NARCISSISM AS A MORAL EVIL

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Abstract. Narcissism is one of the most widely debated toxic and destructive personality structures today, however key aspects of narcissism remain blurred both to practitioners, to health policy decision makers, and to victims and survivors of narcissistic abuse. To address a part of this blurred phenomenology of narcissism from a philosophical point of view, yet one that is relevant to psychotherapy, this paper focuses on the diagnostic issues between narcissism as a personality structure and Narcissistic Personality Disorder as a diagnosis. This distinction reflects a number of key controversies in the medicalization of personality failures which are traditionally subject to moral qualification. An understanding of narcissism in moral terms, and an association of the concepts of moral evil with mental disorder, allows for a re-conceptualization of narcissism as an ethical and cultural challenge with clinical ramifications and opens up a new vista on how narcissism can be philosophically viewed and institutionally treated in order to prevent it from generating the ultimate damage on the organic relationships in which hundreds of thousands of narcissists are engaged.

Keywords: values in diagnostics; psychiatry; philosophy; morality of disorders; philosophical counseling; integrative psychotherapy.

1. RE-DISCOVERING EVIL IN PSYCHIATRY

One of the neglected philosophical perspectives on modern psychiatry concerns the psychiatric culture of medicalizing personality traits. This is a deeply problematic approach to the very practice and everyday use of ordinary morality, whereby traditional moral depictions of one's personality are factually normatively neutralized and transferred into diagnostic discourse. Thus, rather than considering certain personality traits as socially unacceptable and in need of being change, either by the person's own efforts, or by the society's active intervention, modern psychiatry perceives major personality deficiencies as dysfunctionalities which warrant a diagnosis, and removes the social stigma traditionally associated with moral faults, replacing them with a discourse of victimization of the person, presumably through their own moral faults. This is a sinister twist in ethical thinking that requires some clarification.

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Rev. Roum. Philosophie, **66,** *2*, pp. 371–381, București, 2022

In his 2006 paper, which in my opinion is now already a seminal contribution to the debate, Luis Charland argues that the entire DSM IV Cluster B of Personality Disorders, comprising the borderline, narcissistic, antisocial and histrionic personality disorders, is in fact a largely misplaced diagnostic category, because the very description of the diagnostic criteria included in the protocol clearly show that all of the concepts used for "diagnosis" are moral, and not clinical.[1] A part of this problem arises from the way diagnostic protocols operate, namely the principle that psychiatrists do not diagnose individuals because they are toxic to others or society, but only insofar as their condition causes an impediment to their own functioning or inflicts suffering on them. As many narcissistic personalities thrive in society and, as a part of their very personality structure, do not experience any personal trouble or suffering in lieu of causing deprivation and pain to others, most narcissistic personalities do not even show up for diagnosis and therapy, and those who do receive the diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder — normatively, a medical condition which suggests that on a moral level these individuals are afflicted by a personal phenomenology which turns them into victims of their own psychic dynamics.

An ethical perspective on what Charland describes as moral personality disorders is the opposite: the primary moral stigma is attached to decisions and actions which inflict suffering or damage on others, not on oneself. Thus, the moral logic in treating the Cluster B disorders is contrary to the medical logic: these are the kinds of persons who require moral reformation, and not medical treatment. This principle brings us back to the very origins of psychotherapy, when Philippe Pinel, the French psychiatrist who is considered the founder of the modern psychotherapeutic clinic, described psychotherapy as a whole as a form of "moral reformation". Interestingly, Charland also has a paper on Pinel, where he discusses Pine's understanding of the affective dynamics of conditions inclusive of the present Cluster B personality phenomenology[2]. To a large extent, it is this logic that accounts for the notorious ineffectiveness of ethically neutral medical therapy of Cluster B disorders. These disorders exemplify the moral controversies in personality organization that had led Pinel to define entire psychotherapy as a moral reformation endeavor.

