

Moral Vision, Outrage and the Contextual Understanding of Values in the World of Tennis

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Abstract

This article elaborates on Jean Baudrillard's ideas about the moral effects of the rise of the consumerist society, and also on Patrick Stokes' conceptual distinctions between different reactions individuals can display when faced with moral decisions. I start from Baudrillard's viewpoint that in the consumerist society, characteristic for the occidental post-modern world, the need (*necessity*) itself has been replaced by the desire to consume per se. The Western individual perceives abundance as a natural right, and this is transforming both the meaning of work and the value of its products. In essence, Baudrillard describes a form of alienation, with effects that transcend the commercial realm of commodity consumption, and which is better understood within the moral domain. Patrick Stokes exploits the Kierkegaardian concept of *interesse* while expressing his view of moral vision. He is designing a thought experiment that reveals a fundamental distinction between radically different moral reactions of hypothetical individuals, even when they are sharing the same cultural, educational, political or religious background. Starting from these two positions, I analyze a few situations and events from the world of contemporary tennis, revealing how universal values get to be ignored, or contextualized under the influence of social prejudice and schemas. My conclusion is that, nowadays, we are witnessing a reshaping of the way people regard and act on their values, especially in the realm of social media. Thus, situations that should be approached by the appeal to values such as truth, justice, and humanity, in fact get to be interpreted in a biased way, due to the existence of some pre-existing patterns of understanding.

Keywords: alienation, consumerist society, moral vision, moral outrage, responsibility, social media, values

1. The Consumer Society, Morality and Values

In his 1970 volume, *The Consumer Society Myths and Structures*, Jean Baudrillard describes what he envisions as a

fundamental transformation of the occidental world, and with it, of the (post)modern individual, who seems, in his opinion, to be more preoccupied with objects and the necessity attached to their functions, than with fellow human beings. At the beginning of the chapter entitled *Profusion*, he writes the following:

There is all around us today a kind of fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods, and this represents something of a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species. Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects. (Baudrillard 1998, 25)

The individual person itself becomes defined by functionality, similarly to the objects surrounding him. This is, in short, the societal transformation that Baudrillard is alluding to. The individual starts to experience a different time, the time of objects, the time of his owned goods, at a pace that is imposed by those commodities. The contemporary phenomenon that best illustrates this vision is the 'omnipresence' of the mobile devices in our lives. Who could any longer picture their own existence, without a smartphone and all its embedded functions? Smartphones are organizing and guiding our existence, in many instances noticeably replacing the authentic, face-to-face human relating.

A phenomenon that is specific to the consumer society, which puts emphasis not so much on the need itself, but, instead, on the idea of consumption alone, is represented by the ways in which commercialized products and objects are being presented, under the auspices of abundance. The act of consumption, by and of itself, replaced the simple satisfaction of necessities. Respectively, consumption is perpetuated by the abundance of products. The abundance of products, in the form of a multitude of objects found everywhere in the commercial spaces, is witnessed by people as a natural right, to things that everyone is entitled to. Here is where the reader notices a determining attribute of the consumerist society, namely its miraculous status. In essence, this aspect is affecting the way

in which the individual understands the meaning and value of work and the casual connection between work and consumption.

In everyday practice, the blessings of consumption are not experienced as resulting from work or from a production process; they are experienced as a *miracle*. [...] Consumer goods thus present themselves as a *harnessing of power*, not as products embodying work. And, more generally, once severed from its objective determinations, the profusion of goods is felt as a blessing of nature, as a manna, a gift from heaven. (Baudrillard 1998, 31, 32)

To illustrate this perspective with an evocative comparison, Baudrillard mentions the experience of a Melanesian tribe when it first came into contact with members of Western cultures. The people of the Melanesian tribe developed a millenarian cult, known as the “cargo cult.” According to this system of beliefs, the affluence characterizing white people is due to their capacity, exposed since the times of their people’s ancestors, to capture and hijack the goods that were actually destined for them. Only when this “unexplainable” maneuver of the white people would disappear, the forefathers of the tribe would eventually be able to reach them with the miraculous valuable cargo, in this way bringing their people’s state of poverty to an end. The contemporary person, member of a consumer society, is taking the right to possess for granted, regardless if this right is deserved or not, resembling the Melanesian tribe’s conviction that the goods of their non-natives were actually intended for them.

We believe that the effects of the consumer society surpass the strictly delimited area of commerce, of the patterns of consumption that refers to appropriation of goods and the way in which the individuals interact with these goods. We cannot ignore the fact that the contemporary individual is also an avid consumer of information. The shopping centers, the big malls, and the multitude of commercial websites omnipresent in the virtual world, are granting everyone access to objects and goods, all in one place, one click away. In a similar manner, the information regarding the realities of the world around us are packed in various forms.

