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Salvation or Damnation, and where Ethics Fits in to all That

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Abstract

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Abstract

Ignazio Silone's novel Bread and Wine explores the complex nature of ethical decision-making in the context of Fascist Italy, a world in which lofty concerns of moral conduct seem the fodder of fools and idealists. Silone uses his central character, firebrand and part-time philosopher Pietro Spina, to plunge his readers into one man's quest for goodness within the debauchery and despair of war-torn Italy. Pietro's moral development through the context of his adventures illustrates the challenge of crafting any sound ethical code, and the ease with which one might be lost to cynicism or indifference. The road marks of Pietro's philosophical evolution are explored through comparisons with Iris Murdoch's work on moral vision, Elizabeth Anderson's non-ideal theory, and the three crusaders of Samantha Vice, Ryan Preston-Roedder, and Vanessa Carbonell in their campaign for faith in humanity over cynicism.

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Ignazio Silone's novel *Bread and Wine* takes the readers on a wild ride through fascist Italy, as seen through the eyes of Pietro Spina, a one-man revolution in a world of pessimists. One could present Pietro as a less romantic version of James Bond, in his travels as a secret Communist revolutionary, complete with a priest disguise, clandestine meetings, and lots of secret note-passing. Throw in a bunch of world-weary Italian peasants, and Silone has himself a novel! Unconventional as it may be, Pietro's search for justice in the harsh climate of fascist Italy strikes a familiar chord within anyone who has tried looking for light in what seems to be the darkest hour. Throughout his adventures, Pietro's own philosophical evolution sheds light on the real life complexities of exercising moral judgment. This complexity can be usefully unpacked by drawing on Iris Murdoch's work on moral vision, Elizabeth Anderson's non-ideal theory, and recent work urging the need for faith in humanity to combat the threat of cynicism. Through Pietro, Silone illustrates the challenge of crafting any sound ethical code, while still providing a ray of hope in the tale of a good man's fight for justice and truth.

Both Pietro Spina and Iris Murdoch are connected through their particular and unique sense of moral *vision.* Pietro Spina first enters the reader's awareness as a sort of ghostly rumor, floating above the mundane chatter of the other characters' lives. The novel begins with two men named Nunzio and Concettino visiting Don Benedetto, a wizened and world-weary priest who was once their childhood teacher. Their conversation quickly turns to Pietro, another former student. Pietro is given a larger-than-life reputation as an exiled firebrand and proponent of revolutionary communism. As it turns out, Nunzio runs into Pietro on his way back home, and quickly learns that Pietro has returned, hell-bent on turning Italy away from its fascist course. Nunzio represents the sentiment of the average Italian when he dryly tells Pietro, "The ordinary person generally doesn't have any choice at all. The conditions in which he lives are prefabricated for him" (Silone 32). Pietro responds, aghast, to this dour condemnation of life with a cry: "A man who thinks with his own mind and remains uncorrupted is a free man…If you are lazy, callous, servile, you are not free" (Silone 33). Unlike Nunzio, Pietro is afire with a moral vision for Italy beyond the daily misery enforced in a totalitarian state resting on the backs of a peasant population. He insists that more can be done to bring about a better world.

In this initial verbal sparring, one can draw parallels between Pietro's philosophy of morality and Murdoch's notion of moral vision. Like Pietro, Murdoch believes that morality greatly depends on one's point of view, in the sense that "will continually influences belief… and is ideally able to influence it through a sustained attention to reality… As moral agents we have to try to see justly, to overcome prejudice… to direct reflection" (Murdoch 39). Murdoch diverges from typical Western thought in her

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conception of morality as a personal effort to see past one's distortions or "fantasies" through the practice of unbiased reflection, which Murdoch labels as moral "attention." Murdoch emphasizes the very personal, and thus biased, nature of morality. In the case of *Bread and Wine,* Murdoch would probably say that Nunzio is blinded by his complacency, particularly as a rich man in a position of social privilege, and cannot see the moral work waiting to be done. Like Pietro, Murdoch values the sort of personal reflection, or "thinking with one's own mind," which can help overcome the social conventions or personal neuroticisms which may blind us from moral truth-seeking.

