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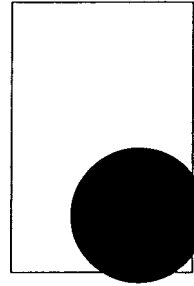
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# Moral breakdown and the ethical demand

## A theoretical framework for an anthropology of moralities

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### Abstract

Recently social scientists in general and anthropologists in particular have invoked the concept of morality in their studies. The use of this concept is seen by many as a way to bypass the complexities and contradictions of such traditional social scientific concepts as culture, society and power. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly evident that in many of these studies morality is used in a way that may be more reminiscent of the moral understanding of the social scientist than that of their subjects. Therefore, a well-founded anthropology of moralities must break from this assumption and rethink the ways in which the moral can be explicitly studied. By engaging in a dialogue with 20th-century continental philosophies of sociality and ethics, this article articulates a theory and model by which an explicit anthropology of moralities becomes possible. Two ethnographic examples, utilizing very different methodological techniques and focusing on two very different societies, are used to illustrate the strength of this theory as a framework for a proper anthropological study of local moralities.

### Keywords

anthropology of moralities • being-in-the-world • ethics • morality • philosophy and anthropology

Recently anthropologists have begun to study explicitly and analyze local concepts of morality (e.g. Howell, 1997; Robbins, 2004; Rydstrom, 2003). The use of this concept is seen by some as a way to bypass the shortcomings of such traditional social scientific concepts as culture, society and power (Rogers, 2004). In addition to these explicit studies of local moralities, the concept of morality is increasingly utilized by anthropologists who do not claim to be studying local moralities as such. For these anthropologists 'moral' and 'morality' seem to describe, not unlike the notion of 'culture' or 'cultural', a set of shared values that underlie certain practices. Thus, for example,

anthropologists have written about the 'strong moral code[s]' that regulate Russian understandings of social networks and public assistance (Caldwell, 2004: 86), or the 'moral worth' acquired by Nepalese women who live within the gendered restrictions of their villages (McHugh, 2004: 590). While these practices may be central to both Russian and Nepalese ways of being in the world – intimately felt by their actors – and may even impose certain limits on social behavior, there is no indication that local persons would describe such practices as moral. In describing them as such, then, we have a better understanding of the anthropologists' conception of morality than of that of their subjects. This article attempts to overcome anthropological and social scientific assumptions of what counts as moral by providing a framework for an explicit anthropology of moralities. For only with such a framework can we avoid the analytically confusing slippage between local, anthropological, and the individual anthropologist's notions of moralities, and in doing so, provide clearer descriptions of the moral worlds of the people with whom we work.

For many anthropologists, however, the very notion of an anthropology of moralities remains quite strange. This is so because it is claimed that anthropologists in their innumerable studies of, for example, cultures and societies, religious and kinship systems, modes of exchange and gender relations, have been studying morality all along (Parkin, 1985: 4). It is this general discipline-wide assumption, I contend, that has made it difficult for those of us who have attempted an anthropological study of moralities to agree on our subject of study. Related to this is the fact that we have no theoretical or methodological foundation for a systematic approach to the study of local moralities (Faubion, 2001b; Laidlaw, 2002). Because of this, anthropologists of moralities have thus far had to borrow their theories and methods from other anthropological studies. The aim of this article is to address this lacunae by providing a working theory for an anthropology of moralities.

The belief that anthropologists have in their own ways been studying morality all along is, in part, due to the discipline's Durkheimian origins (Laidlaw, 2002; Robbins, 2005). In his attempt to replace moral philosophy with a science of moral facts, Durkheim essentially made the moral congruent with the social (1953: 35–62). That is, in his critique of Kantian morality, Durkheim replaced the moral law, as both the foundation for and the origin of obligation for all moral acts, with society. Thus, morality, in Durkheim's view, is not, as Kant would have it, a universal and a priori notion shared by all rational beings and enacted through the proper use of practical reason. Rather, for Durkheim morality is socially constituted, and differs across time and place according to the very structures of each society (or read in a slightly different way, Durkheim could be viewed as arguing that those societies that share the same basic structures also share a basic morality). Further, each member of these various societies is obliged to follow the moral rules of their own particular society, for the overwhelming force that society holds over each of them compels them to do so (Durkheim, 1957[1915]: 206–9). Therefore, in replacing Kant's moral law with society, Durkheim also negated morality as a particular topic of study for those who follow his assumption that morality is congruent with society (or culture). For when morality is equated with society (or culture), it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to analytically separate a moral realm for study.

