himself, but they were not strong enough to generate the reversal, so that the man's self was, for some time, in a state of unstable equilibrium. Later, without a clear external stimulation but with an internal preparation, a dominance reversal, from admiration to hate, took place.

On a most basic level, I-positions are forms of energy that are dynamically related to other positions in the self and others. As placed in the context of other positions and dynamically related to each other, positions can provide energy (force) to each other, so that the energy of one position can be transferred to another position, a process that in DST is called "transpositioning."²⁰ In order to understand this process, it is insightful to return to a passage in James's work where he addresses the theme of "energy." He designates the group of ideas to which a person is devoted as the "*habitual centre of his personal energy*."²¹ It makes a great difference, he observes, whether a particular set of ideas become central or remain peripheral in the self. When a person is "converted," this means that ideas that were previously peripheral in their consciousness take up a central place and then become the habitual center of their energy. Apparently, a

¹⁷ Ibid. (p. 143). ¹⁸ Ibid. ¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ This concept was introduced in DST by van Loon (2017).

²¹ James (1902/2002, p. 155, emphasis added).

peripheral position, or “background position” in DST terms, may later become dominant in somebody’s self-system. However, I want to take James’s formulation one important step further. I propose that the central idea not only *follows* the preceding idea but also *receives its energy*. In DST terms, this means that the preceding position energizes the following one. When we apply this insight to the man who was falling out of love, this means that his anger and hate were already prepared during the phase of his adoration of the woman, but his implicit dissatisfaction was not intense enough to move to the foreground and take up a central place in his position repertoire. However, as soon as the dominance reversal took place, the energy of the initial love and admiration was *transferred* to an intense anger and hate. In other words, there was a transpositioning of his energy from love to hate. Rather than a succession of two independent states of mind, the first form of positioning gave energy and impetus to the second one. In a similar way, I assume that what we generally consider as “good” or “bad” can be subjected to a process of transpositioning, which implies that they have the potential of energizing each other (elaborated in Chapters 4–6).

Collective Dominance Reversal: Bakhtin’s Description of Carnival

Whereas James treats conversion and reversal on the individual level, Bakhtin studies the reversal experience primarily on the collective level, where we can see, in DST terms, the workings of we-positions and the way they organize I-positions. He does so by delving deeply into the phenomenon of carnival, which, in his view, has its deep roots in the primordial order and thinking of human beings, and he therefore considers it as “one of the most complex and most interesting problems in the history of culture.”²² I include it here as an additional example of the highly dynamic nature of the process of transpositioning.

Carnivalistic life, understood as the sum total of all diverse festivities and rituals of a carnival type, is life drawn out of its usual rut, “turned inside out,” and it shows “the reversed side of the world.”²³ The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions of the rigidly organized class society are suspended during carnival. The hierarchical structure, including its terror, social pressure, and reverence to authorities, gives way to free and familiar contact among people

²² Bakhtin (1984, p. 122). ²³ Ibid. (p. 122).

in the open space of the carnival square.²⁴ Carnival is the time for acting out, in a “half-real and half-play-acted form,”²⁵ a different mode of interaction among individuals, who now have the freedom to enter a world that is counterposed to the all-powerful sociohierarchical structures that reign over everyday life. Behaviors, gestures, and discourses are *liberated* from the authority of hierarchical positions, such as social standing, rank, age, and possessions. From the perspective of noncarnival life, this form of interaction is considered eccentric and inappropriate. However, this eccentricity and, with it, the breaking of social codes permit the expression and revelation of “the latent sides of human nature.”²⁶

A clear example of dominance reversal of positions is the carnival act of the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king (in the present time it can also be a carnival queen), a ritual that, in one form or another, Bakhtin has found in all festivities of the carnival type. In its most elaborate form, it is part of the Roman saturnalia (Figure 1.3),²⁷ the European carnival, and the festival of fools. In the latter type, the official king was replaced by mock priests, bishops, or popes. Crowning/decrowning is an ambivalent ritual of dual nature as it expresses the creative power of change and renewal and the joyful relativity of structure, order, authority, and hierarchy. Crowning is ambivalent from the very start, as it already contains the idea of immanent decrowning. The one who is crowned, a slave or jester, is the antipode of a real king and symbolizes the inside-out world of carnival. The symbols of authority are handed over to the newly crowned king, and the extravagant clothing in which he is dressed expresses the eccentricity of this way of life. All carnival symbols, among which are many symbols of death, include within themselves a perspective of negation or vice versa. “Birth is fraught with death, and death with new birth.”²⁸ Carnival marks the transition from the death and darkness of the winter to the new life and light of the upcoming spring.