As one might imagine, this sort of moral effort is a continual journey, not simply a one-time epiphany. Murdoch continually emphasizes that morality is an eternal struggle which requires relentless effort to improve our clarity about reality, and our ensuing moral options within that reality. Pietro Spina represents this very journey in a literal sense, as his travels though Italy act as a mirror for the evolution of his moral philosophy in life. Pietro is initially very ill, and takes on the disguise of a priest to evade capture from the Italian police, or *carabinieri.* He travels to a small rural town called Pietrasecca to convalesce, and in the process gets to know the local peasant population. Pietro's experience there draws many parallels to an example put forward by Murdoch herself illuminating the nature of personal moral improvement. He starts off with a great disdain for the superstitious ignorance and political complacency of the peasants. At one point he declares, "I feel like a chunk of rotten meat surrounded by flies" (Silone 69). His position as a priest make him privy to simple lives of the peasants, and their inability to think beyond survival for the next harvest, or even the next day. He spends all his time buried in his communist papers. In the same way, Murdoch presents the image of conflict between a mother and a daughter-in-law, M and D. M originally thinks D is a simpleton with poor manners. However, the key part comes in when M thinks, "Let me look again" such that M "reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters… The change is not in D's behavior but in M's mind" (Murdoch 17).

In the same way, Pietro truly begins his moral journey in Pietrasecca, as he changes his opinions about the worth of the local people. The key to both Pietro and M changing their minds is their effort to extend "loving attention," in Murdoch's words, towards the situation in which they find themselves. Pietro for once allows his emotions to influence him when he comes to befriend a young woman in Pietrasecca named Christina (with a wee bit of infatuation to help things along…). After conversing in depth with Christina, he finds, "In this lovely Christina I have found many features of my own adolescence… the same infatuation with the absolute, the same rejection of …ordinary life, even the same readiness for self-sacrifice" (Silone 87). Pi-

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etro's eventual reexamination of his opinion of the peasants emphasizes Murdoch's point that increasing mental maturity can help people throw off prejudices which dilute one's understanding of reality.

Both Murdoch and Pietro are very deeply invested in the concept of freedom. While Pietro's passions are subsumed within a greater vision for Italy, one could say that he ultimately pursues the same moral vision as Murdoch, what she calls the "Good." Murdoch places the Good as the "single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention" to which humans gravitate (Murdoch 54). According to Murdoch, the Good is a sort of Platonic perfect ideal which lies at the heart of humanity's curious, questioning nature. The Good is transcendent in the sense that, if one "sees" the Good properly, it draws one onwards in the journey away from natural selfishness towards a "magnetic perfection" of moral truth. In the same way, Pietro's slow dawning of compassion for the locals makes him to start to question his entrenched views on Communism as the solution to all life's problems. He asks himself, "Is it possible to take part in political life… and remain sincere? Have I then, escaped from the opportunism of a decadent Church only to end up in the Machiavellism of a political sect?" (Silone 88). As of yet, Pietro does not have any of the answers to these questions. However, as Murdoch might say, he at least begins to ask the right questions.

As Pietro slowly begins to move away from his original Communist intentions towards a more spiritual awakening, one could argue that he follows an evolution similar to that of Rawlsian justice. Like Rawls, Pietro starts out with an ideal theory of justice, wrapped in the fiery cloak of Communist revolutionary grandeur. When he first begins to talk with the working-class Italian peasants, called the *cafoni*, he is shocked by their lack of concern for the status of Italy and the oppression of the government. Pietro insists, "Don't you think that one day the landowners might be expropriated and their land given to the poor? …Don't you think that one day laws might be made by you in favor of all?" (Silone 130). Like Rawls, Pietro is a visionary who wishes to reach for perfection, for someday, even if that day has not yet arrived. Both believe that justice is intrinsically linked to the concept of fairness, and societal distribution of all benefits and burdens should be fair for all citizens, who are all of equal worth.