In Baudrillard's view, the mall is perhaps the most prominent symbol of the consumer society, embodying the phenomenon of indiscriminate spending, a commercial mixer that homogenizes diverse consumption activities. One can find everything inside a mall, all in one place, for the purpose of shopping, a subtle enough activity that is defined not just by the acquisition of commodities. Shopping is seen by the French philosopher as a form of 'flirting with objects' (Baudrillard 1998, 27), a continuous entertainment that tends to take over our daily existence. Whether you are buying or not, you will ultimately consume. The mall is offering the subtle ambiance of the possibility of consumption through its diverse offer, which brings together all sorts of entertainment goods, including artistic, cultural and sports productions.

Similarly to the mall, mass communication offers the same type of 'supply' when it comes to consumption of information. Sitting comfortably in front of a TV, computer or of a smartphone screen, the modern individual receives all types of information indiscriminately, with an uncritical mindset and in an unfluctuating psychological and moral disposition. In the same way the mall homogenizes work, leisure, nature, and culture, mass communication transforms information in random facts.

What characterizes consumer society is *the universality of the news item [le fait divers]* in mass communication. All political, historical and cultural information is received in the same – at once anodyne and miraculous – form of the news item. [...] What mass communications give us is not reality, but *the dizzying whirl of reality [le vertige de la réalité]*. (Baudrillard 1998, 33, 34)

The contemporary man, inhabitant of the consumer society, is living behind the camouflage of this whirl of reality, a world of overflowing signs that hide the truth, thus keeping the individual removed from reality, at a protective distance. Genuine interest, responsibility, conscious involvement and moral reactions to events are spared and become dormant.

The consumer's relation to the real world, to politics, to history, to culture is not a relation of interest, investment or committed responsibility – nor is it one of total indifference: it is a relation of curiosity. On the same pattern, we can say that the dimension of

consumption as we have defined it here is not one of knowledge of the world, nor is it one of total ignorance: it is the dimension of misrecognition. (Baudrillard 1998, 34)

In this context, curiosity and the false recognition convey the withdrawal from the objective reality, a sort of detachment, or a self-preservation mechanism that is far from serving as a direct and responsible contact with the real world. The realities of the world quickly become anodyne facts. Essentially, this constitutes an alienation process with effects in the moral realm, because this non-involved, passive, and distant way to face the realities of the world have one effect, the mitigation of individual responsibility. The contemporary individual, essentially a consumer, takes contact with the surrounding world through several safety filters: the unidirectional televised image, and the comfortable and anonymous nature of Internet communication. Nothing can affect the individual personally as long as there is a wide gap between 'here' and 'there', between 'me' and 'them'. Baudrillard concludes here:

At this 'lived' level, consumption makes maximum exclusion from the (real, social, historical) world the maximum index of security. It seeks the resolution of tensions – that happiness by default. But it runs up against a contradiction: the contradiction between the passivity implied by this new value system and the norms of a social morality which, in essentials, remains one of voluntarism, action, efficacy and sacrifice. (Baudrillard 1998, 35)

Lead by Baudrillard's ideas to the moral domain, in the following section I will take a look over the psychological evidence on the phenomena intuited by the French philosopher. Recent research in moral psychology keeps gathering clues converging to the idea that people are habitual seekers and consumers of morally infused information, especially the types of content that points to perceived transgressions, either in the form of news, personal testimonies, or expressed opinions. Consuming information about moral violations is inciting anger, indignation, contempt, or outrage. Moral outrage is among the main reactions to perceived acts of injustice, an emotion driving the impulse to punish the presumed offenders and restate the limits of acceptable conduct. Some researchers

in psychology invest efforts in defending the position that this heightened anger and outrage reactivity (and the attached behavioral orientation towards finding and punishing wrongdoers) are actually socially beneficial, leading to the protection of norms – by deterring future threats to these; uncovering and publicly shaming transgressors, is a symbolic act of punishment that is ultimately facilitating collective action against these wrongdoers (Spring, Cameron, Cikara 2018; Kleef, Fischer 2015). However, other voices in this area rush to call this point of view into question, advocating that stirring of intense moral emotions, especially in online media is actually detrimental to social cohesion. In fact, as these authors (e.g. Crockett 2017) argue, the side effects of this phenomenon are: deepening the social divides by dehumanization of ideological opponents, polarization of conflicting parties or escalation of animosities, by making characterial or dispositional attributions when evaluating others, or oversimplifying nuanced, complex issues (more effects of anger are summarized in a review by Lerner and Tiedens 2006). Crockett (2017) points out that, in fact, the most prominent benefits of moral outrage expression are of a personal nature, mostly serving self-presentation purposes. The mentioned author states that beside the already enumerated costs, an unanticipated one is the dulling of the outrage response, which may lead in time to an incapacity to distinguish between abominable and less condemnable acts, something that could make people indiscriminately punitive. If Spring and collaborators (2018) affirm that outrage in online media gives voice to marginalized groups, Brady and Crockett (2019) think that this purported benefit, of motivating social action, is actually limited, hypothesizing it might lead to even more exclusion of marginalized groups. I agree with the latter perspective, especially on the idea that outrage by itself cannot be used as a moral compass.