In the carnivalistic world, crowning and decrowning are inseparable, and as parts of a duality they transform from one into the other. If they would be separated from each other, they would completely lose their carnivalistic meaning. This dual nature is at the heart of the carnival. As Bakhtin writes:

²⁴ In the Middle Ages, the square was a dominant place in cities and villages where festivities took place and punishments were demonstrated en plein public.

²⁵ Bakhtin (1984, p. 123). ²⁶ Ibid. (p. 123).

²⁷ The saturnalia was the ancient Roman festival of Saturn in December, a period of general merrymaking and the predecessor of Christmas.

²⁸ Bakhtin (1984, p. 125).



Figure 1.3 Roman saturnalia.

Source: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

We must consider again in more detail the ambivalent nature of carnival images. All the images of carnival are dualistic; they unite within themselves both poles of change and crisis: birth and death (the image of pregnant death), blessing and curse (benedictory carnival curses which call simultaneously for death and rebirth), praise and abuse, youth and old age, top and bottom, face and backside, stupidity and wisdom. Very characteristic for carnival thinking is paired images, chosen for their contrast (high/low, fat/thin, etc.) or for their similarity (doubles/twins). Also characteristic is the utilization of things in reverse: putting clothes on inside out (or wrong side out), trousers on the head, dishes in place of headgear, the use of household utensils as weapons, and so forth. This is a special instance of the carnival category of *eccentricity*, the violation of the usual and the generally accepted, life drawn out of its usual rut.²⁹

²⁹ Ibid. (p. 126, emphasis in original).

In his extensive exposition of carnival, Bakhtin also refers to the image of fire as another indication of the ambivalent nature of the ritual. He considers fire as ambivalent in the sense that it simultaneously destroys and renews the world. In many European carnivals, there was a vehicle adorned with gaudy carnival trash, and this vehicle was called “hell.” At the close of the festival, this “hell” was triumphantly set on fire. A characteristic expression of this dual nature is also found in Roman carnival, in the ritual of “*moccoli*”: Participants carried a lighted candle and tried to put out another’s candle with a cry of “*Sia ammazzato!*” (“Death to thee!”). During “*moccoli*,” a boy extinguished his father’s candle with the cheerful carnival cry: “*Sia ammazzato il Signore Padre!*” (“Death to thee, Signor Father!”).³⁰

The significance of carnival becomes evident when one realizes that the people in the large cities of the late Middle Ages (e.g. Rome, Naples, Venice, Paris, Lyon, Nuremberg, Cologne) lived a full carnival life on average for three months out of the year and sometimes even more. With a certain reservation, Bakhtin adds that a person of the Middle Ages lived, as it were, two lives. One was the official life, “monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence, and piety.” The other was the life of the carnival square: “free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything.” Both lives were legitimate but separated by strict temporal boundaries (e.g., the beginning and ending of carnival).³¹ However, *on the energetic level*, the precarnival, carnival, and postcarnival phases were intensely interconnected. The preceding phase of order and authority gave energy and impetus to the subsequent stage of chaos and anarchy and, vice versa, the free expression, obscenities, and debaucheries of the carnival led to the reconfirmation and restabilization of law and order in “normal life.” Carnival and its preceding and following stages were involved in the transference of energy, or, in other words, in a process of transpositioning.

Dominance Reversal: Basic Similarity between James and Bakhtin

Recall that in James’s description of falling out of love we see, in DST terms, a process of repositioning, from admiration to hate, that occurred on the individual level. In Bakhtin’s portrayal of carnival life, we witness a

³⁰ Ibid. (p. 126). ³¹ Ibid. (pp. 129–130).

repositioning from a strictly hierarchical organization of society into a playful and leveling contact of everybody with everybody, as a change on the level of we-positions. In both instances, there is a reversal of positions. However, in order to examine extensively the commonality and differences of the two phenomena, a more detailed comparison is needed.