Rawls believed that one could come up with these rules to structure society if one started with the idealized utopia, and in this sense Rawls is the poster boy of modern ideal theory. According to Rawls, when creating societal rules, one must start from the "original position" behind the "veil of ignorance." By Rawls' logic, "Since all are similarly situated and no one is able to design principles to favor his particular condition, the principles of justice are the result of a fair agreement or bargain" (Rawls

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205). If justice is modeled on the hypothetical, *ideal* justice where everyone is unaware of their own station in society, there is thus no motive to try and bias societal structure to favor one's particular circumstances. If everyone is equally in the dark, one is more likely to arrive at a fair society for all involved. In the same way, Pietro is so attracted by Communism because he believes putting decisions in the hands of the *cafoni* will prevent the sort of biases made by rich, apathetic individuals high up in the Italian government. Both Rawls and Pietro subscribe to ideal theory as the "first step" in identifying the principles behind a good theory. Pietro appears to side with Rawls in that he is deeply invested in the potential of humankind, and believes that one can worry about the nitty-gritty details later.

However, as the novel progresses, Pietro comes to see that the Communist movement, just like any sort of ideal theory, is not necessarily all it's cracked up to be. At first, he is delighted by the zeal and fervor of the first few Communists he meets, nearly all of which are young, disillusioned students. He recruits a young man and woman by the names of Bianchina and Pompeo to join his movement. In their discussion, they are all impassioned by the idea of the "second revolution," and feel bound by their loyalty to the "principles proclaimed by our fathers…as the foundations of society… The actual functioning of that society conflicts with or ignores them" (Silone 153). Pietro then sets off to Rome, intent on finding a young man named Romeo who can help Pietro expand the communist movement. However, it is Pietro's arrival in Rome which heralds the shattering of his rose-colored glasses.

In Rome, one could argue that Pietro finds all the reasons why Elizabeth Anderson argues that ideal theory falls to pieces. Anderson points out various ways in which idealized versions of justice hardly ever bring about their precious utopia—in fact, such ambitions can sometimes take one further down a darkened road. Pietro begins to realize these leaks in his airtight dreams when he finally meets Romeo, who shows Pietro just how high the cost of revolution is for ordinary people. Romeo tells Pietro that he is "asking for too much…If a working man who is a former cafone is against the government it amounts to sacrilege. He's nearly always killed. If he manages to get out of prison alive he's a shadow of his former self" (Silone 159). In focusing so narrowly on the necessity of spreading the Communist revolution, Pietro sometimes seems to forget the very real toll it takes on the people who risk their lives for the movement. In the same way, Anderson believes this idealized sort of motivation can cause a certain blindness towards the true root of one's problems, which have a great deal more to them than simply not matching the ideal. Anderson believes that acknowledging certain realistic "distinctions" or obstacles to justice, such as discrepancies in civil or political rights, make for more realistic solutions. In her words, "when we are forced to… gain a more empirically adequate understanding of our problems,

we also open some and close other evaluative options" (Anderson 5).

Pietro is forced to do some reevaluating of his own when he takes into account the true, non-ideal cost of his Communist dreams on the youthful hopefuls who have suffered for their ideals. In his search for Luigi Murica, Pietro runs into a heartbreaking example of the plight of a couple who dared to defy the Italian government. Pietro manages to find Annina, the former girlfriend of Murica. In coaxing Annina's tale out of her, Pietro declares one must be "pitiless" to survive as a conspirator, only for Annina to reply "perhaps it's my duty to tell the story…you're like [Murica], you probably think the same way as he does, and perhaps you have the same faults" (Silone 179). She proceeds to tell him how she and Murica fell in love working for the movement. When Murica was tracked down by the government, she allowed herself to be raped by two policemen to prevent them from arresting him. At the discovery, Murica called her a whore and fled, leaving her to a solitary life of penury and squalor. As this example illustrates, Pietro has simultaneously overestimated the "motivational and cognitive capacities of human beings" (Anderson 3), while also remaining unaware of the very real discrimination which waits for his followers—an error Anderson points out as a classic of Rawlsian-esque idealism. Moved by Annina's story, Pietro renews his determination to find Murica—so much for being pitiless.

By the end of Pietro's trip to Rome, it is quite clear that the Communist movement is in a state of disarray, yet this bothers Pietro less than the plight of those he has met. Pietro seems to have shifted his priorities away from lofty Communist idealism towards the real-life problems of the peasant populace in Italy. He runs into Battipaglia, an international Communist leader, who accuses Pietro of defying Party orders, and threatens to expel Pietro from the party. In reply, Pietro notes "I've other things on my mind, I mean the situation here…What it boils down to, is that I do not feel able to form opinions on matters outside my experience. I cannot stoop to… approving or condemning things with my eyes shut" (Silone 163). Pietro, who once would have been thrilled to meet such an important Communist leader, has opened his eyes to the much more concrete issues which face Italy and its people. Pietro seems to start believing that his true loyalty is not to communism, but to the overwhelming suffering faced by the *cafoni*.