As Baudrillard considered that indiscriminate consumption leads to an artificial growth, like a cancer that feeds on itself, the habit of expressing moral emotions only generates an increased need to perpetuate them. Expressing

these emotions replenishes the need to seek them again, by entering a vigilante state aimed at coining and punishing norm-violators. To bring the analogy with Baudrillard's understanding of consumerism in the realm of moral evaluation, the sought 'status objects' are the morally-charged pieces of information that the individual is pursuing to display, alongside with his disapproval. Thus, the moralizing behavior in online media takes the form of a compulsive or impulsive behavior that seems to lose its social function or other survival benefits. These 'moral objects' are not desired for their utility, but for their symbolic ability to say something about their owner. Mass media and social media perpetuate click-bait news to be consumed. The more morally charged the news, the more spread or shared they become (Brady et al. 2017). If for Baudrillard consumer goods are signs or emblems of distinctiveness, taste and status, in a similar way, people share moral outrage as a proxy for their positive character qualities and display their disapproval as a form of exercising civil duty.

The idea of considering the display of moral outrage as a consumption object is derived from the psychological literature suggesting that often, people post, share and react to morally charged information in a way which is presumably leading to a desire to express even more indignation and anger. It is not norm protection that is mainly sought, but rather more self-serving goals such as presenting oneself as moral, and even improving personal reputation. Displays of indignation and anger when confronted with norm violations are a proxy for or reflection of one's own moral character traits (the implicit statement is 'I am constantly on watch, thus I am an aware, virtuous, trustworthy person.'). In other words, impression management trumps goals like social cohesion. I now dedicate my attention to a philosopher who is attempting to revive a kierkegaardian concept in the service of refining moral psychology's understanding of moral judgment.

2. Moral Vision and Moral Reaction

I now turn to a book written by an Australian philosopher, Patrick Stokes, *Kierkegaard's mirrors. Interest,*

Mirrors and Moral Vision. At the beginning of this book, the author is provoking his readers to a mental exercise, a thought experiment designed to bring to their attention the inter-individual differences in *moral vision*, and as a consequence of these differences, the variability of reactions people can display when confronted with a decisional situation that has individual consequences. The main idea of this experiment can be summarized as follows: two individuals share the same cultural, educational, moral, political, or religious background. They have similar life expectancies and moral engagements and also similar characters. Based on all these mentioned similarities, one could say that their motivational structures, and generally, their way of understanding and looking at things should be similar. One can describe these two persons as having corresponding personalities, if we were to quantify them. Nevertheless, when confronted with the same decision, these two individuals will act completely different, as we will see in the following hypothetical scenario. Let's suppose, as Stokes guides us, that two such individuals are watching (separately) a TV channel that is broadcasting a material on the effects of the 2004 tsunami that took place in the Indian Ocean, focusing on the humanitarian crisis following the disaster. Up to a certain point, both had the same reactions: they experienced compassion towards the victims, sadness, and sympathy for the suffering. In addition, both individuals are thinking the same thing, namely that something needs to be done to come to these people's aid. However, after this point, the thinking paths of the two individuals start to separate. More specifically, while one of the individuals only expresses an abstract intention of helping, (adhering to an impersonal 'something must be done!'), the other is assuming individual responsibility for this something that must be done and seeks solutions to actively offer his help. In Stokes' own words, the two reactions are described as follows:

I sit in my chair and ruminate on the horror of what I've seen and the urgency of addressing the problem. You leap from your chair and look up the phone number for the Red Cross, so you can call and find out what you can do to help – make a cash donation? Organize a food drive? Get on a plane and join the relief effort? In effect, you have

acted, while I have continued to contemplate ineffectually without acting. Crucially, you didn't stop to think whether you are obliged to act, or whether you *should*. You didn't, in fact, stop to think *at all*. (Stokes 2010, 2)

Hence, while the first person in the example remains relatively inert, although he is morally affected by hearing about the people in suffering, the other person straightforwardly decides to act. The first individual is contemplating an abstract moral pattern (in approaching world events), while the other reacts only in conjunction to his own moral imperative, his own concerns, even if, emotionally and cognitively, they are both confronted with the same situations.

Both our characters understand that they are witnessing a tragedy, being equally empathic and experiencing feelings such as pity and compassion etc. One of them perceives the situation as being (morally) compelling, while the other feels himself to be morally compelled to act. What's missing from the first individual's reaction that is present in the other one's? For the latter, the reaction/decision is immediate and direct, while for the former, the reaction is facilitated by a conscious cognitive process, namely by internal deliberation. The moment we are starting to develop a deliberate decisional process over a situation like the one described above, a chasm starts growing between our moral emotions and the possible response in the form of an action. In this context, the author proposed the following position: 'I think we can start to formulate answers to these questions if we articulate a new understanding of moral cognition in terms of normative moral *vision* rather than normative deliberation, good will, and so forth.' (Stokes 2010, 6)