A fundamental aspect of this dialectic of personality disorders was described by Lacanian psychologist Paul Verhaeghe, who, in arguably the best modern textbook of psychotherapy, exclaimed that the truth in psychotherapy does not lie in the realm of epistemology, but in the realm of ethics: "Learning and knowledge belong to science, truth lurks in the field of ethics."[3]

Making the above point intelligible requires at least two steps: first, examining the concept of practical truth as relevance, and the consequent meaning of such truth

[1] Louis Charland, "The moral nature of the DSM IV Cluster B personality disorders", *Journal of Personality Disorders*, vol 20, nr. 2, 2006, pp. 116–125.

[2] L. Charland, "Science and morals in the affective psychopathology of Philippe Pinel", *History of Psychiatry*, vol 21, nr. 10, 2010, pp. 38–53. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0957154X09338334.

[3] Paul Verhaeghe, *On being normal and other disorders: A manual for psychodiagnostics*, London, Karnac Press, 2008, p. 64.

for personal integrity, and secondly exploring, briefly at least, the role of recognition of other personalities and identities in the very constitution of moral emotions which fuel our moral action. Given that the latter task is far more substantial, I will deal with it in the next, separate section, while the former discussion follows from what has been said so far within this section.

One often invoked and important aspect of integrity is "truthfulness", in the sense that the person is generally inclined to tell the truth, especially the truth about important matters that determine our social structure, namely our relationships. The truth in this practical sense is the stuff of ethics, rather than of epistemology, because the character-related type of 'the truth' is not the semantic truth or just any type of factual truth, but the truth about what is morally relevant. This appears as a circular argument, for what is morally relevant, and who decides about that relevance? I would postulate that what is a relevant truth in determining character is that truth which makes other truths possible. This is a point which, to my knowledge, has been first proposed by Jordan Peterson[4]. The relevant ethical truth for judging character is that kind of truth which makes the entire person's narrative credible. Marya Schechtman, one of the founders of the modern theory of the psychotherapeutic narrative, calls this type of truthfulness the truth about "salient facts" which makes the person's entire narrative acceptable within the context of a shared experience of one's community[5].

But how does one truth make other truths possible? Only in the practical sense, which is fundamentally epistemic: there are certain truths, the knowledge of which only makes possible the knowledge of other truths. For example, the truth that there are morals, that there is a normative system particular to a person or group, an ethic that one is familiar with, makes possible the knowledge of other truths, including the moral truths about good and evil. Thus, in psychiatry, and in forensics more generally, the knowledge, or awareness, that some choices are morally wrong and legally forbidden is a precondition for the person's criminal culpability (the epistemic criterion of the so-called "M'Naghten Rules"[6]. The Rules were adopted as a test of criminal culpability in Britain in 1843, following the trial of Daniel M'Naghten for murder, whereby he was found "not guilty" on the grounds of insanity. Thus, the fundamental "truths that make other truths practically possible", or "actionable", which presupposes that they are known to the actor, play a key role in our everyday decision making, and consequently, in the legal and institutional encapsulation of our responsibility to others and to society as a whole.

This, however, is not the entire content of the M'Naghten rules, because they also contain a volitional criterion, namely the requirement that, in order to be fully culpable, a person "must have been able to act otherwise", that is, that the person was sufficiently able to freely decide not to do the wrong thing.

[4] Jordan Peterson, *12 rules for life: An antidote to chaos*, Toronto, Random House Canada, 2018.

[5] Marya Schechtman, *The constitution of selves*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1996.

[6] Benjamin Andoh, "The M'Naghten Rules — The story so far", *Medico-Legal Journal*, vol 61, nr. 2, 1993, pp. 93–103. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F002581729306100205.

One of the key reasons narcissists, or any other persons afflicted by the Cluster B personality disorders, are not generally excused from culpability when they commit a crime is that they satisfy the M'Naghten criteria: they are aware that what they are doing is morally and, where applicable, legally wrong, and they could, albeit with some additional effort, act otherwise. They do have a choice, but they choose to in the wrong way.

