Introduction

This essay is in search of some light as to how one should respond to a certain kind of human suffering. The word 'should' undoubtedly raises a normative issue, and also the use of 'one' to refer to whoever may be subject to the corresponding normative demand. Choice of such words is hardly neutral and betrays a certain philosophical stance that, I hope, later considerations will reasonably ground. We may thus begin by examining a case of human suffering that seems to call for a response. Consider the picture of a Vietnamese girl walking naked in the middle of the road with some soldiers in the background and a cloud of smoke hiding the horizon. Do you remember it? May I ask you to look at it again? What do you see? Do you see a naked girl in the company of some of other children running away from somewhere, perhaps, a village being burned by some bombs, napalm bombs as we've come to know? Do you see the innocence in their bodies and faces, the isolation and abandonment in the way they walk together? Do you see, by contrast, how the soldiers look armed and powerful, as members of an army, as not deserving either the word 'innocence' or the word 'isolation'?[1] Do you see the village through the smoke? It looks as if it has vanished: these children no longer seem to have a home to return to. Do you feel tempted to cry: '*This shouldn't happen!*'? But what does 'this' refer to and what's the strength of 'shouldn't' in this exclamation? Let us begin with the word 'this', since, by elucidating its reference, we may also learn about the normative nature of 'shouldn't'.

It seems clear that whenever someone may be inclined to cry 'This shouldn't happen!', the reference of 'this' can hardly be confined to the particular case at stake, but must generalize in two directions at least. On the one hand, 'this' seems to apply not only to the particular Vietnamese girl in the picture, but to a number of other situations that could be similar from a moral point of view. If someone were to interpret the exclamation as merely expressing a concern for this particular girl with no regard for any other child in the picture (or, in general, for any other people in a relevantly similar situation), they would be missing an essential point in the outcry. There is, however, a second direction in which 'this' generalizes, since it extends not only beyond the particular situation at stake, but also

beyond the particular person who may actually have issued the exclamation. For it seems clear that the speaker is not responding to this picture as a particular individual, but as she assumes *anyone* should respond to it. So, 'This shouldn't happen!' seems to place some demands upon us that do not depend either on the details of anyone's personal idiosyncrasy or on the peculiarities of any given situation, but presuppose some similarities across agents and contexts in virtue of which the generality of those normative demands is to be justified. Whether such demands can ultimately be justified and what the reasons to ground them may look like are central issues to be explored throughout this essay in discussion with a specific view about morality, namely, the Kantian approach.

Our moral practices are apparently a robust attempt to articulate the way one should respond to the sort of human suffering being displayed in the picture of the Vietnamese girl, namely, *the harm that we cause to each other*. Such harm surely goes far beyond the pain inflicted on a victim's body, even though it is already a controversial issue what else may be involved. It is, in any case, clear that preventing such harm and promoting an appropriate response to it lies at the core of the outcry: 'This shouldn't happen!' This exclamation certainly expresses a serious concern for an important matter and some may derive from this fact the conviction that all kinds of harm are really important; as a result, they will regard prevention (and reparation) of any such harm as the most important goal to be pursued by any decent person. A certain view about the role of morality in our lives will thereby emerge, namely, a view that regards moral reasons as being of supreme importance, so that any other sort of reason should be outweighed in cases of conflict. Hence, being moral appears at least as a necessary condition for someone to lead a valuable, meaningful life. Let us refer to this approach to moral reasons and the importance of being moral as '*the moralist view*'.

This view puts a lot of pressure on our capacity to lead a meaningful life. For it is not just that being moral may turn out to be hard in some circumstances, as it certainly will be, but also that moral reasons must always come first. This constraint depicts the life of a moral agent as in constant conflict between the demands of morality and her other commitments and projects, if not on the whole, at least in the details of how they might more meaningfully be pursued.[2] In light of such conflicts, the agent will certainly feel tempted to either challenge the relevance of morality or, pursuing a strategy less costly to her self-image, revise her own view of the situation to the effect that she might no longer feel under any significant obligation. We may thus see how, once the moralist view is granted, the notion of obligation becomes central to morality,[3] as well as the lure of self-deception.[4] To put it another way, we may say that the moralist interprets 'shouldn't' in the exclamation as deriving from the set of moral obligations that must guide the life of an agent, so that certain actions might be prevented or, at least, adequately punished and repaired.