While this Durkheimian assumption may be held by many anthropologists in general, a good number of anthropologists of moralities do not *explicitly* hold this assumption.

On my reading of the literature, there are two predominant approaches to the anthropological study of local moralities: the moral reasoning and choice approach and the Neo-Aristotelian and Foucauldian approach. Howell and several contributors to her edited volume on the ethnography of moralities suggests that a cross-cultural study of moralities may be best served by focusing on the acting individual's process of moral reasoning, during which choices are made between alternative possible actions (1997: 14–16). Robbins agrees and claims that the moral domain is a conscious domain of choice (2004: 315–16; see also Laidlaw, 2002). While to some extent I agree that attention to choices and reasoning are important, and in fact in the ethnographic section later in this article I will argue that Robbins' concern with choice is a necessary and important part of his study of Urapmin moral questioning, I am concerned that this position limits what Robbins calls the moral domain. For a person is not only moral when he or she must make a conscious decision to be so. In fact, my research on the moral conceptions of persons in Moscow suggests that most people consider others and themselves moral most of the time, and for this reason it is rarely considered or consciously thought about (Zigon, 2006). The need to consciously consider or reason about what one must do only arises in moments that shake one out of the everydayness of being moral. This moment is what I will call in this article the moral breakdown. What is often missing from the reasoning and choice approach, then, is an explicit framing of those moments of moral breakdown when one must find ways, and choosing and reasoning may only be two of the possible ways, to return to the unreflective state of being moral.

Other anthropologists have focused their attention on what might be called a dispositional or virtue ethics (e.g. Hirschkind, 2001; Mahmood, 2005; Widlock, 2004). These studies take Neo-Aristotelian and Foucauldian approaches in considering how persons make themselves into properly attuned moral persons. While there are certainly differences between these two approaches, both share the notion that one becomes a moral person primarily by means of developing certain dispositional capacities. Mahmood describes this approach to ethics 'as always local and particular, pertaining to a specific set of procedures, techniques, and discourses through which highly specific ethical-moral subjects come to be formed' (2005: 28). For this approach, then, one becomes a moral person not by following rules or norms, but by training oneself in a set of certain practices (Widlock, 2004: 59). Again, I am very sympathetic to the dispositional/virtue approach. However, what I often find limiting about this approach is that the practices and techniques of moral training are too often restricted to certain local domains. Thus, this approach rarely allows us to see how persons can transfer and translate dispositional training across various social contexts.

While both of these approaches are essentially non-Durkheimian, a bit of Durkheim does seem to slip in on occasion. For example, in describing persons as being 'culturally constructed' to recognize moral domains of choice, Robbins (2004: 315) seems to suggest that culture as a kind of moral legislator determines what counts as the moral for all persons within a society. Similarly, when those who take the dispositional/virtue approach focus on the practices and techniques connected to a particular disciplinary domain, the impression is often given that this domain determines the ethical practices and techniques connected to it. This is not unlike the smaller societies, such as family and workplace, that Durkheim spoke of as having their own moralities within the larger, more general society and its overarching morality. Thus, while there have been

significant attempts to move beyond Durkheim by anthropologists of moralities, his legacy continues even if only in traces.

This legacy, I suggest, remains the main obstacle to anthropological studies of moralities. As I have already suggested, this obstacle has two aspects. First, the assumption apparently held by many anthropologists who do not explicitly study the topic that anthropologists have been studying morality all along. Second, that those anthropologists who are currently attempting an anthropology of moralities find it difficult to make distinctions between the moral and the non-moral, and morality and ethics. Related to this is the difficulty of showing how, for example, moral practices, training and dispositions are carried across various social contexts. This article will attempt to address these problems by positing a way in which the moral can be identified as both a theoretical and ethnographic subject of study for anthropologists. In doing so, I hope to overcome the Durkheimian assumption that morality is congruent with society/culture and provide a framework with which an anthropology of moralities can become a significant theoretical and ethnographic field of study.