Stokes develops this problem by reinterpreting and re-exploiting the Kierkegaardian concept of *interesse*, through which he develops a distinct model of moral cognition. He formulates the following application of Kierkegaard's concept:

Under such a model, 'vision' rather than 'deliberation' or 'reflection' stands for what is central to successful moral cognition; the normative locus of moral psychology shifts from practical reason and deliberative intention to distinctive modes of apprehension. Our reading of *interesse* has begun to scope out a Kierkegaardian model

of moral cognition which has as its telos the immediate coextensiveness of vision, volition, and action. The perfected moral agent – such as never is and possibly never can be found – sees, judges and acts in one unitary moment. (Stokes 2010, 180)

For the perfect moral agent, the emphasis is put on the immediate transfer between intention and action. There's no separate deliberation phase taking place. Rather, there is an immediate transition from the perception of a situation to the substantive act of helping. The person who is taking action in the previous example is doing it with the same 'naturalness' with which, in Stokes' opinion, the other one is driving his car, based on some automaticity that does not require a constantly involved, active deliberative process. (Stokes 2010, 2)

What is truly relevant for the present situation is one of moral psychology's vulnerabilities, more specifically, when trying to understanding moral cognition as normative deliberation. Along these lines, Stokes emphasized, our internal deliberation process is bringing together not only moral considerations and facts, but also facts of a non-moral nature. The latter have the power to decisively influence our decisions and actions. To support his idea, Stokes is offering a mundane example: 'I should stop to give that hitchhiker a lift, but I'm worried about my safety and I am also running late.' (Stokes 2010, 181) As we can see, the last two aspects of deliberation possess a non-moral nature, but they have influenced a moral decision. These elements of the deliberation are not directly related to the objective situation, namely that someone is waving from the side of the road asking for a ride, thus obviously calling for help.

Of course, several observations can be made in relation to Stokes' proposed example. One can speculate on several situational factors that can interfere with the moral decisional process, for instance maybe the area in the described situation is not very safe and there were a lot of incidents involving hitchhikers reported, or perhaps the driver was hurrying to save another person's life etc. However, for the discussion of the cases that are presented in the following sections of the present paper, I believe that this fusion of moral and non-moral

elements, from an ideal decision making perspective, has rather negative effects and contributes to confusions and inadequate moral reactions. What interests me here is this idea of differentiating between moral and non-moral considerations when one is confronted with the decision to act. I agree with Stokes on the premise that this kind of cognitive deliberations that people make when facing moral dilemmas are overshadowing some universal values.

Essentially, this is a matter of responsibility, meaning that the decisions that are taken in the manner described by Stokes are making us feel less accountable as individuals. Thus, when we interpret and judge a phenomenon or situation, we display the tendency to add non-moral elements in the architecture of that decision, elements that might affect the complete or correct understanding of the facts and ultimately, influencing the way in which we decide to act.

A recent series of experiments in moral psychology (Jordan and Rand 2019) suggests that people tend to report more moral outrage and punishment when they lack the opportunity to signal their trustworthiness via prosociality, than when they can express it by sharing. Interestingly, in conditions of anonymity (so when their reputation was not at stake, because when no one was watching, their actions would not signal trustworthiness), more deliberative individuals choose not to punish, if this would be costly to them, even if they report high levels of outrage, thus a desire to punish. The authors suggest that an explanation for this result could be the fact that deliberative individuals would suppress their drive for altruistic punishment in conditions of anonymity because, in the particular situation, the costly behavior would not bring much material benefit. Another explanation would be that, compared to their less reflective counterparts, deliberative individuals may also be better at elaborating moral justifications for their decision to act in a different way than they would if their reputation was at stake.

In the following, in the light of these ideas, I will analyze a couple of situations from the world of contemporary tennis, situations that illustrate a type of reaction that becomes

habitual in a post-modern consumer society, with direct implications on the way in which people execute their moral deliberations every day.

Why did I choose tennis? Tennis has always been regarded as a noble, aristocratic sport, a leisure of the elites. This means, from my personal standpoint, that tennis and its audience is creating a space for the promotion and assimilation of certain values and virtues in the first place. Among these, I mention fair-play, respect for the adversary, integrity, developing a certain kind of conduct and, lastly, building the moral character, to mention only some of the defining elements of tennis, in its ideal manifestation.

Nevertheless, the traditional representation of tennis as a sport for the elites, also known as 'the white sport,' lead to the perpetuation of some negative phenomena too. Thus, throughout its history, tennis was promoted as an exclusivist sport, a pastime of the wealthy, a sport that leads to social divides and that, in the common opinion, allowed the emergence of racial, gender, classist or ethnic prejudice. Illustrative for this sinuous history is the fact that, until the feminist activist work of Billie Jean King, a reputed tennis champion in the 60's and 70's, the idea that women could share the right to win the same amount as men in tennis was just an utopia. The idea was rejected on several reasons, including the so called 'biological' reasons, or other rationalizations related to presumed limits of their mental and emotional capacities. In fact, even today, there is a continuous debate regarding the basis for awarding comparable prize amounts for men and women.