The moral evil in narcissism arises from the fact that the narcissist knows the general social truths that other individuals use to orient themselves in the community, and, should they wish to do so, the narcissist would be able to act likewise, however they choose to act morally wrongly, and far more frequently so than most other "healthy" personalities. This is the moral meaning of the term "toxic personality", which is now officially used to describe narcissism and the other Cluster B disorders. In plain terms, the narcissist just does not care about the suffering they inflict on others, although they are fully aware of it.

Perhaps the first psychotherapist who explicitly defined narcissism as the only evil in psychotherapy, was Morgan Scot Peck, who associated the moral evil of narcissism with a fundamental spiritual laziness that is inherent in the narcissist personality: the narcissist does not want to change and evolve, although they know that they ways are toxic to their fellow human beings. Peck draws the radical conclusion that narcissism is in fact the only evil in psychotherapy, for all the other disorders affect the sufferer, the person who is afflicted by them, and only incidentally and indirectly they also affect the families and the society. However, with the narcissistic personality organization (and narcissism is involved, to varying degrees, in all the other Cluster B personality disorders, as well) allows many narcissists to actually flourish, while inflicting incredible pain on their close ones, whom they use of narcissistic supply for their own validation. The reason narcissists are often considered exceptional, apart from their charm and ability to manipulate others, is the fact that by exploiting others they are able to thrive professionally, financially and often socially, while at the same time being empty emotional shells with almost no empathy or ability to connect to others on a more profound personal level. Thus, according to Peck, the narcissistic laziness and lack of care embody a disregard for moral emotions and expectations of others — a psychological situation that begets evil, to the extent of being one of the original sins[7].

On a more philosophical level, the argument for the evil of narcissism focuses on the part of Peck's argument about moral emotions. Our practical ability to act in morally sound ways is usually predicated by our ability to experience moral emotions, which drive us to action. Moral emotions, on the other hand, are often elicited by convictions and beliefs, including philosophical beliefs about what is actually moral. Believing in an ethic is a precondition to feel moral emotions in the ordinary sense, however belief in the ethic alone will hardly suffice as a motivator to act without the accompanying desire, or emotions, to do so. The typical moral emotions most often referred to include loyalty, solidarity, empathy and the like, however there are serious methodological reasons, perhaps most influentially pointed out by David Velleman, to view all of the

[7] M. S. Peck, *The road less travelled and beyond*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987, p. 25.

moral emotions, and thus the very foundation of practical morality, as focused in the emotion of love, which Velleman considers the generic moral emotion[8].

Velleman's argument, put very simply, is that loving someone means responding to their personhood, which is manifested by their personal autonomy, and recognizing the personal value of another which, in an important sense, is "like our own". This is an important moment in the argument, because it suggests that must first recognize and be aware of our own personhood, and of its value — we must, in a sense, love ourselves — in order to be able to feel the same emotion towards the person of another in their value "like our own"[9]. This suggests that any disturbance of the person's ability to love oneself automatically causes issues in one's ability to love another, and, given that love is the generic moral emotion, in one's ability to satisfy the practical demands of moral action. Velleman's paper is relevant to my argument here insofar as it convincingly specifies the emotional structure that is a pre-requisite for moral action in a way capable of explaining a variety of experiential issues with narcissists.

While Velleman is generally a Kantian moral theorist, his account of the dynamics of moral action could be considered an emotionalist, or sentimentalist account. This is not a theoretical sentimentalism in the conventional sense, because Velleman does not consider love and the other moral emotions to constitute the very normative structure of moral choice, i.e. we know what is morally right independently of our emotions; our personhood and the normativity of our choices arise from our personal autonomy, which is definitive of us as persons[10]. However, we are able to act morally only if we have enough love for ourselves and others to move us to such action A theoretically consistent sentimentalism entails that what is morally right is in fact what is consistent with certain moral emotions — e.g. any action that is consistent with empathy is morally justified[11].