In order to make my argument I will need to go beyond anthropological analyses of moralities and engage in a dialogue with philosophers, moral and otherwise. As Laidlaw has claimed, this is regrettably seldom done by anthropologists (2002: 312). This is a shortcoming of anthropology, which not only leaves us in the dark about the ways in which morality has been discussed, debated and analyzed outside our discipline, but also often prevents us from participating in the recent resurgence of philosophical interest in morality and ethics. While there is no doubt that philosophers stand to gain much from engaging in a dialogue with anthropologists, it is crucial that anthropologists of moralities enter such a dialogue. For the systematic study of morality and ethics has to this point been almost solely taken up by philosophers. Therefore, in my attempt to delineate the moral as a realm for anthropological study, I will draw heavily from recent philosophical discussions of morality, ethics, and everyday social life. While the few attempts by anthropologists to engage moral philosophers has tended to focus on the virtue theorists – from Aristotle to MacIntyre to Nussbaum – I will engage with an entirely different philosophical tradition (e.g. Laidlaw, 2002; Lambek, 2000). I will focus my attention on those philosophers who might be very loosely categorized as 20th-century continental philosophers. In doing so, I hope not only to provide a framework for an anthropological study of moralities, but also to enter into a dialogue with those contemporary philosophers who have recently ‘rediscovered’ morality.

## **SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF A FEW PHILOSOPHERS**

### **Heidegger and being-in-the-world**

Although Heidegger explicitly denied that he was writing an ethical philosophy, his work, and especially that of *Being and Time*, is ripe with potential for providing a basis for a moral theory (Hodge, 1995; Sherover, 1979). For example, in pointing to Heidegger's concepts of care, concern and the call of conscience, Hodge argues that Heidegger provides the ‘ontological conditions required for’ an Aristotelian-style ethics (1995: 202). Similarly, I will consider his concepts of being-in-the-world, being-with, and breakdown as the conditions for an anthropological distinction between morality

and ethics. It is this distinction, I will argue, that allows for a more analytically precise anthropological study of local moralities.

Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world (1996 [1953]) is essentially a social mode of being. The world of being-in-the-world is an *our* world constituted, for example, social-politically, culturally and historically. That is to say, the world is never found naturally, but rather is always pregiven mediately. Likewise, the being that always finds him- or herself as being-in-the-world is never a natural being, but always constituted through the same processes. This is because the 'in' of being-in-the-world is not an 'in', as Heidegger tells us, in the sense of the water in the glass – a something in a container. Rather, the 'in' is a dwelling among familiarity. It is an at-homeness allowed by living-with. To be-in-the-world is to be at home in *our* familiar world (Heidegger, 1996[1953]: 51).

But being-in-the-world is never limited to this *our* world. For the world is also always *mine*. Although the *our* world is always shared, it is primarily lived through me. Thus, it is *my* home, *my* job, *my* love-for, *my* pain, and so on. Only secondarily, if that, are these recognized as shared. Thus, being-in-the-world has an essentially inseparable dual nature. On the one hand, one always finds oneself thrown into a shared world – a world that while certainly *ours* is never simply mine – and on the other hand, one is always living through *my* world. In other words, being-in-the-world is always, and at the same time, openly shared and deeply personal.

This dual nature of being-in-the-world gives it its unreflective character. Because being-in is not only a dwelling in familiarity but is also characterized by involved activity, being-in-the-world can also be described as involvement. But this involvement is rarely intentional, mentalistic, or rational. Rather, for the most part the involved activity of being-in-the-world takes on the mode of comportment (see Dreyfus, 1999: 51). To speak of comportment is to speak of the unreflective, non-intentional dispositions of acting, speaking, thinking and so on, that constitute everydayness. As such, while we cannot say that being-in-the-world is located in the human body (more on this soon), it is appropriate to say that it becomes manifest in the bodily dispositions of individual persons. It is in this sense, I suggest, that we can best understand the moral dispositions of everyday life. That is, morality can best be analytically thought of as those bodily dispositions enacted in the world non-intentionally and unreflectively. To be moral is to inhabit a bodily disposition, one might even say inhabit a soul, that is familiar to oneself and most others with whom one comes into contact. It is in this familiar sharedness of morality that one can speak of the good, or more appropriately, being good. Thus, if the moral dispositions of everyday life, or what we might call morality, are understood in this way, it is hardly different from the ways in which many anthropologists today speak of an embodied culture.