Also, it was not only until 1950 that African American athletes had the right to participate in international tennis tournaments, starting with Althea Gibson, who later became a tennis champion. Up to that point, the competitions were closed to any athlete that was not white. Therefore, one can think of plenty of precedents that can be invoked to explain the emergence and development of prejudice and biases in the world of tennis, whether sexist or racists.

In its defining nature, tennis is a sport and a space for character development, by facilitating values awareness,

promoting a certain code of conduct and is also supposed to shape moral traits. On the other hand, this space is in the same time, through its exclusivist politics, contributing to the maintenance of the prejudices and biases we mentioned before. This is the context that lead to the appearance of a contradictory phenomenon: the development of a heightened reactivity towards acts that resemble the initial acts of discrimination and prejudice, a sort of ‘counter-prejudice,’ manifested by immediate emotional, not entirely deliberate, reactions. The contextual inflamed sense of injustice and moral sense give rise to these manifestations. Such reactions reveal a certain type of ignorance, combining a lack of understanding of the situations and personal irresponsibility in acknowledging the limits of one’s knowledge, which are visible especially on online media. These types of reactions will be illustrated through a few examples in the following sections.

3. Presumed Racism on Tennis Courts

On February 13th 2018, Ryan Harrison and Donald Young, two American professional players (the former Caucasian, the latter African-American), who have been rivals since their junior years, met in the first round of the New York Open. The match was ultimately won by Ryan Harrison in two sets, 6-3, 7-6. During the first set, the two players had a heated verbal argument. The video cameras did not capture the audio of the incident, thus there was no clear-cut evidence about what really happened on the court during the verbal exchange.

Immediately after the match, Donald Young is posting the following message on twitter: ‘I’m shocked and disappointed, Ryan Harrison, to hear you tell me how you really feel about me as a black tennis player in the middle of our NY match. I thought this was supposed to be an inclusive gentleman’s sport.’ (as quoted in Lutz 2018)

To this tweet, Harrison replies: ‘The accusations made by Donald Young tonight following our match are absolutely untrue. I’m extremely disappointed that someone would say this in reaction to a lost tennis match. Any video/audio will

100% clear me and I encourage anyone with the available resources to find it.’ (as quoted in Bonesteel and Song 2018)

Unfortunately, the damage had already been done. In response to Young’s message, part of the media and especially social media users showed harsh reactions towards Ryan Harrison, accusing him (obviously!) of racism. Over the next few days, Ryan Harrison and his family are being ‘brutalized’ on social media networks. Even there was no clear evidence supporting the accusations of racism, all the ‘elements’ of the case have been presented so that they would instantly inflame the public opinion. Which were these key elements? A tennis match between a white and an African-American player, the moments of tension during the game, the white player addressing a few bellicose lines to the black player, the black tennis player losing the game. Following this ‘logical’ path, something racist must have happened. Michael Bruno, a ball person assisting the match, who stood close to the players during the incident, thus a direct witness to what happened that day, admitted that he did not hear any racial comment whatsoever.¹

ATP further investigated the case, concluding that there were no racist exchanges or attitudes exhibited during the match.² The specter of racial prejudice and the habit of reading such a situation through those lenses, following a ‘logical path’ that is confirming pre-existing schemas and beliefs, have created more tension around the event than reality itself did. Not to mention the subjective and probably deliberate intervention Donald Young had after the match, that wasn’t exactly inspired, but was a perfect fit for the expectations of an over-reactive audience.

In this situation, if we apply Stokes’ framework, the moral and non-moral aspects had a compound influence on the way the event was initially received. Thus, Donald Young’s decision to post his tweet online was ‘intoxicated’ by non-moral, subjective reasons that had nothing to do with what happened in reality. Was this caused by the frustration he felt after losing the match or due to the mounting tensions that characterized the historic rivalry with Harrison? One could find plausible the

supposition that Donald Young's reaction was a result of a constant frustration he had been experiencing as an African-American tennis player in a white sport; a victimization that could have looked justified' by the exclusivist history of tennis. In any case, neither of these reasons aren't directly connected to the reality of the incident, more specifically, the fact that the exchanges, even if bellicose, did not include any element of racism from Harrison's part. Thus, the way in which Donald Young's tweets have been shared, without a minimal check, pinpoint to a similar pattern. The public's expectations, fueled by an inflamed sense of injustice have been satisfied by the racism allegations, who confirmed their beliefs. Intellectual habits, like reality checking and looking for evidence supporting the claims and weighting them, were eclipsed by the rapid acceptance of the rumors that involved racism. There are also some elements that remind us of the perils of the consumer society: the indiscriminate information consumption and the lack of fact checking, a disregard of individual accountability in using mass communication channels, the effects of the accusations coming from all directions, pointing to Ryan Harrison.