Let's go back to James's analysis of the transference of energy in the self. When a person is "converted," this means that previously peripheral ideas take over the central place and then become the main center of energy. In DST terms, a peripheral or background position becomes dominant in somebody's self-system. In the case of the man who was falling out of love, this means that his anger and hate were already present on an implicit level during the phase of his admiration of the woman, but his dissatisfaction was for some time not intense enough to move to the foreground and take the dominant place in his position repertoire. As soon as the dominance reversal took place, the energy of the initial position of love and admiration was transferred to its opposite in the form of intense anger and hate. His love was not simply succeeded by his hate, as if they were separate successive positions with their *own* energies only. Within a particular period of time, the intensity of his love was followed by the equal intensity of his hate. The intensity of his energy invested in his preceding love gave energy to his following hate and *continued* in it. The energy of the first position (adoring her) was transferred to the energy of the second one (loathing her). *What we generally consider as morally "good" (e.g. love) and "bad" (e.g. hate) can be subjected to a process of transpositioning, implying that one position can energize the other.*

A similar but not identical process takes place in the ritual of carnival. The energy of the strongly hierarchical and centralized precarnival period alternates with the anarchic, decentralized energy. The first one is transferred to the second one and vice versa. In his treatise of the process of crowning and decrowning, Bakhtin wrote: "The ritual of decrowning completes, as it were, the coronation and is inseparable from it . . . And through it, a new crowning already glimmers. *Carnival celebrates the shift itself, the very process of replaceability*, and not the precise item that is replaced."³² And he adds that "crowning and decrowning . . . *pass one into the other*; in any absolute dissociation they would completely lose their carnivalistic sense."³³ In DST terms: Two opposite positions can, under particular circumstances, pass their energy to one another so that piled up

³² Ibid. (p. 125, emphasis added). ³³ Ibid.

tensions can be reduced. The celebration of carnival creates a space in the self where the juices of life can flow freely.

Hell and, in particular, wishing somebody to hell would be considered as morally bad in a society that emphasizes love for one's fellow human being. However, recall the example of the vehicle called "hell" adorned with gaudy carnival trash, which at the close of the festival was triumphantly set on fire. And what about the cry "*Sia ammazzato!*" ("Death to thee!") shouted by the participants involved in joyful carnival ceremonies and the boy who, during "*moccoli*," extinguished his father's candle with the cheerful carnival cry: "*Sia ammazzato il Signore Padre!*" ("Death to thee, Signor Father!"). During noncarnival time, shouting "Death to you, Father!" (with or without a candle) would be perceived as morally bad. However, during carnival, such a cry would be experienced, even by the father, as playful and acceptable. Living in a strictly hierarchical society, which, in Bakhtin's terms, is monolithically serious and gloomy, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence, and piety, tension and surmounting energy were built up, preparing a reversal from order to anarchy. In other words, behavior that was considered morally bad during precarnival times was evaluated as permissible during carnival. Yet, the healthy aspect of this reversal is that its eccentricity "permits – in concretely sensuous form – the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves."³⁴ The built-up tension resulting from a period of rigid societal (and personal) order finds expression in a carnivalistic outburst, a temporally limited ritualistic revolution that functions, in a permissible form, as a confirmation of the stability of the moral order of the postcarnival period. Throughout history and continuing into our time, carnival has been a shining example of the moral middle ground, where good and bad coexist to the benefit of self and society.

The Jester as Middle Ground Character

During the medieval and Renaissance eras, a jester (Figure 1.4), a character engaging in foolish acts, was part of the household of a nobleman or a monarch. They were employed to entertain guests at the court and also to amuse common folk at fairs and town markets. Jesters often wore brightly colored clothes and eccentric hats in motley patterns. They entertained their audience with a wide variety of skills: songs, music, telling jokes, and puns, employing imitations and stereotypes. They were permitted to

³⁴ Ibid. (p. 123).



Figure 1.4 Jester.

Source: H. Armstrong Roberts/ClassicStock/Getty Images.

ridicule and insult monarchs, kings, politicians, and high-status members of the church, acts that were not permitted to any other citizen.