It is for this reason that the unreflective moral dispositions of everyday life that I have so far been describing do not look too different from how many would describe *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990). But there are in fact important differences. They begin with the dispositional comportments of being-in-the-world that I have suggested best describe the moral way of being. While the dispositions are indeed embodied, being-in-the-world should not be thought of as bodily. In fact, we should not think of being-in-the-world as a static thing that is located anywhere. Rather, being-in-the-world as involved dwelling is always a relationship. This relationship is always a relationship between persons. In

this way, being-in-the-world is always a being-with. This relationship as being-with is always maintained, even in the absence of a coterminous other. For since one resides in a personal world that is always at the same time *our* world, other persons are always there even in their absence. It is this relationship that primarily constitutes the embodied person. In this way, the ever-changing relationship that is being-in-the-world is enacted through, for example, moods and feelings, unreflective and unreflexive activity – or what I would rather call ‘doings’ – and language – or what I would rather call ‘talking’. As the anthropologist James Weiner, one of the few who have seriously utilized Heidegger in anthropology, puts it:

In one's everyday, average attitude, when one is not deliberately focusing one's attention on one's state of being, one gets along unreflectively: we use words, implements, clothing, and other pieces of equipment, we engage in casual social encounters without consciously posing the problem of our *relationship* to such entities . . . We can lose ourselves in this familiarity. (Weiner, 2001: 7)

Because being-in-the-world, then, is a relationship of being-with and not embodied – although it is made manifest in bodily dispositions or comportments – it is a mode of being that is always open to the world and never statically and permanently encapsulated, as one reading of Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* suggests.

The aspect of being-in-the-world that allows it to remain open to the world and never static is what Heidegger called the breakdown. It is the breakdown that is essential to the argument I am trying to make here about why being-in-the-world is a useful starting place for an anthropological study of moralities. According to Heidegger, the breakdown occurs when something that is usually ready-to-hand becomes present-to-hand. The example Heidegger gives is the use of a hammer. Usually and for the most part when one uses a hammer one uses it as ready-to-hand. That is, one does not reflect on what a hammer is, how to use it, or what it means to be one who uses a hammer. Rather, one simply uses the hammer and while hammering there is no sense of where the hammer begins and ends, how much force should be exerted or at what angle. This is because in the process of using a hammer as ready-to-hand there is no subjective/objective distinction between the one who uses the hammer and the hammer itself (or the nail for that matter). There is, to be simple, only hammering occurring.

All of this can suddenly shift into a present-to-hand situation, if, for example, the hammer head becomes loose from the handle, the hammer turns awkwardly in one's hand or even if the nail bends. A breakdown has occurred. At this point the one who is/was hammering must reflect on the process of hammering – can I continue with a loose hammerhead? Should I fix this hammerhead or just get a new hammer? Is the nail bent too much or can I just straighten it? I may also notice for the first time that my arm is a bit sore, my hand is sweaty, that my heart is beating and I am breathing. A breakdown has occurred and has forced me – notice that this breakdown, like many, was entirely out of my hands, it happened to me – into the uncomfortable and unnatural mode of stepping-away. In this stepped-away mode of being-in-the-world such ways of being as subjective and objective, presence, awareness and consciousness become available to individuals. It should be mentioned that Heidegger maintains that the same

breakdown occurs when one is participating in an intellectual endeavor like natural science or anthropology.