Let's remember another tense moment in the history of tennis that occurred not long ago, which involved a Romanian tennis player, Irina Begu, after a match against Caroline Garcia, representing France. The match took place during the Charleston Open, USA, on April 4th 2016 and was finished with Begu's victory, 6-4, 2-6, 7-6. After the game ended, several individuals started spreading an information of an ambiguous origin on social media, claiming that the French player, in a crucial moment of the match, addressed offensive words to her Romanian competitor, allegedly calling her a 'gypsy s**t'. Although unverified, this information was treated by the international press, and especially the Romanian media as accurate, featuring the news under bombastic titles such as: *Racism at the Charleston Open!*, *A new scandal in tennis!* etc. Obviously, social media exploded, the tipping point being reached by the verbal assault of Romanian 'supporters' on Caroline Garcia, her Facebook page being flooded by injurious and obscene comments and posts. In reality, Garcia hasn't

uttered any of those words, a fact that was confirmed by the subsequent analysis of the video footage of the match, part of an investigation that was performed by the match referees and WTA officials. As of March, 3 2016, WTA through CEO Steve Simon, WTA CEO posted on its website: ‘The highest level of professional conduct on court is paramount to the WTA and anything less is unacceptable. After thorough investigation, we have found no evidence to support these allegations. This matter is closed.’

In this second case, only the press and social media users inflamed the spirits. Neither of the two players got involved directly in what followed the match. Some racial prejudice and social perceptions, combined with a generalized inferiority complex of Romanians, overcame other values like truth and more specifically, truth seeking.

It is possible that the emergence and quick diffusion of these false allegations, among the Romanian player’s supporters were fueled by a broader phenomenon describing the perceptions of Romanians in Europe, and particularly in France. For decades, the negative stereotypes about Roma migrants in France led to an anti-Romanian sentiment that was, in the perception of many co-nationals, based on their erroneous assimilation with the ethnic minorities, invading the streets of Western European countries like France. Thus, the virulent reaction of the Romanian ‘supporters’ appeared on a background of identity frustration. None of these situational aspects is directly connected to the reality of the events, which is the fact that there was no racist statement uttered by Caroline Garcia during the match. In addition, not even Irina Begu, the purported victim, did mention anything like this happening on the tennis court. This kind of situations enjoy a lot of publicity not because of their problematic nature per se, but because they readily answer the public’s expectations, expectations that have been shaped by prejudice, by habits of interpreting and understanding reality, especially morally charged issues.

As I was mentioning before, tennis has a history of being an exclusivist, elitist sport. This background lead, in many

instances, to the signaling of prejudice, of a racial or sexist nature, among other types. Without any doubts, authentic cases of racism, sexism or classism have been reported in tennis. Among the most notorious incidents is the moment experienced by the Williams sisters in 2001, during the Indian Wells Open. From the midst of a predominantly white audience attending in the bleachers, someone addressed Serena with the following words: 'I wish it was '75; we'd skin you alive.'(quoted in Doug 2001) Consequently, the sisters boycotted the Indian Wells Open for 14 years, by refusing to participate in the tournament. Real incidents could nevertheless have generated a heightened level of sensitivity to various forms of injustice, like the ones displayed by Donald Young or Serena Williams during the 2018 US Open final match. Among other things Serena said to the umpire:

'How dare you insinuate that I was cheating? You stole a point from me. You're a thief too. This is not right. To lose a game for saying that, it's not fair. How many other men do things? There's a lot of men out here who have said a lot of things. It's because I am a woman, and that's not right.' (as quoted in Eccleshare 2018)

The incident has been widely publicized, reactivating the discussion of racism and sexism in the world of tennis. However, looking at this case from an objective perspective, the referee's decisions were entirely covered by the regulations. In many respects, Serena Williams' impulsive reactions were considered inappropriate for the tennis court and were driven by a personal history and career events that had been scarred by moments of (accurately or not) perceived expressions of racism or sexism. Whichever the case, this type of situations and especially the way they are managed in the public space and on online communication platforms contributes to the propagation of prejudice and they work counter to the spirit and mission of tennis, namely stabilizing and promoting a space characterized by authentic values.

Turning back to understanding today's 'moralization' habits through Baudrillard's account of consumerism, we can understand, through the examples we presented, what are the risks of this indiscriminate consumption of information. As the

consumer society ethos can heighten the feeling of deprivation and poverty, especially where the pressure is put on achieving the ideal of the ‘good life’ through consumption, so can the moralizing instinct be exacerbated by the pervasive circulation of information on social media. This is a reaction to the pressure to conform to a ‘righteous life,’ that comes in tandem with perceptions of anomy, social cynicism and a lack of distrust in the other members of the group, authorities and society overall. This prosecutorial mindset leads to false positives such as the racism cases presented to perpetuate with such velocity.