An example of the freedom to insult was the Persian (now Iranian) jester Karim, who could ridicule the whole court, including the Shah. When in a meeting the Shah asked whether there was a shortage of food in his country, the jester answered: “Yes, I see your majesty is eating only five times a day.”³⁵ As this example illustrates, the jester’s remark represents a coalition of two forms of positioning: insulting and addressing his target with a joke. Whereas the insult gives expression to a latent criticism, the joke makes the audience defenseless, even the Shah. As a character located at the moral middle ground of his community, the jester employs a fusion

³⁵ Otto (2001, p. 241).

of insulting and joking that, in their combination, works as a coalition of positions. This places the jester in the privileged position of addressing the powerholder and confronting him with an ambiguous remark or “offensive” act without the risk of being punished.³⁶

Today, the jester is found in different formats of medieval reenactment, in fairs and entertainments, including carnival performances. During the Burgundian and the Rhineland carnivals, cabaret performances, presented in local dialect, are organized. In Brabant, one of the southern provinces of the Netherlands, this person is called a “*tonpraater*” (ton speaker; one who is producing his jokes in or on a barrel). In Limburg (the most southern province of the same country), this person is named “*buutteredner*” (ton orator). They perform cabaret speeches covering many current issues that are well known to the local audience. Typically, celebrities from local and regional politics are mocked, ridiculed, and insulted. The orators can be considered as characters temporarily located at the middle ground of good and bad, as they may use primitive language, allusions, suspicions, and insults that, in noncarnival times, are not allowed to be expressed publicly.

When I was young, I often joined in with the carnival in Maastricht, the largest city in the south of the Netherlands. Wandering around in an extraordinary costume with an ugly mask on my face and drinking glasses of beer, one after another, together with friends, I have vivid memories of a custom named “telling the truth.” This ritual allowed you to insult someone else, in particular about their moral weaknesses, misbehaviors, strange appearance, or anything that would be inappropriate to express in everyday life. Although the insult could be painful, the addressee was not expected to become angry but had to suffer the insults with a benevolent smile and, of course, with some cruel joke in return. When somebody was masked, the addressee was not allowed to remove the mask from their opponent’s face. They could guess who the speaker was who addressed them, often with a disguised voice, but they were not permitted to ask their identity. It was a comedy of laughing, ridiculing, and being ridiculed, coalitions of being playful and offending at the same time. Good and bad were, during the temporally limited carnival time, not sharply distinguishable but rather combined as constitutive parts of a moral middle ground.

³⁶ For a more elaborate review of jesters in a variety of countries and cultures, including Shakespearean wise fools, Till Eulenspiegel, and Erasmus’s *Plays of Folly*, see Otto (2001).

The Concept of Transpositioning: The Transfer of Energy

Because the concept of transpositioning plays a central role in the book as a whole, I want to dive somewhat deeper into its meaning and potential. As I have argued in the preceding sections, a commonality between the phenomena of falling out of love and carnival is the transfer of energy, described as a process of transpositioning. This commonality explains that the energy of the preceding phase is transferred to the subsequent phase and gives it force and impetus. However, the process of transpositioning has the potential of doing more than the simple transfer of energy alone. It is also possible that the *specific* experiential quality of one position is transferred to the subsequent position, with the effect that the subsequent position receives, to a stronger or lesser degree, the specific experiential quality of the preceding one, resulting in a new hybrid combination.

It makes sense to make a comparison between the process of transpositioning and Freud's well-known concept of transference. He most clearly defined this term in his paper "The Dynamics of Transference,"³⁷ where he explained that certain past "role models" could affect the later relationship of a patient with their physician in a psychiatric/psychotherapeutic setting.³⁸ A simplified everyday example is that you may transfer the original feelings or desires you had in relation to one of your parents to a new boss. In such a case, you attribute your parental feelings – positive or negative ones – to this new person. In this example, the energy originally directed to the parent subsequently influences the energy directed to the boss. However, the specific way the boss is experienced is not neutral but "colored" by the specific experiential quality you originally had in the relationship with your parent. What does this mean for the processes of positioning and transpositioning?

Let's take the example of enjoying a dinner. When you are hungry and have dinner, you feel it as an enjoyable experience. After finishing your meal, your appetite has gone. This is very different in the case of the gourmand who is proud of being a connoisseur of food and drink and is focused on the discriminating enjoyment of them. The gourmand has a hearty appetite for good food and drink, and they are quite knowledgeable about the history and rituals of haute cuisine. The gourmand is not simply having dinner but adds an artistic quality to it that affects the specific nature of enjoying the food. This artistic quality garnered the interest of a group of researchers³⁹ who wanted to know how visual factors, such as the

³⁷ Freud (1958).

³⁸ Parth et al. (2017, p. 167).