The moralist is often convinced that the best way to counteract our temptation to disregard the demands of morality is to ground moral obligations, as well as the supreme importance of morality, on principles that no rational agent could challenge. In the age of the natural sciences, the moralist is, nevertheless, confronted with a rather specific difficulty when carrying out her project, for the natural sciences seem to tell us that the world as it is in itself, independently of our response to it, is dispossessed of any evaluative properties. There is no place in that world for the good or the bad, for cruelty or generosity, for courage or cowardice, or even for moral harm itself. Where could the moralist then ground our moral obligations and, ultimately, the very need of a moral response? If such foundations are not to be found in the world, as it is independently of us, shouldn't we rather elaborate them by an appeal to the way *we may actually respond to it*? After all, the starting point of our reflection was already a response, namely, *the experience of being affected by a particular case of harm*. Kantian approaches seek to ground our moral obligations on this basis; that is, they grant that the world in itself is dispossessed of evaluative properties and, as a result, assume that morality should be grounded on those responses of ours that every rational agent would accept. The notion of *agreement* among rational agents is thereby emphasized, but also the need for *a procedure*, since Kantian approaches aim at meeting the metaphysical demands of a disenchanted conception of the world by relying on some version of the distinction between *form* and *content*, that is, by appealing to a *procedure* that every rational agent must apply, such that it determines our moral obligations without relying on any substantive moral claims.[5] By this means, being moral becomes inextricably linked to a conception of what being a rational moral agent may consist of and which focuses on (1) the ability to reach an agreement with all other rational agents in virtue of their common capacity to follow a certain formal procedure and (2) the ability to be faithful to whatever principles and obligations a proper application of such a procedure might produce. We may see requisites (1) and (2) as central tenets of any Kantian approach to morality, no matter how different the details may be in each particular case. Let me then provisionally use the phrase '*the Kantian approach*' to refer to a set of theories, practices and institutions that *endorse (or take for granted) the moralist view and seek to ground our moral judgments exclusively on the basis of requisites (1) and (2)*.[6]

The Kantian approach may constitute the *received view* about morality, but its role in our lives is deeper than that of a theory that some philosophers may defend, for it also constitutes a *cultural stereotype* in light of which our lives are *actually* shaped and examined. It permeates our lives to such a degree that we tend to conflate our moral experiences and practices with their Kantian characterization, so that no room is apparently left for an alternative understanding of them. Yet, I intend to show that the Kantian approach is morally counterproductive in some relevant circumstances.

And this should count as a serious challenge to this approach (and, therefore, to a fundamental stereotype in our culture), whose point of departure was indeed to favor the position that harm could be prevented or, at least, appropriately punished and repaired. We have then a serious reason to investigate whether our actual experience of harm really coincides with the way the Kantian approach conceives of it. For, in case it didn't, room would be made for an alternative model that might eventually promote a more appropriate response to harm.

To elaborate an alternative model, I will focus not only on the harm that we cause to each other, but also on the harm that an agent may cause to herself. For I will argue that the conditions under which an agent may take a more favorable view of herself give us a hint as to how we may more efficiently respond to the harm that we cause to our fellow creatures. From this perspective, it is the exercise of *a certain kind of attention*, and not so much our obligation to abide by a system of principles, that will be defended as a relevant way to motivate a more appropriate response to harm. A central feature of this attentional model will be that agents are not expected to abstract away from their emotions, projects and commitments in order to deliberate morally, but, on the contrary, are encouraged to make use of them in their attempt to discern the morally relevant aspects of any given situation. This will, in the end, come as a challenge to the Kantian picture of what being rational consists of and, in general, to the theoretical plausibility of the Kantian approach itself. In fact, I will conclude that this approach is not only morally counterproductive, but conceptually untenable as well.

There are, however, several ways in which we may investigate the Kantian approach as a cultural stereotype. Some explicitly Kantian theories of morality should certainly be examined, but also those philosophical writings where some Kantian assumptions can be traced even though they are not made explicit as such, and indeed a number of social practices and institutions, including all sorts of artistic works, should be considered in order to discern the ways in which they may have been conditioned by this cultural stereotype. And, yet, a full analysis of the Kantian stereotype goes beyond the scope of this essay. This is why I will confine myself to examine some explicitly Kantian views (mainly, Rawls' and Korsgaard's) as well as some particular experiences of harm, like torture and war, in order to determine to what extent the Kantian stereotype may hinder (or, instead, favor) a proper understanding of such experiences and our capacity to appropriately respond to them.