Just as compulsive hoarders (a pathology often observed in consumerist societies) purchase and stockpile objects without even getting to use them in many cases, the social media moralist shares information online even before checking or digesting it completely. As consumption is not determined by need, in Baudrillard’s view, expressing outrage is determined by a reinforcement pattern similar to the one that leads to the emergence of other habits:

Just as a habitual snacker eats without feeling hungry, a habitual online shamer might express outrage without actually feeling outraged. Thus, when outrage expression moves online it becomes more readily available, requires less effort, and is reinforced on a schedule that maximizes the likelihood of future outrage expression in ways that might divorce the feeling of outrage from its behavioural expression. (Crockett 2017, 770)

The acquisition of objects (and news to share) is focused on the symbolic rather the utilitarian side of the behavior. If one of the challenges of the consumer society is to sway citizens away from irresponsible choices towards more ethical consumption patterns, the moral philosophers’ and psychologists’ missions in the information society is developing mindful consumption skills, or trying to persuade social media users to act more responsibly in their interaction with the information they see and share.

4. Truth vs. Celebrity. Sharapova’s Case

The case that I am presenting in the following section is not necessarily related to the ‘historical’ background of

prejudice and discrimination in tennis. It isn't about racism or sexism either, but about the inherent conflict between tennis, as a sport that promotes authentic values and the mercantile demands and criteria of the consumer society. It is a struggle between the value of sport and popularity, between merit and the need for consumption, and ultimately, the tension between truth and notoriety.

In February 2016, the famous tennis player Maria Sharapova is suspended for two years, after she tested positive for meldonium during the 2016 Australian Open. The Russian athlete was using the substance for two years based on medical prescription (to keep some respiratory problems under control), but meldonium has been blacklisted starting January 2016. Later, the suspension was reduced to 15 months, allowing the athlete to return in the WTA circuit by March 2017, during the Stuttgart tournament, where she received a controversial Wild Card. This moment marked the emergence of a series of publicly expressed negative reactions and dilemmas. A lot of active or former players have reacted promptly and critically in relation to the organizers' decision, considering that it was unfair to award a Wild Card to a player who had been recently suspended for doping.³ The tournament organizers usually grant this type of prizes to young players or athletes that have been removed from competitions on fundamentally different grounds than Sharapova's absence, such as health issues or they grant them to local players who are poorly situated in the tennis rankings.

To the already existing controversy surrounding Sharapova's return, mass media coverage has contributed as well, especially through the way reporters conducted interviews with the Russian player. The journalists have repeatedly addressed the suspension period using euphemisms or imprecise descriptions, such as time out, pause or period of inactivity, and avoided referring it by what is was in truth, a suspension over a positive doping test.⁴ Additionally, all the other reporters who insisted (some still keep insisting) with the questions on doping were rather ignored by the Russian sportswoman. The tennis public's reaction was divided. A part of the public condemned the

return of the player to the WTA circuit, in addition to the preferential treatment she received. However, a larger part of the public received her comeback enthusiastically, considering the event (paradoxically!) an auspicious time for tennis, a sport in need for strong personalities and notorious figures to promote and revitalize its image.

This type of ambivalent attitude within the public, media and even among the tournament organizers, is bringing us back to Patrick Stokes' framework. In this particular case, we can see how non-moral considerations, like Sharapova's notoriety, the previous (and still undisputable) success in tennis of the Russian player, and also the constant promotion of her image in media, have been weighting enough to obfuscate a truth, the fact that Sharapova has been charged with doping, proved guilty and subsequently, temporarily removed from athletic activity.

Also, Sharapova's image, a colossal brand in the feminine tennis, fits in perfectly with the standards of a consumer society like the one described by Baudrillard. The commercial image built around the player, the products that she is advertising along with her image, have always invited to consumption, to shopping. Sharapova's image constantly generated money, and her matches instantly filled tennis courts. Her image is always present in ads and in tournament promotional materials. Surely, the premises of success have always been present for Maria Sharapova, even from the outset of her career. A Russian athlete with classic aesthetic qualities (blonde, tall, with green eyes), who manages to win over Serena Williams in 2004, in the final match of the Wimbledon tournament, the most prestigious Tennis Open in the world. And all that at only 17 years. Thus, the interest for intensely promoting and using Sharapova's image has always existed, especially on the part of tournament organizers and sponsors, who are willing to invest massive resources when they spot a 'winner'. Nevertheless, the way in which the details of her controversial situation have been delivered created confusion and made it difficult to the public to accurately discern the parameters of the problem.

The cosmetic presentation of the player's doping problem is throwing the image of this sport in the realm of uncertainty and compromise, an effect that is substantially more detrimental on the long term than the washing of her public image could have been. This type of phenomenon is eroding the value hierarchies and the moral stance of this sport. In this situation, we can talk about a willful obscuring of a supreme value, the truth. We are noticing a contextualization of truth that is driven by certain interests and non-value criteria. Many of these reactions, conducing to the acceptance of poor standards of conduct are financially motivated, marketing-oriented, as we have already shown. Maria Sharapova's image, her public success, her popularity and notoriety exceeded the importance of protecting values such as fair-play, truth, fairness and lastly, the promotion of a clean sportsmanship and sporting environment. The image of tennis itself, also called the 'white sport' in reference to its noble roots, a sport that is in essence based on fair-play, risked being compromised by bringing an athlete that had basically cheated back into the spotlight. Endorsing or tolerating dishonest behaviors could lead to mutations to the sport's core ethos and values and their depreciation with utilitarian and pragmatic attitudes.