It also occurs, I would like to suggest, in the moment of the ethical dilemma, and this is when one must perform ethics. For although Heidegger uses such words as 'conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy' (1996 [1953]: 69[74]) to describe the breakdown of tools, so too can these words be used to describe persons and certain difficult situational relationships within which one might find oneself. For as I will describe in the ethnographic section of this article, the ethical dilemmas, difficult times, and troubles in which people do on occasion find themselves can best be described as a breakdown. Just as the hammer is usually and for the most part ready-to-hand, so too are moral expectations and dispositions. They are normally unquestioned, unreflected upon and simply done. This is one's normal, everyday mode of being-in-the-world. But on occasion, something breaks down. A disagreement arises. Someone asks you a troubling question to which you might not want to answer – for example, is my girlfriend cheating on me? Or you have the opportunity to steal or get something for free, such as a train ticket. Or one is concerned with how to reconcile a traditional moral-cultural way of being with a relatively newly acquired one – such as Pentecostal Christianity. These dilemmas, difficult times, and troubles do arise from time to time and they force one – again, often without any or a very minor part played by the individuals involved – to step-away and figure out, work-through and deal with the situation-at-hand.

The breakdown is very similar to what Foucault called problematization. The Foucauldian notion of problematization describes a reflective state in which an everyday, unreflected state, such as behavior, is presented 'to oneself as an object of thought and [one is able] to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals' (Foucault, 1984: 388). When Foucault speaks of 'thought' as an essential aspect of problematization he is not referring to the 'taken-for-granted cultural representations' or 'discourse' that anthropologists often focus upon (Laidlaw, 2002: 324), but instead he speaks of thought as a particular moment of freedom. For instance:

[thought] is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting [the taken-for-granted], to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem. (Foucault, 2000: 117)

Needless to say, for Foucault and for the argument being constructed here, the freedom that thought allows is always a freedom within the limits of certain socio-historic-cultural possibilities. Still, it is a freedom that allows individuals to draw on a particular socio-historic-cultural, as well as personal, repertoire in order to work-through the specific ethical dilemma of the moral breakdown. It is a freedom that allows ethics. Thus, it is the moral breakdown, or the moment of problematization, that I call the ethical moment. This is the moment in which ethics must be performed. In this way, then, I make a distinction between morality as the unreflective mode of being-in-the-world and ethics as a tactic performed in the moment of the breakdown of the ethical dilemma. And as I will try to argue throughout the rest of this article, it is upon these



moments of moral breakdown, when ethics must be performed, that anthropologists of moralities should focus their methodological and analytic attention.

But there is a paradox to ethics. For when something becomes present-to-hand, that is, when something breaks down, it becomes disconnected from its usual relations in the world. It becomes an object. In the same way, in the ethical moment the ethical subject(s) and the object of the dilemma, difficulty or trouble become disconnected from their world. The 'in' of being-in-the-world goes from an at home familiar dwelling to an 'in' of a container. The ethical subject no longer dwells in the comfort of the familiar, unreflective being-in-the-world, but rather stands uncomfortably and uncannily *in* the situation-at-hand. The ethical subject is still being-in-the-world (he or she can never step out of that) but the mode of that being-*in* has significantly changed. Thus, the primary goal of ethics, as I will presently argue, is to move back *into* the world; to once again dwell in the unreflective comfort of the familiar. Ethics is the process of once again returning to the unreflective mode of everyday moral dispositions. But this return from the ethical moment is never a return to the same unreflective moral dispositions. For the very process of stepping-out and responding to the breakdown in various ways alters, even if ever so slightly, the aspect of being-in-the-world that is the unreflective moral dispositions. It is in the moment of breakdown, then, that it can be said that people work on themselves, and in so doing, alter their very way of being-in-the-world.

### **Keep going – the ethical demand**

The Danish theologian and moral philosopher Knud Ejler Løgstrup has provided an influential and deeply interesting approach to the problem of ethics. For Løgstrup the ethical moment is a moment of ethical demand (1997). In other words, when an individual finds him- or herself in a moment of moral breakdown, that person also finds that a demand is being placed upon him or her. Very similar to the ethics of Levinas, this demand is a demand placed upon the ethical subject by an Other. For Løgstrup, then, the ethical moment is a moment of ethical demand in which the ethical subject is wholly responsible to the Other. In conceiving of the ethical demand as wholly for the Other, Løgstrup has moved beyond the Kantian notion of the autonomous moral subject and provided a way to think of the ethical moment as a moment of relationship. That is to say, with the notion of the ethical demand, ethics is a socially constituted ethics.