³⁹ Michel et al. (2014).

color and balance of the elements on a plate, affect a diner's perception and enjoyment of the food. They offered their participants a salad arranged in three different presentations: a simple plated one with all of the elements of the salad tossed together, another one with the elements arranged to look like a painting of Kandinsky (the artist's name was not mentioned to the participants), and a third arrangement in which the elements were organized neatly but in a nonartistic manner. Interestingly, the results revealed that the participants considered the Kandinsky-inspired version as more artistic and were willing to pay more for this arrangement on their plate. Moreover, after finishing their meal, they gave higher tastiness ratings for the art-inspired presentation. Therefore, the researchers concluded that their findings were in support of the common assumption that we eat with our eyes first.

In this research, at least two I-positions were involved: "I as enjoying a dinner" and "I as artistic." The latter position enhanced the experiential quality of the former one. The taste and enjoyment of the food were enhanced by the artistic perception. The enjoyer of the dinner did not simply appreciate the artistic pattern of the plate. Rather, the participants became "artistic enjoyers" in the style of a gourmand. The specific constellation of the elements of the plate changed the way they enjoyed the food. The enjoyer of food and the art lover came together in a *coalition* in which the mixture of the two positions resulted in a "hybrid" experience that can only be understood as a Gestalt that is more than the sum of its parts. This combination was the result of a process of transpositioning in which, due to their *specific* contributions, the two positions changed as parts of a special, enjoyable experience. At the end of this chapter and in Chapter 4 in particular I will apply the process of transpositioning to processes that take place on the moral middle ground.

Recapitulation

At the beginning of this chapter, I presented the ideas of James on the self and Bakhtin on dialogue as sources of inspiration for DST. In order to give an additional push to the theory, I selected two phenomena that are central in their work: James on conversions and Bakhtin on carnival. I did so with the intention to provide a theoretical basis for the understanding of the concept of dominance reversal in the processes of positioning and repositioning. My purpose was to show that the energy of the position before the reversal is transferred to the one that follows it. Positions do not follow each other as purely successive moments in a row; they have the potential to energize and vitalize each other in a process of transpositioning.

But how is this energizing process related to the notion of the moral middle ground? Precisely on that point Bakhtin's portrayal of carnival ritual adds a significant dimension to James's reversal description. Let's compare: In the example of falling out of love, we saw a sudden, relatively unpredictable dominance reversal from love to hate. Without any apparent causal stimulation, the man, while walking to his work, suddenly decided to return to his house and destroy all of his possessions related to his lover. Whereas previously he adored and admired his lover as a good angel, he despised her later as a bad lucifer. Certainly, his description showed signs of discomfort and tension before the reversal, as he secretly knew that she was unfit as his partner, but this knowledge was latent and not yet dominant in his mind. Only after the dominance reversal did his hate toward her come to a full and unrestricted expression. The preceding energies, including the latent tensions, oriented to the "good woman" were transferred to the "bad woman." However, in this description there is no sign of a middle ground where good and bad coexist. This is remarkably different from the carnival example, where we saw a temporally and spatially organized middle ground where it is no longer possible to separate good and bad or simply see them as mutually exclusive opposites. They go together in a well-organized *coalition* producing a *new quality* (e.g. playful insulting, or "Death to thee, Signor Father!") that provides an emotional outlet for tensions built up in the everyday, restrictive, hierarchical society. What is usually considered as morally "bad" does not simply disappear but has a role to play that contributes to the vitality of self and society. As parts of this coalition, and as long as they can get along well with each other, good and bad don't function as enemies but as a pair, of which the components energize each other and are involved in a process of transpositioning.

In the present chapter, I referred to the phenomenon of carnival as a prelude to an exposition of the moral middle ground, the central concept in this book. My intention is to explore this middle ground and its potentials on a broader and deeper level in the next chapters, particularly in Chapter 4.

Practical Implications

If we accept the existence of a middle ground, including its positional dynamics, it has some significant implications. In my view, the main one is avoiding any sharp separation between mutually excluding definitions of good and bad. Let's explore some real-life examples that show not only the existence of a middle ground, but also its *open boundaries to the realms of*

good and bad. With these examples, I want to demonstrate, in a preliminary way, that the middle ground is not a sharply delineated area, clearly separated from what is evaluated as good or bad, but that its boundaries are highly permeable; that is, positions in this area are highly dynamic in the sense that they can fluidly move to one or the other side.

Sabotage Is Forbidden but . . .