According to Velleman, what is morally rights and wrong when we make our choices to others is determined by our appreciation of the autonomy of the other person. Thus, the source of moral obligation, or in a weaker sense, moral evaluation of choices, rests on our own autonomous appreciation of the actual autonomy of another. However, in practice, moral action, which reflects our recognition of what is right and wrong, is governed by moral emotions. They are not the foundation of rightness or wrongness, but they are instruments without which it would not be possible to act rightly or wrongly[12].

From the point of view of my present discussion, the otherwise principled distinction between what constitutes right and wrong, on the one hand, and what allows us

[8] David Velleman, "Love as a moral emotion', *Ethics* vol. 109, nr. 2, 1999, pp. 347–348.

[9] D. Velleman, "Beyond price", *Ethics*, vol. 118, nr. 2, 2008, p. 203.

[10] D. Velleman, David, "A brief introduction to Kantian ethics", *Self-to-Self: Selected essays*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 43.

[11] Michael Slote, *Moral sentimentalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.

[12] Jeanette Kennett, "True and proper selves: Velleman on love", *Ethics*, vol. 118, nr. 2, 2008, pp. 214–215.

to act rightly or wrongly, is not relevant: when discussing narcissism as an evil in psychiatry, one deals with the latter dimension of morals, namely one's organization of personality which makes one a good or not a good person depending on one's choices. Velleman's account of moral emotions fully satisfies this range of argument as it applies to psychiatry. If a person is aware of the meaning of right and wrong, and is theoretically able to choose to act rightly or wrongly, but is dominated by emotions which cause them to consistently choose to act morally wrongly, that is the concept of evil in psychiatry and psychotherapy, consistent with Peck's view of "laziness" in narcissism; in this context, the "laziness" in fact means a lack of motivation to change, which is exhibited in a lack of love or appreciation of other people's personhood and value — some of the defining characteristic of the narcissistic personality.

2. WHY NARCISSISTS DON'T LOVE

If love is fundamentally about the appreciation of another person, then narcissists cannot love, because their primary focus is the validation of their own personhood through the reactions, and often the suffering, of another. The narcissist does not see another person as a being "like oneself", nor does she appreciate the person of another like she appreciates her own person, for the simple reason that the core of the narcissistic disorder is a failure to appreciate the narcissist's own personhood. Whatever might be the etiology of the narcissistic organization of personality (and that is not the subject of my present discussion), the narcissist does not consider their own personality valuable, or acceptable: they find it difficult to accept and love themselves, and given the compulsion to somehow live with themselves, they overinflate their expectations of appreciation by others to the extent of actually manipulating, and sometimes forcing, others to show that appreciation. When, despite all of the efforts, the appreciation does not arise, the narcissist will resort to inflicting pain on significant others, which she will then interpret as an indirect confirmation of her own value according to the formula: "he suffers because of me, therefore I am valuable to him".

The presentation of narcissistic personality organization varies widely, and have recently been classified on several levels, starting from a division of presentations into grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, and progressing with finer graded classifications into the axes of narcissistic extraversion, antagonism and narcissistic neuroticism[13].

The projection of narcissistic ideation of grandeur corresponds to the smallness and fear of the narcissist's ego: the smaller the ego and the more threaten the narcissist's own self-valuation is by the outside world, the fiercer will be the compensation

[13] Joshua Miller et al, "Narcissism today: What we know and what we need to learn", *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 30, nr. 6, 2021, 2022, pp. 519–525. https://doi.org/10.1177/09637214211044109; Michael Crow et al., "Exploring the structure of narcissism: Toward and integrated solution", *Journal of Personality*, vol 87, nr. 6, 2019, pp. 1151–1169. https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12464.

reflected in the grandiose projections. Thus, the drama of the narcissist's grandiosity is a sign of just how vulnerable and soft the narcissist's ego is inside the shell of arrogance and domination. Thus, the most radical presentations of narcissism present the greatest risk of the person breaking down once the narcissist ideation is challenged or successfully confronted. It is this familiar concept of symptom as compensation that renders narcissism fundamentally a disorder. Narcissistic Personality Disorder is not diagnosed unless the person shows up in the psychiatric or counseling room and complains about experiencing personal difficulties or pain, however the many narcissists who do not appear to consciously experience deprivation or pain, but who pain and hurt others, and who thus do not get diagnosed with NPD, can still be (and in fact often are) informally considered disordered, because of this mechanism where their arrogance and grandiosity represent symptoms of an internal fragility which threatens to tear their personality down in case of the breakdown of the symptom.