I must stress, however, that Kantian theories are not in general designed to make a certain cultural stereotype explicit, but rather to *ground* our moral obligations, even though any such attempt will inevitably promote and strengthen the stereotype itself. The entire process may, nevertheless, turn out to be question begging, since the foundations provided may ultimately rely on some experiences whose perception have already been molded

by the stereotype they are supposed to justify. This kind of argumentative flaw may be detected both in the content of some assumptions explicitly stated as uncontroversial, and in the way the morally relevant features of any given moral situation are identified. For this purpose, I will try to go beyond the sketchy examples and thought experiments so often found at the heart of academic debates in ethics and meta-ethics, and study some central experiences of harm as they have been reported by some individuals directly involved in those experiences. This methodological strategy raises certain questions as to the authority of such voices: whether they are not too close to the experience to be reliable, what to do when they conflict with each other, and whether one should accept everything they say on a certain matter. These concerns are certainly relevant, but it does not follow that an *impartial* view could intelligibly be reached where all such distortions are really averted. By this I do not mean to deny that the notion of impartiality should play a relevant role in moral deliberation, but only to challenge a certain understanding of it, namely, the one that relies on the idea that, in order to be really impartial, agents must abstract away from their respective character and deliberate exclusively on the basis of some formal procedure.[7] At some point, I will argue that an agent's specific character must play a central role in her moral deliberation and, therefore, that the notion of impartiality should be construed in light of the notion of *proportionality*, where the focus is not so much on our capacity to abstract away from any idiosyncratic attitudes and commitments, but on the particular situation that a certain agent (that is, an agent with a specific character) must respond to.

More specifically, the discussion will develop as follows. In Chapter 1, I will first raise a certain methodological issue in order to provide an initial motivation for the philosophical style I will exercise in this essay and also sketch a number of questions and distinctions that will be further explored in later chapters. With regard to the methodological issue, I will examine a famous thought experiment in the Kantian tradition, namely, John Rawls' original position. This experiment rests, in my view, on what I will call 'the Matching Assumption' that has to do with the idea that, whenever an agent flawlessly deliberates upon a certain hypothetical situation S, her judgment will match her own judgment whenever she may actually confront the situation at stake and deliberates on it flawlessly. In particular, the Matching Assumption claims that such a match can be granted even though 'flawlessly' is interpreted as embracing exclusively those flaws that the agent could reasonably overcome from within her own deliberative stance, either hypothetical or actual. I will argue, however, that the Matching Assumption is untenable and, complementarily, emphasize that a more intimate contact with the experience of harm than a merely hypothetical deliberation may provide will not only benefit our ability to grasp the moral significance of such facts, but also reveal the conditions under which that kind of deliberation may be deeply misleading. For this

purpose, I will examine Primo Levi's experience of shame after his liberation from Auschwitz (Levi 1986: 52–67). At this point, I will distinguish between a more detached and a more intimate relation to the experience of harm, which in Chapter 2 will give rise to the distinction between *a merely declarative awareness* of some moral facts and an *expressive awareness* of them. This distinction is in turn connected to an emphasis on the limits of what a third party may legitimately say with regard to one's own moral concerns. Room will thus be made for the claim that, even though no one could legitimately accuse Levi of having done anything shameful, he may justifiedly regard his own shame as rational or, more specifically, as going in the direction of a proportional response to the facts. To make sense of Levi's need to honor his shame, a certain notion of necessity will be introduced that conflicts with the divided conception of the self that, despite Rawls' claims to the contrary, the original position seems to presuppose. All these issues will be further explored in chapters to come and, to facilitate the overall discussion, Chapter 1 will close with a section where the hallmarks of the Kantian approach are explicitly formulated.