On September 27, 2016, Greenpeace activists closed off access to imports and exports from the palm oil trader IOI, one of Malaysia's biggest conglomerates, in the port of Rotterdam.⁴⁰ This blockage was preceded by a report by Greenpeace mentioning that international palm oil companies were involved in forest destruction, peatland fires, and child labor. Two Indonesian men who were directly affected by forest fires blocked access to the refinery together with eight activists. The Greenpeace ship *Esperanza* moored to the dock at the back of the Rotterdam refinery and prevented palm oil from being unloaded from incoming oil tankers. For sure, this blockage was illegal in the country where it happened and had economic and financial consequences for IOI and the involved traders. Was this action good or bad from a moral perspective? It may be evaluated as good by Greenpeace but as bad by the trading partners. However, from a broader moral perspective good and bad are not clearly separated in this case but rather represent a moral coalition. Any conclusion about its moral nature would require discussion and dialogue, implying both agreements and disagreements. But the moral judgment was not clear from the onset. This would be different if Greenpeace (or any organization with similar purposes) and IOI representatives could find a solution to the problem via negotiations. In that case, the action would shift to the side of moral good. However, suppose Greenpeace decided to sink the ship, resulting in casualties; then the action would shift to a judgment of "morally bad." In the latter two possibilities, the validity of moral judgments in the community where it happened would be less problematic than in the case of the moral middle ground where good and bad coexist as a coalition of two positions.

Stealing Is Forbidden but . . .

Robin Hood, a legendary heroic outlaw originally depicted in English folklore of the late Middle Ages, was admired as a highly skilled archer

⁴⁰ www.marineinsight.com/shipping-news/greenpeace-blockades-palm-oil-trader-ioi/.

and swordsman. One of the reasons for his immense popularity across the centuries is the influence of his stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, an action that continues to inspire discussions and debates today. The image of a noble bandit who fights for justice by acting against a corrupt system for the benefit of the oppressed appeals to many people. There are many versions of this story portrayed in films and literature,⁴¹ and there is even doubt as to whether Robin Hood ever existed. Purely as an invitation to reflection, let's take the version in which he is portrayed as a hero who returned the property of the poor that the rich had taken from them by imposing improper taxes and by outright theft. Robin Hood returned the goods to the poor to help them out of poverty. He did not steal from those who were rich because they had accumulated their wealth. His targets were only those individuals who had accumulated their wealth from human misery.⁴²

From a utilitarian perspective, which claims that it is morally right to seek the greatest good for the greatest number of people, many of Robin Hood's deeds could be evaluated as acceptable because, compared to the gains by the poor, the losses of the few rich were insignificant. However, Kantian ethics would regard stealing as inherently wrong. Such a contradiction can evoke hot debate and controversy. When reading about Robin Hood, I remembered the national commotion caused by one of our bishops in the Netherlands, Tiny Muskens, with his public statement that stealing was, in particular circumstances, acceptable: "The catholic morality has always made clear that, when you are so poor that you cannot live, you are then allowed to take away a bread from the shop."⁴³ As this example suggests, there are circumstances in which it is difficult to separate moral good and bad. In the bishop's view, even Catholic morality permitted, in special circumstances, limited or necessary forms of theft.

Imagine a hypothetical situation in which Robin Hood asked the rich to do something to benefit the poor, and they agreed with his request to turn over part of their wealth to the poor. In that case, the action would shift from the middle ground to the realm of good. However, if he killed rich landowners, as some sources⁴⁴ reveal, then the action would shift from the middle ground to the realm of moral bad.

⁴¹ A recent example of the Robin Hood legend is *Sherwood*, an American computer-animated science fiction web television series created by Diana Manson and Megan Laughton that premiered on March 6, 2019, on YouTube Premium.

⁴² Interpretation by Dennis Manning, www.quora.com/Didnt-Robin-Hood-steal-from-the-rich-and-give-to-the-poor/answer/Dennis-Manning-9.

⁴³ Muskens (1996). ⁴⁴ Hilton (1958).

Fraud Is Forbidden but . . .