What causes this change? It is not so much some drastic turnaround from Pietro's original plans. Rather, Pietro comes to call upon his innate rejection of cynicism and deep faith in humanity, which make him a true example of a "moral saint" (or as close as one can get, for someone with unnerving skill at disguises who drinks altogether too much wine). Samantha Vice, a contemporary philosopher and staunch opponent of cynicism, parallels Silone's illustration of the dangerously corrosive na-

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ture of cynicism. Pietro is not exactly what one would call “chipper,” and he’s hardly above the occasional sarcastic one-liner, nor would Vice have him so. However, Vice points out the perils of cynicism as an *embedded* character trait translated into attitudes towards others. On his way back from Rome, Pietro’s conversation with the disillusioned former communist Uliva demonstrates the bitterness of the cynic. Uliva accuses Pietro, “You too aspire to totalitarian power in the name of different ideas… the regenerative ardour that filled us when we were in the students’ cell has already become an ideology, a tissue of fixed ideas, a spider’s web” (Silone 170). Vice argues that cynics like Uliva always expect that everyone will act in self-interest, and thus preclude any sort of societal moral interest or progress, which are intrinsically “nourished by hope” that such change is achievable (Vice 178).

Pietro represents a character foil with Uliva, and voices the retort favored by Vice on why such ingrained cynicism is at worst reprehensible, and at the least, quite useless. In defending his hope for the future despite the flaws of the Communist movement, Pietro replies, “It’s true that if I did not believe in the liberty of man, or at any rate the possibility… I should be afraid of life” (Silone 171). Like Pietro, Vice argues that cynics inadvertently condemn us to a dreary world by discounting the possibility of moral striving and the cultivation of faith, hope, and charity. In Vice’s words, “Cynicism is incompatible with these virtues, all of which are required to explain our sense of moral progression and striving” (Vice 179). Pietro, like Vice, is committed to a stance of moral optimism, in order to live in community with others and work towards the possibility of a better world. By not believing in Uliva’s words, Pietro’s optimism represents the best chance for actually making a change and bringing about societal progress.

Over the course of the novel, one realizes that Pietro is not a hero for his pursuit of Communist freedom, but rather for the deep extent to which he cares for the Italian populace, and the faith he places in their human worth despite their daily suffering under Italian oppression. Like Preston-Roedder, Pietro recognizing the self-fulfilling nature of cynicism, but realizes that optimism, or faith, can have a similar effect for a better outcome. Preston-Roedder notes, “One’s faith in people’s decency is apt to prompt them… to act rightly, and it also tends to help one avoid subtly prompting them to act wrongly” (Preston-Roedder 678). People are very sensitive to social cues, so moral encouragement holds the power to bring about positive behavior from others, as they respond to someone’s faith in them.

The evolution of Pietro’s relationship with Bianchina throughout the novel illustrates the power of faith in others’ inherent worth. At the beginning of the novel, Pietro (in the guise of a priest) extends a small act of kindness by “absolving” Bianchiana for attempting an abortion, giving her comfort in a time of fear and poor health. She

becomes a faithful friend and messenger for Pietro throughout the novel, and by the end one sees that she is actually a fairly complex character. Bianchina is the only one willing to call Pietro "an incorrigible reckless baby" (Silone 203) when he makes impetuous decisions, yet she also saves his life by preventing him from being discovered and lynched for his communist ties. Despite her intellectual ignorance, Bianchina is the sounding board for a great many of Pietro's thoughts, and she is symbolic of the earnest and compassionate Italian peasantry that Pietro has come to know and love. Pietro remarks to her, "How lucky it is that the human race includes women" and not just "calculating males" (Silone 204). Setting aside the dash of sexism flavoring that comment, Pietro and Bianchina's relationship was possible due to Pietro taking a chance on the goodness of a stranger. Their deep, if slightly unconventional, bond illustrates Preston-Roedder's argument that faith in humanity "enables a person to live in a kind of community with others, even though their interests and aims may differ" (Preston-Roedder 684). By giving others a chance, one opens a door to opportunities and relationships that brighten one's life.