For Løgstrup this responsibility precedes freedom. This is so for two reasons. First, while each individual is free to eschew the ethical demand of the Other, its authority and content are not derived from the ethical choices of the acting individual (Løgstrup, 1997: xxxiii). Neither, it should be added, is its authority and content derived from the Other. The ethical demand, then, is a product of the particular situation and the individuals involved. Therefore, the ethical demand is a situationally sensitive and, thus, a social demand. Second, and related to the sociality of the demand, is that this responsibility to the Other always takes place within certain socio-historic-cultural conditions. Because of this, the ethical demand, as well as the range of possible responses it evokes, are socio-historic-culturally constituted. Thus, just as Foucault claimed that freedom of thought in the moment of problematization is limited by a range of socio-historic-cultural conditions, so too is the responsibility and the ethical demand articulated by Løgstrup.

This does not mean, however, that either the demand or the response of the ethical subject to the demand is a matter of social convention. For Løgstrup social convention

and its norms are the comforting 'directives' of everyday life that are more similar to what I have called the unreflective moral dispositions of everyday life than to the ethical demand of the breakdown (1997: 19–20, 58, 121). The demand, because of the very fact that it occurs within the moment of moral breakdown, is unconventional. Indeed, the demand and the response it brings about may in fact be considered 'immoral' by the conventions of society. Nor can one ever be sure how the response to an ethical demand will turn out. There is always a risk in performing ethics. But yet, one must act. One must respond to the ethical demand, for one cannot live, as the ethnographic example of the Urapmin I will give later illustrates, in a permanent state of moral breakdown.

This inability to live in permanent moral breakdown, then, might be considered one of the fundamental motives for responding to the ethical demand. Indeed, the question of motivation is perhaps the most pressing problem of contemporary secular moral theory (Critchley, 2004, pers. comm.). Most traditional moral philosophies reply to this question by positing something like the good, justice or the moral law as both the motivation and the end of ethical action. The French philosopher Alain Badiou, however, suggests another reply. For Badiou the maxim of the ethical moment is 'Keep Going!' (2001: 52). Similar to how I have described the stepping-away of the ethical moment, Badiou conceives of ethics as that which is required in response to certain situations, or what he calls singular events. Thus, for Badiou there can never be an ethics in general, but only particular ethics of —; that is, ethics is always a unique response to particular situations, or ethical moments. Despite this radical relativistic notion of ethics,<sup>1</sup> Badiou does maintain that these various ethics-of are united by the maxim 'Keep Going!'

While for Løgstrup the ethical demand of the situation requires one to be wholly responsible to the Other, for Badiou the ethical demand of all situations is to 'Keep Going!' By this he means that no matter what the dilemma or problem of the ethical moment might be, one must be committed to finding a way to resolve the particular ethical dilemma or problem faced in this particular ethical moment. No matter the difficulties, struggles or temptations the ethical moment may provide, one must persevere and 'Keep Going!' in order to get-through the ethical moment.

Considered in light of the schema of the unreflective moral dispositions of everydayness and the reflective stepping-away of the ethical moment that I have been trying to set up so far in this article, Badiou's maxim of 'Keep Going!' provides us with a way of understanding the motivation of one who finds him- or herself in the ethical moment. That is, the motivation of the ethical moment is to step back into, or to keep going back into, the unreflective moral dispositions of everydayness. Thus, ethics, as I define it in this article, is a tactic performed in response to the ethical demand of the moral breakdown to return to the unreflective moral dispositions of everydayness. The tactics that are possible in each particular ethical moment are made available, for example, by the unique coming-together of the individuals involved in the moral breakdown, their own personal histories and experiences that inform their understanding and reasoning in the ethical moment, as well as the socio-historic-cultural possibilities for thinking and acting in such situations. Thus, unlike many traditional moral philosophies, or even anthropologies, that might claim that one acts in order 'to be good' or 'to be a good'— (fill in any social group)', in utilizing Badiou's notion of 'Keep Going!' I suggest that the main motivation for responding to the ethical demand is to get out of the breakdown. That

is, what is important in the moment of moral breakdown is not 'to be good' or 'to be a good—', but to get back to the unreflective moral dispositions of everyday life. It is having accomplished this return that is considered good, not the act itself.