Concluding ideas

In Maria Sharapova's case, many people, including the event organizers, coaches, supporters and the large public have long ignored an obvious truth, to the advantage of the sportswoman's image and notoriety. Post-hoc moral justifications or worse, the tolerance of dishonest behaviors contrast the heightened sensitivity to injustice seen in the other presented cases, jointly pointing to the arbitrariness with which moral values are becoming protected and endorsed within the field of tennis. In the Young-Harrison and Begu-Garcia incidents, the public ignored truth and justice while weighting the facts, which lead to the interpretation of the situations in the light of pre-existing beliefs regarding prejudice, and in the light of social stereotypes grounded in a long history. This kind

of approach is affecting the correct perception of reality and also altering the potential moral reactions and actions in response to events. Such phenomena are most visible in sports, and in tennis in particular, a world that is supposed to thrive based on the respect of indisputable regulations, of its core values and the promotion of equality, and fair-play. In fact, sports and tennis in particular should have a determining social role. Sports competitions represent more than entertainment for the masses, or simple athletic competitions, and idealized, cosmetic representations of the top athletes, to be consumed by the large audiences.

Sports in general, and tennis in particular, should focus not only on harnessing physical mastery, but also on modelling values and strengthening moral character (through traits such as dedication, tenacity, fairness, respect for norms and rules). And the athlete should desirably function as a moral exemplar. Sports were never conceived as simple entertainment for its public. Especially when we consider a noble sport like tennis, who is surrounded in a historical aura of elitism, and promoted as a space for fair-play and etiquette, an environment conducive to personal development. In contrast to these aspirations, the perpetuation of prejudice and stereotypes only access, as we could see, some preexisting patterns of biased understanding. This is leading to moral confusions and ultimately condenses the specific consequences of the consumer society. These consequences are visible in a weakening of personal accountability, and a distortion of an authentic moral vision.

To summarize, we are talking about a temporary deferral of fundamental values when we interpret or understand phenomena such as those analyzed in the present paper (a deferral especially visible in the realm of social media). Our judgment is often obscured by certain schemas, customs or interpretation biases. This is, in the end, a problem of indiscriminate consumption of information, which directs the understanding of facts away from reality, towards the consideration of non-value criteria: ignorance, lack of authentic references, individualism, moral numbness, the avoidance of personal responsibility. And the effects are mainly observed in

the moral realm, especially through the lack of direct and personal acknowledgement of one's own thoughts and actions. Values such as truth, fairness, humaneness, and solidarity are replaced by societally predefined thinking patterns, patterns that are specific to the postmodern man, that make this distorted perception of reality so readily 'available'.

Everything seems to boil down to a 'correct conceptual identification,' a simple categorization of different events and phenomena. We are not internalizing anymore, we are not willing to execute an accurate moral deliberation, in the sense proposed by Patrick Stokes, but we only align to a set of social habits of understanding and interpretation. We are contextualizing values based on predefined frames of reference provided by certain societal segments, especially through the press, through mass media. We ultimately get to see evidence of racism where there isn't any in reality; we promote counterfeit 'truths' especially due to the moral numbness and confusion, which are generated by the indiscriminate way in which we consume everything that we are offered. In essence, this attitude is an attribute of consumer society. This offers, similar to the malls, an abundance of 'culture', food, arts, entertainment and wellbeing. On the TV screens, we are offered relaxing advertisements, mixed with images of ecological disasters, shiny ads and plastic happiness.

Lastly, we also enjoy the anonymity and the immediate reaction that the virtual world of internet and social media provide us. This change of paradigm, that allows switching certain values with notoriety for instance, is generated by the existence, especially in social media of the hater or troll, who aims to attack and compromise any kind of value. Self-awareness and individual responsibility are anesthetized by understanding of wellbeing as a natural right, and also by the safety and comfort offered by our couch from where we are watching, critiquing, analyzing the world, in a distant and uninvolved way. The solution should nevertheless be a simple one: looking for authentic values and objectively following them when faced with morally infused judgments or actions, in

tandem with the removal of interpretative biases and patterns interfering with these processes.

NOTES

¹ Here is what Bruno the ballboy had to say: “I’m right there, and I didn’t hear it. No one heard a racial comment; no one on my side, no one on Young’s side. No racial terminology whatsoever. It was pretty nasty, some of the things I was reading. For people to just jump on the bandwagon and start, like, really damaging someone’s character without hearing any evidence or details of the conversation, it didn’t sit right with me.” (as quoted in Waldstein 2018):

² Find more information in (Bonesteel and Soong 2018):

³ More information about the subject can be found here: “Players Divided on Sharapova Wild Cards.” (2018):

⁴ More on the issue is to be found here: “Channel Seven Is a Global Laughing Stock.” (2018):

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