The previous line of argument seems to favor a philosophical style where, even if thought experiments could still play a relevant role, a close examination of some particular experiences of harm is regarded as pivotal to a proper elucidation of how one should respond to it and how such a response could be promoted. This emphasis on particular experiences will also show in my reluctance to indulge in the elaboration of distinctions and claims that are not close enough to the particular experiences we are trying to understand in each particular case. Of course, some degree of projection from one case to another is unavoidable, but we must not forget that it is a projection and not just an illustration of a general principle or distinction. Thus, I will focus in Chapter 2 on torture as a paradigmatic case of harm, and go on to the experience of war in Chapter 3. When dealing with torture, I will mainly rely on Jean Améry's analysis of the victim's condition in *At the Mind's Limit* (1980: 21–40, 62–81), where the loss of some expectations of safety and protection is presented as the fundamental impact of being tortured. This is what he calls '*the loss of confidence in the world*', which, as the subtitle of this essay may suggest, will play a central role in my approach. Some may doubt, at this stage, the methodological relevance of Améry's view on torture, as they might have challenged the significance of Levi's experience of shame. They may be strongly inclined to dismiss Améry's and Levi's views as purely idiosyncratic or, at least, place the burden of proof upon those who defend their overall significance to a proper understanding of harm. This is certainly a very relevant question that will be addressed in due course, but, in short, my fundamental line of defense is twofold: (a) that examples and counterexamples in thought experiments are subject to exactly the same concern, unless one were in the business of providing necessary and sufficient conditions, which is rarely

the case insofar as issues of importance are concerned; (b) the relevance of any examples, imaginary or otherwise, must be proved by their ability to *make sense* of our experience, and the hope is that this essay as a whole may reasonably contribute to meeting this constraint with regard to both Levi's experience of shame and Améry's view on torture.

The expectations of safety and protection that are involved in our confidence in the world add a third element to torture: not only are the torturer and the victim directly involved, but third agents are clearly invoked as well. I will argue, for instance, that our need to trust the world is central in explaining why, despite their initial sympathy for the victim, third agents tend to look away and side with the torturer's legitimizing discourse in the absence of any evidence to support it. As in Levi's case, the question will be raised as to whether the loss of confidence in the world may just be an irrational response on the victim's side. I will reply, however, that even though there is plenty of evidence to challenge our confidence in the world, it is clear that a mere declarative awareness of it, like the one the torturer and third agents may have, does not suffice to undermine our confidence in the world. Only a more intimate kind of contact with harm, like the one the victim has, may bring about such a loss. A consequence of this will be that it is not the victim who has a distorted view about the world we inhabit, but those whose confidence remains unshaken despite any contrary evidence. In Chapter 3, the notion of confidence in the world will shed some light on the facts of war as they are reported in the testimonies collected by Svetlana Alexievich in *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War* (1992). The experience of these soldiers divide into three stages, namely, the departure, the battlefield and the homecoming. Such stages are not only arranged along the arrow of time, but are split like *the real* and *the imaginary* insofar as there is reason to think that the facts of the battlefield can hardly be sensed as real from the viewpoint of those who stay at home. Before his departure, the soldier had a merely declarative kind of awareness of such facts, and only after some experiences on the battlefield have occurred may he sense them as real and, therefore, acquire a certain expressive awareness of them. The divide between the homely world and the battlefield is so deeply rooted in our psychology that the self that experiences the reality of the battlefield hardly recognizes himself as being the same person as the one who left home: it seems as if a new, damaged self had been born. This suggests that those expectations of safety and protection that the battlefield manifestly denies (namely, those that constitute our confidence in the world) are so deeply ingrained in our psychology that the self cannot really survive their loss. All these facts become particularly poignant as the soldier returns home. He feels betrayed by his fellow citizens who are generally unable to welcome him back. They hardly bother to listen to his stories and are eager to look away, so that they might not feel responsible for what happened and ashamed in front of the soldier who had to depart. In this way they preserve

their confidence in the world but at the cost of denying the kind of response that such confidence demands.

Once the experience of harm in torture and war has been characterized in Chapters 2 and 3, there is still the question of *how one should respond to it*. This points to an aspect of one's relation to harm where I certainly agree with the Kantian approach, namely, that harm *calls for a response*. Therefore, the issue in the remaining chapters will not so much be whether harm requires a response, but instead *what sort of response* it may demand from us and how we may be best motivated to provide it. To this end, I will focus in Chapters 4 and 5 on Christine Korsgaard's attempt to defend a Kantian response to the question 'Why should I be moral?',[8] but conclude that her particular account (and, in general, any Kantian attempt in this respect) is both *philosophically untenable* and *morally counterproductive*. Thus, in Chapter 4, I first argue that thick moral concepts such as 'being humiliating' or 'being generous' are subject to a *narrative discipline* that uncontroversial response-dependent concepts like 'being nauseating' or 'being amusing' do not possess. More specifically, I try to demonstrate that thick moral concepts form a network, such that moral disagreements can only be rendered intelligible by an appeal to a divergence as to how some concepts in that network may apply to the situation at stake. Two initial implications will be derived from this claim: firstly, that moral projectivism cannot coherently fix the content of our moral judgments[9] and, secondly, that any procedure that might reasonably determine the normative value of such judgments must rely on some substantive commitments. All this is to the detriment of Korsgaard's defense of procedural moral realism and to the benefit of a substantive realist view about morality.