## **TWO ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMPLES OF MORAL BREAKDOWN**

Let me briefly summarize what I have thus far laid out in this article. I suggested that one of the reasons anthropologists have rarely taken up an explicit study of moralities, and why those who have rarely agree on, or make distinctions between, morality and ethics, is because of the embedded Durkheimian assumption in anthropology that the moral is congruent with the social. In considering the ways in which some influential 20th-century continental philosophers have approached the problems of sociality and ethics I have suggested a schema that is helpful for making a distinction between moral dispositions and ethics, and how this distinction provides a space for anthropological study and analysis.

To recap: the study of what I have called the unreflective moral dispositions of everydayness is essentially what anthropologists have traditionally considered when studying embodied culture, tradition and power. Thus, such studies cannot be properly called an anthropology of moralities. Rather, I suggest an anthropology of moralities should be limited to what I have called moral breakdowns. That is, it should be limited to those social and personal moments when persons or groups of persons are forced to step-away from their unreflective everydayness and think-through, figure out, work on themselves and respond to certain ethical dilemmas, troubles or problems. These moral breakdowns are characterized by an ethical demand placed on the person or persons experiencing the breakdown, and this demand requires that they find a way or ways to 'Keep Going!' and return to the everydayness of the unreflective moral dispositions.

In the rest of this article I will show how two anthropological studies of moralities, one done by Joel Robbins in Papua New Guinea and the other from my own research done in Moscow, have focused their analytic attention on particular moral breakdowns. These examples illustrate how the anthropological theory of moralities that I have articulated works on both the level of the social group and the individual. While each ethnographic example expresses how the theory works at both of these levels, the first focuses on the level of the social group, while the second focuses on that of the individual. In doing so, together they present examples of the kind of anthropology of moralities this article attempts to delineate.

### **Moral breakdown of Urapmin society**

The Urapmin are a small society of people numbering nearly 400 living in the western highlands of Papua New Guinea. Contemporary Urapmin have found themselves experiencing a societal-wide moral breakdown (Robbins, 2004). This is so because they are caught living with two cultures – a newly adopted Pentecostal Christian culture and their traditional Urapmin one. Based on extensive fieldwork among the Urapmin, Joel Robbins argues that in adopting a new Pentecostal Christian culture in whole, it was not gradually assimilated into the traditional Urapmin culture (2004: 3). Thus, many aspects of the traditional Urapmin culture were left intact, leaving the Urapmin people caught between two significantly different cultural and moral systems. Having been caught in this betwixt state, Robbins argues, morality is a constant issue for them.

This is so because the moral domain – as a domain of conscious choice – is a place where change comes to consciousness. For those caught living between a traditional cultural system and one they have newly adopted, morality is likely to provide the window through which they can see the contradictions with which they have to live. This is why . . . the Urapmin conception of their situation so single-mindedly understands and explains it in terms of moral difficulty. (Robbins, 2004: 14)

The Urapmin, then, are living through, what in the last section I called, a societal-wide moral breakdown. While individual Urapmin certainly experience their own moral breakdowns in the course of living their usual everyday human lives, they also have the extra burden of what Robbins describes as nearly a constant state of moral questioning due to this societal-wide breakdown. Thus, to put Robbins' description in my own terms, Urapmin individuals are constantly stepped-away in the ethical moment, faced with ethical demands and striving to 'Keep Going!' in order to find a way to reconcile this societal-wide moral breakdown, and in doing so, no longer have morality as a constant, burdensome question. How has Robbins studied this situation and how do the Urapmin live through this societal ethical moment?

Robbins defines the moral sphere as a sphere of conscious choice. As he puts it:

Having defined the moral domain as one in which actors are culturally constructed as being aware both of the directive force of values and of the choices left open to them in responding to that force, we have to recognize that it is fundamentally a domain that consists of actions undertaken consciously . . . Consciousness of the issues involved is thus a criterion of moral choice. (2004: 315–16)

It is for this reason, then, that Robbins centers his analytic attention on specific realms and practices of ethical choice such as the will, law and technologies of the self. In doing so, he focuses on the ways in which each of these can only be understood as ethical choices in the context of the moral breakdown the Urapmin experience due to the tensions and contradictions of the two conflicting cultural and moral worldviews they are currently living through.