> (…) psychic symptoms invariably come down to a patient's economic attempt at a solution for an underlying, structurally determined problem. "Economic" here signifies an accounting paradigm of loss and gain.[14]

The gain that the narcissist achieves by projecting grandiosity is a sense of increased self worth. This sense is inauthentic and temporary, and this is why the narcissist continues a quest of "narcissist supply", namely the validation that they derive from the others' accepting, or at least reacting to, their grandiosity. If other people go along with the narcissist's grandiose behavior and arrogance, the narcissist will see this as a sign that the enlarged ego projected outward is in fact realistic, that they are truly larger than they know and feel they are. On the other hand, if others react confrontationally to the narcissist's grandiosity, the narcissist will interpret such behavior as jealousy and a desire to obstruct the narcissist's greatness. In both cases, the narcissist gains validation as long as there is some kind of affective reaction by others. However, if such reaction is absent — if others simply ignore them — the narcissist will typically burst into "narcissistic rage" and initiate major confrontation, because the structure of the economic paradigm Verhaeghe mentions implies that only in such a case the narcissist does not gain, but in fact loses validation. This causes them pain, because it confirms their own internal sense of low value — the others' indifference to them in fact validates their own low self-esteem.

Although grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are generally distinguished as very different presentations of the narcissistic organization of personality — grandiose as involving arrogance, entitlement, aggression, initial likeability, etc., and vulnerable as presenting distrust of others, prolonged negative emotions and social isolation[15], the two presentations follow the same economic paradigm described by Verhaeghe. Namely, the vulnerable narcissist also gains by soliciting validation, or narcissist supply, from others, only by using different extraction methods: rather than bullying others into

[14] P. Verhaeghe, *On being normal and other disorders: A manual for psychodiagnostics*, p. 16.
[15] J. Miller et al., "Narcissism today: What we know and what we need to learn", p. 519.

recognizing their greatness or imposing themselves by charm on top of the various social hierarchies, the vulnerable narcissist draws others' attention by withdrawing, expressing doubts in their own worth and by consistently acting out a negative affectivity. Both types of the narcissist gain through the affective reactions of others, and both lose by the absence of such emotional reactions: thus, the vulnerable narcissist will also break down, either by decompensating through narcissistic rage in the same way as the grandiose narcissist, or by self-harming behavior (physical, emotional, or both), if they encounter indifference. For both types of narcissists, a lack of narcissistic supply confirms their low self-esteem and causes them intense psychic pain.

A further classification axis suggests that the grandiose narcissist will exhibit extraversion and antagonism as prevalent styles of their social interactions, while the vulnerable narcissist will present antagonism and narcissistic neuroticism, or inability to handle frustration of desire for validation which will symptomatize through intense negative affect or self-harming actions[16].

The described dynamics suggest why the narcissist structure of gain and loss does not support genuine love in the sense described by Velleman, one that appears highly intuitive and involves valuing the autonomy and identity of another person for its own sake. The narcissistic personality's structure of gains and losses does not involve a recognition of the identity of worth of other people as persons: rather the economic paradigm of the narcissist structure sees others merely as sources of narcissistic supply. This means that the "loving" relationships the narcissists enter into, when they are affectionate on the part of the narcissist, arise from the narcissist's joy in the validation they receive through the relationship. However, when the relationship arrives at a point when the initial courtship is over and the partners need to address life's challenges, the narcissistic supply often dries out, at least temporarily, and this leads to eruptions of narcissistic rage. In romantic relationships, this often results in divorce. When a marriage with the narcissist ends, if the couple have children, this always leads to protracted and extremely damaging custody wars, and where the partners have property to divide between themselves, without children, the legal battle for the property tends to be uncompromising. The narcissist will seek to derive the final narcissistic supply from inflicting as much emotional, financial and existential pain on their former husband or wife as possible, usually regardless of the interests of the vulnerable children and out of proportion with the actual benefits from litigation over property.