Even though purely formal procedures may fail to track our moral intuitions, some principles might still be required if arbitrariness in the moral domain is to be averted. In Chapter 5, I will first argue that this emphasis on principles and their role as a guide for our political and ethical lives presupposes a divided conception of self. More specifically, I will examine Korsgaard's attempt to get away from that conception of the self and still defend the indispensability of moral principles to answer the moral question. My case against her account of moral deliberation may be stated as a dilemma: either she is committed to a divided conception of the self or she isn't. In the latter case, moral principles are required to guide an agent's true self and, in the end, her entire life, but, in the former one, moral principles are to play a rather ancillary role and the specific sort of moral principle whose indispensability Korsgaard vindicates will turn out to be not only dispensable, but unintelligible as well. So, it seems that she cannot have it both ways: a defense of the indispensability of moral principles and a denial of the divided conception of the self. In light of this discussion, the notion of '*projective attention*' will be introduced in order to sort out some specific aspects of the narrative discipline of moral features, including the role that an agent's character must play within such a discipline.

In section 5.5, an apparently unjustified shift in the discussion will take place. I focus there on guilt as an emotion that, according to the Kantian approach, actually promotes morality inasmuch as its painfulness may deter agents from infringing on the moral principles they may have autonomously endorsed. The purpose of my analysis of guilt is manifold. To begin with, I will try to show that guilt is as heteronomous as shame, whereby guilt can hardly be vindicated by the Kantian approach as an autonomous, moral emotion. To this end, I will argue, along the lines suggested by Richard Wollheim (Wollheim 1999: ch. 3), that it is not so much awareness of having infringed on a certain principle that triggers guilt, but one's awareness of being *accused* by an inner agency of some wrongdoing. This emphasis on the role of this inner agency will, in turn, reveal why the divided conception of the self is not a necessary structure of our agency, but articulates a peculiar kind of character, which, in some relevant circumstances, favors the production of harm rather than acting as a deterrent. I will thus conclude that the Kantian approach is not only philosophically implausible insofar as a peculiar structure of character is vindicated as constitutive of the self, but also morally counterproductive, given that such a structure can be a powerful motivational (and distorting) force in some relevant contexts, like wars, massacres and genocides.

If a hallmark of the Kantian approach is the divided conception of the self, and this has the sort of distorting effects I have just mentioned, why not point in the opposite direction, that is, in the direction of integration? Instead of regarding the divided self as a precondition for our moral achievements, why not approach the divided self as a failure in itself? This is the direction the notion of 'expressive awareness' points to insofar as it refers to a kind of awareness that goes beyond a merely knowing that such and such is a fact, that is, beyond having a merely declarative kind of awareness of certain facts. The worry is not so much that an agent may have a declarative kind of awareness, but the sense of restraint that *merely* having them emphasizes. Such 'merely' is designed to pull apart an agent's deliberative capacities from her being motivated to respond in a certain way, so that the connection between deliberation and motivation becomes a serious problem. The notion of 'expressive awareness' is meant to stress, by contrast, that our initial response to harm involves both reason and motivation, a kind of sensitivity, whereas a mere declarative awareness of it appears, in this light, as a rather sophisticated strategy to distance ourselves from the demands that such a sensitivity may impose upon us. In Chapter 6, I will explore the plight of the divided self as it appears in some pathological cases and examine how a certain kind of awareness may have a healing effect by favoring integration, as the psychoanalytic practice suggests. For this purpose, I will take advantage of Bernard Williams' notion of acknowledgment (Williams 1981c: ch. 9–10; 1985: ch. 10 and postscript; 1993a: ch. 4; and 2002: ch. 8), as well as Simone Weil's distinction between two notions of necessity (1963: 38–44), to introduce the notion of *'receptive passivity'*

as a kind of attitude one may adopt toward oneself that may have such healing effects. In Chapter 7, I will try to show how a proper cultivation of this attitude involves a sort of relation to oneself that may also increase our sensitivity to harm and, thereby, our capacity to honor the demands of a human world, that is, a world where certain expectations of safety and protection are met.

Morality, Self-Knowledge and Human Suffering

An Essay on the Loss of
Confidence in the World

Josep E. Corbí

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