By the end of the novel, Pietro's original aim to bring about a Communist revolution is a tarnished dream that doesn't appear to stand any chance of fulfillment. The various contacts he has made over his journey have since moved on to greater troubles, and Pietro's own aims have moved from political to spiritual connections as he deepens his understanding and compassion for the plight of the peasants. In fact, Pietro himself eventually dies, possibly from vicious wolves, as he flees into the mountains to avoid capture by the Italian police. However, Silone does not seem to intend a depressing and meaningless ending to Pietro's struggles. If one looks at Pietro as the sort of "moral saint" sketched by Vanessa Carbonell, there is perhaps a shred of hope in an otherwise somber tale.

Carbonell notes that there are some who think that moral saints do not exist, and aiming for such a pinnacle of morality is a useless endeavor. However, Carbonell provides reasons why exemplary moral figures, like Silone's Pietro, provide a guiding light for others. Pietro is very much like Vanessa Carbonell's example of Paul Farmer, her moral "saint" who aims to provide medical care to the poorest individuals around the world. Carbonell argues that her real-life saint "simply wants to help the poor and the sick, and he does so not with… angelic purity… but rather with an ascerbic wit and a willingness to do what is necessary to further his cause", which sounds an awful lot like Pietro (Carbonell 377). Pietro has long since moved on from particular communist ideals, and has no qualms about defying a particular party leader's rules in his aims to bring about better conditions for people who suffer. Even at the end, when all hope seems to be fading fast, Pietro still believes, "Under every dictatorship…it's sufficient for one little man, just one ordinary, little man to say no, and the

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whole of that formidable granite order is imperiled" (Silone 208). Pietro never gets caught up in trivialities which might water down his intentions, but remains faithful to his belief that caring for the welfare of ordinary people is a cause worth pursuing. While some would see both Farmer and Pietro as radical, they are both actually quite moral, even saintly, in Carbonell's estimation.

Furthermore, moral saints may not actually be perfect people, but they represent a journey *towards* perfection, and provide a model of the kind of person that one might wish to emulate. To quote Carbonell, "What makes [Farmer] so interesting is that he is a distinctly *human* moral saint… He proves that someone who exhibits all of the important features of a moral saint *can* be the sort of person we want to be" (Carbonell 380). Pietro's story is hardly a perfect one—having one's movement go to shambles and most likely dying alone from hypothermia or animal mauling is hardly the most heroic of tales. However, Silone and Carbonell seem to suggest that there is still something inspiring about these figures who face any obstacle with optimism and fervor, even in the face of failure. For example, one of Pietro's followers is murdered at the end of the novel, yet inspires his village with a note he left behind declaring, "Truth and brotherhood will prevail among men instead of lies and hatred" (Silone 261). Despite the odds, despite horrible circumstances, Pietro manages to instill hope in the people he meets. While he is hardly perfect, his willingness to sacrifice—even risking death—seems to make him larger than life, and brings others along in his vision for a better future.

Even though the world appears to snuff out Pietro's light, his eternal optimism lives on in the lives of those he touched throughout the novel. Pietro is a moral exemplar that one can look to as a reminder of why Murdoch's moral imagination, Anderson's realism, and Preston-Roedder's faith are so important in paving the way for a better future. Pietro possessed the moral imagination to see beyond the despair of his daily life, and never stopped trying to make it better despite his knowledge of the very real obstacles which lay before him. As Anderson might note, there is no guarantee that moral effort will lead to a better life. Even the best of intentions might be metaphorically "eaten by wolves," as Pietro was. Nevertheless, Pietro reminds the readers of why it is still so important to *try.* Pietro's burgeoning compassion for the lowliest of individuals harkens back to the immense complexity and capacity of human beings for both darker and greater things, and shines a light on the value of every human life. There are, admittedly, risks when one takes chances like Pietro does, but he is the sort of figure that inspires others to be more like him anyway. Pietro Spina, despite all his faults, represents something good, some eternal source of hope, to which we might all strive.

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