The symptoms or manifestations of narcissism exclude love as a quality relationship between two persons which is based on a mutual appreciation of their personhood and autonomy — the way in which Velleman contributes to an essentialist interpretation of love. This type of interpretation focuses love as a complex system of cognitive, affective and somatic intentionality directed at another person as a whole, not just a sexual or purely romantic or poetic idealization of a particular aspect of another person. Other accounts of love focus the aspects of commitment to another, combined with af-

[16] *Ibidem.*

fective attachment[17], or as a rational relationship between two persons[18]. However, there are also sharply different views of love in literature, including that which advocates the removal of love from the psychological catalogues of emotions and the respective affective components of psychometric tools, and for an understanding of love as a "drive". One of the arguments in favor of this view is that once the love drive is exhausted, or betrayed, it tends to turn into its opposite, and this then accounts for the large numbers of divorces, suicides, murders, etc.[19] Such consequences can be seen as inconsistent with the essentialist understanding of love based on the appreciation of the autonomy and inherent qualities of another person, and as far more consistent with the dynamics of a drive, whereby the frustration or exhaustion of a drive may trigger resentment, disappointment, anger and hatred.

It appears to me that non-essentialist accounts of love fail to distinguish between love as a complex relationship between two persons and more limited, partial aspects of attraction and attention that may or may not amount to love. For example, if love is seen as merely attachment, or commitment, it is difficult to distinguish romantic love from agape, the love that characterizes friendship. If love is seen as a rational relationship based on a harmony of two personality, then it becomes largely indistinguishable from both friendship and from interest-based alliances such as those in business. The latter might be pleasant and satisfying, yet in romantic love there appears to exist something important that sets it apart from business or friendly partnerships. Finally, love seen as a drive seems to me as a reduction which collapses love into a range of more transient relationships, including sexual affairs (with or without an actual love between the sexual partners), needy relationships arising from loneliness, and a variety of obsessions, all of which can be seen as powerful "drives" which, when frustrated, can backfire through the opposed drives to destruct and inflict pain on the other person. All of these aspects of what may or may not amount to true love are familiar, and are usually explained as "not-enough-for-love" phenomena. Relationships that exhaust themselves in these partial accounts of "love" tend to be experienced as "not-love"; in fact, once they are over, or once they backfire through resentment and hostility, their protagonists often describe them as misconceived interactions which they had taught might have been love, however they have proven otherwise. Thus, it appears to me that we cannot practically avoid an essentialist understanding of full-fledged love that includes a fundamentally aesthetic dimension of appreciation of another's autonomy and particular personality features, along the lines of Velleman's argument.

[17] Phillip Shaver et al., "Love as Attachment: The Integration of Three Behavioral Systems", in R. Sternberg, Robert and M. Barnes (eds.), *The Psychology of Love*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988, pp 68–99.

[18] Clyde Hendrick and Susan Hendrick, "A theory and method of love", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 50, nr. 2, 1986, pp. 392–402. https://doi.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.50.2.392; Richard P. Ebstein et al., "Genetics of human social behavior", *Neuron*, vol. 65, nr. 6:, 2010, pp. 831–844. https://doi.org/10.10.16/j.neuron.2010.02.020.

[19] Enrique Burunat, "Love is not an emotion", *Psychology,* vol. 7, nr. 14, 2016, pp. 1883–1910.