Perhaps you are familiar with the case of Dr. Ozel Clifford Brazil, a black minister who committed fraud in order to send 18,000 young African American people from Los Angeles's inner-city neighborhoods to college. He succeeded, over a period of more than fifteen years, to help students get into college and university, and he claimed that 98 percent of them ended up getting their degrees. He advised students to sever all legal ties with their parents if that would put them in a better financial position. In some college applications he mentioned only the lower-income earner of two parents while not mentioning the income of the other parent. None of what Brazil did ever benefited him personally. The downside of his generous help was that in 2003 he was sentenced to three and a half years in prison for financial aid fraud. Moreover, he also ended up having to pay restitution of nearly three-quarters of a million dollars.⁴⁵

In this case too we notice a gradual transition to both moral sides. Suppose that Brazil had found a loophole in the law that allowed him to help disadvantaged students to go to college. His actions would then lean to the moral good. However, if his actions were planned and realized in the service of his own financial benefit, then we would be inclined to say that he deviated in the wrong direction.

I give these brief sketches not only to illustrate the existence of a moral middle ground, but also to demonstrate that the boundaries in the directions of both good and bad are highly permeable. But what is the practical advantage of assuming the existence of such a middle ground as a welcome element in our moral considerations? An argument for this can be found in the way moral discussions seem to degenerate into moral clashes in an increasingly polarizing society.⁴⁶ With Tim Dean, Honorary Associate in Philosophy of the University of Sydney, I agree that there is not a lack of morality in the world, but rather too much.⁴⁷ The way we tend to think and talk about morality, often limited by the social, political, or ideological groups to which we belong, puts serious limits on our ability to engage with views other than our own. The moral "bubbles" in which we are locked up make it hard to manage diversity and disagreement and to provide space for alternative moral views. As a consequence, we face a great struggle in finding appropriate responses to a *multiplicity of moral positions* (see also Chapter 2), and overcoming this is crucial in a globalizing and digitalizing world. Moral tribalism and its associated rigid

⁴⁵ Price Pierre (2014). ⁴⁶ Phillips (2022). ⁴⁷ Dean (2018).

boundaries often lead to moral clashes that produce suffering and moral unrest, which have their origins in the conviction that our moral norms have a universal pretention, in the sense that everybody *should think as we do*. In a highly interdependent society in which we have to live together with other social, cultural, political, ethnic, sexual, and gender groups, any form of moral tribalism is increasingly infeasible.

Far from having the pretention that the present book provides any “solution” to this problem, I propose that the acceptance of a middle ground as an element in our moral discussions has one great advantage: It stimulates debate and dialogue that offer the potential of relativizing any sharp and rigidly closed moral position both in the relationships among people and within the domains of our own selves. If the middle ground is allowed in moral discussions, it can work as a buffer against hard clashes between convictions of good and bad because it “makes us think” and stimulates dialogue with others and within ourselves. The moral middle ground is loaded with uncertainty, contradiction, and ambivalence (see Chapter 5), as it is located in a field of tension *between* positions evaluated as good or bad, exemplified by the three examples presented above. Pausing on this middle ground makes it difficult to give a quick and fixed answer to moral problems, reveals the existence of a space that resists any sharply differentiated thumbs-up or thumbs-down gesture, and goes beyond any simplifying and dichotomous like or dislike, often used as “moral knives.”

Summary

I started this chapter with a summary of DST and its historical fore-runners. The works of the two main authors who inspired this theory were outlined: William James on the self and Mikhail Bakhtin on dialogue. The two terms, self and dialogue, are combined in the concept of the dialogical self.

To demonstrate the flexibility of the processes of positioning and repositioning and the associated transference of energies, I introduced the concept of dominance reversal, illustrated by James’s description of “falling out of love” and Bakhtin’s exposé of carnival. I argued that the carnival ritual provides a basis for the conceptualization of a moral middle ground and the process of transpositioning. The main practical implication of this chapter is the significance of recognizing that, via this middle ground, sharp distinctions between good and bad can be transcended and that moral positions can work together in productive coalitions.

To illustrate this, I analyzed some controversial events, referring to sabotage, stealing, and fraud, in order to demonstrate that there exists, in particular circumstances, a moral middle ground in which good and bad positions form coalitions that have a specific quality that is not reducible to any one of its components. Analyzing these examples, I clarified that moving onto the moral middle ground opens up the boundaries to the sides of both moral good and bad. Recognition of a middle ground has the potential of buffering the clashes between individuals and groups that implicitly assume that good and bad are sharply differentiated and mutually exclusive. Moreover, allowing uncertainty and contradictions, as necessarily associated with the moral middle ground, has the advantage of stimulating debate and dialogue both within the self and between social groups in society at large.