In fact, Velleman's argument appears to me as a contemporary rendition of Max Scheler's early view of love as a particular type of "fellow feeling" that Scheler painstakingly distinguishes from a systematic exposition of all others types of fellow feeling. Scheler describes love as an aesthetic contemplation of, and joy in, the unique identity of another person, without which we sense that the aesthetic quality of our own life would be diminished[20].

Assuming that these common intuitions are sufficient to consider love to be more than its parts, which indeed do include drives, attachment, commitment and all the other components of the various reductionist attempts to "define" love, it follows that narcissistic personality organization must be incapable of fully engaging in love, for the simple reason that it cannot grasp the value and uniqueness of another autonomous personality outside its mere instrumental role for generating narcissistic supply for the narcissistic subject herself. This is a principled and at the same time practical reason loving relationships are impossible for the narcissist. If love, or capacity for love, as Velleman reasonably argues, are equipped with moral attributes (loving others is morally desirable, and being incapable of love is morally deficient), it then follows that narcissistic personality organization is morally defunct in an important sense. This still appears to fall short of the claim that narcissism is "morally evil", as it appears that being incapable of acting in a morally desirable way, namely by exhibiting the generic moral emotion of love, while morally deficient, does not amount to a positive moral evil, in the same way as failing to do good does not seem the same as actively doing something bad. If the argument were to stop here, it might portray Peck's view of narcissism as a moral evil in psychotherapy as too radical.

On a practical level, failure to do something good comes much closer to acting in the evil way than it does in theory. Specifically in psychotherapy, the action-oriented context of the problem that are dealt with suggests that, as Peck points it out, laziness to change in fact leads to choices which, whether they represent an active commission of undesirable acts, or a failure to act in normally expected ways, in fact inflict pain on others. Thus, in psychotherapeutic situations the active background of the pain, which brings people to therapy in the first place, requires a dynamism of adaptation and change which, when it is stifled, and the personal choices are frozen in morally undesirable, or impermissible, modes, always proactively generate pain. This can be easily illustrated by many psychotherapeutic situations. Narcissistic parents inflict pain on their children by depriving them of the necessary development opportunities to learn empathy and become desirable and socially integrated human beings, thus leading them on a path of all kinds of compensations. The narcissistic parent, most often, does not actively cause damage to their children; they do not actively commit evil against their own offspring, however by failing to evolve their relationships with their kids in the way that allows the children to psychologically prosper they cause them deficiencies in emotional responses and capacities that inflict pain on the children and diminish their existential potential.

[20] Max Scheler, *The nature of sympathy*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, pp. 166–174.

A narcissistic spouse who feels no empathy for their husband or wife, offers no support or empowerment when the other person is in need, does not actively commit evil deeds, however the failure to live up to ordinary human expectations of solidarity and fellow feeling actually causes active pain and debilitates the other person, and their relationships as a whole.

A philosophical perspective on psychotherapeutic situations requires us to see the human relationships as complex action systems, where legitimate mutual expectations are rules of the game. When these rules are consistently broken by some of the participants in the relationships not living up to the legitimate expectations (including that of showing moral emotions, in clearly designated situations, such as in organic relationships including marriage, romantic love or friendship), this obstructs the entire action system and causes positive damage to other participants in the same game. The psychological benefit that the narcissist, described in the first section of this paper, derives from triggering the frustration and revolt in others, and thus from obtaining narcissistic supply, arises from the psychological loss that the narcissist inflicts on the entire 'game' of the relationship and on the other players in the same game. Thus, the game becomes exploitative and singularly morally questionable. Thanks to the action-oriented nature of the game, the difference between passive and active moral evil is diminished. The economic logic of psychological gain and loss that lies behind the idea of symptoms as psychic compensations further colors the narcissist strategy, which is exploitative and focused on generating a psychic gain at the expense of another's psychic loss in the form of a narcissistic supply that caters for a disturbed system of the narcissist's inner validation, as moral evil. This, in consequence, renders Peck's conclusion that narcissism is a paradigmatic moral evil in psychotherapy philosophically defensible.