Because the Urapmin are stuck between two contradictory moral systems, they are also stuck between two contradictory conceptions of will. The traditional Urapmin moral system 'values the will when it is deployed to create or positively transform social relationships' (Robbins, 2004: 289). Considered in this way, the will coincides with the law, a set of fundamental, if not banal, prohibitions that are at the core of the traditional moral system (2004: 184–5). While the will is valued when it coincides with the law, it is considered immoral if the will acts to disrupt social relations or eschew certain social obligations. However, when the law and will 'are brought into a mutually conditioning dialectic with each other in people's hearts' (2004: 195), then they are the foundation for the traditional Urapmin moral system. The will, then, if properly managed can have positive moral qualities according to this traditional system.

Christian morality, on the other hand, condemns the will as an expression of one's own desire and emotions and, therefore, an obstacle to following God's will. Thus, for the Christian morality adopted by the Urapmin, the will is always sinful (2004: 225). Many Urapmin, then, are stuck between a notion of the will that can have positive moral

qualities and another notion that only views the will as immoral. It would seem that at the present there is no possibility of reconciling these two views. It is for this reason, Robbins suggests, that this contradiction is responded to in terms of millennialism.

What, then, do the Urapmin do in the presence of their perpetual moral breakdown? Robbins' answer is that they work on themselves so that they can be prepared for the salvational moment of the millennium. Because Christian salvation is only possible through a renunciation of the will, this is the ultimate goal of the Urapmin technologies of the self utilized to work on themselves. Thus, it would seem, the ethical demand being responded to by the Urapmin is to move beyond the traditional Urapmin notion of will and renounce it completely. Robbins focuses on two technologies of the self meant for this purpose: moral self-reflection and confession.

Robbins claims that all Urapmin of at least the age of 12 'reflect on their feelings and actions in order to identify their sins' (2004: 232). By maintaining an accurate list of sins committed since one's last confession, the Urapmin are not only better prepared for the next confession but, more importantly, keep a close watch on their acts, inner emotions and the will that motivates both of these. In this way, then, moral self-reflection is one tactic utilized by Urapmin to respond to the ethical demand of their societal-wide moral breakdown. Another tactic utilized is confession. As a way of washing away one's sins, the 'new life that confession initiates also points toward the new life to come in heaven' (Robbins, 2004: 277). Thus, as a central technology of the self for Urapmin Christians, confession works on the will in two ways. First, it trains the will to renounce its independence from the will of God and, in so doing, confession, secondly, prepares one for the millennium.

Therefore, these two technologies of the self work together to move Urapmin individuals toward salvation. By constantly maintaining vigilance and moral self-reflection, the Urapmin are better prepared to participate in an efficacious confession. Having done so, the Urapmin individual is better prepared for the judgment of the millennium. It should be noted, of course, that both of these technologies are focused on individual salvation, and are therefore at odds with the traditional communal, or what Robbins calls relational, moral values of the Urapmin system. Thus, in practicing these very technologies of the self as a way to respond to the demand of the moral breakdown, the Urapmin are, at the same time, likely to be furthering the contradictions. The breakdown, then, continues.

Robbins' study of the Urapmin and their moral torment provides an excellent example of the way in which an anthropology of moralities is interestingly and precisely done when focused on an explicit example of a moral breakdown. In doing so, Robbins makes a very clear distinction between Urapmin concerns and questions about morality, on the one hand, and what might be called culture or social structure, on the other hand. While Robbins' study is centered on the societal-wide moral breakdown of the Urapmin, the next section will provide an example of how looking at the moral breakdowns experienced by individuals can provide another way of studying the everyday moral dispositions and ethical tactics of persons.

### **Moral breakdown of a Muscovite woman**

For nearly the last 20 years the Russian people have been living through an historically unprecedented period of social and political upheaval and cultural and epistemological

questioning – or what is often referred to as a period of transition. It has been argued that rather than bringing about a condition of increased homogeneity, globalization has brought about an ‘increasing intensity of problematization’ (Faubion, 2001b: 101). It is my contention that, like globalization, the so-called transition of post-Soviet Russia is also characterized by problematization. One characteristic of this questioning is the struggle by individuals and institutions to articulate a coherent and widely acceptable notion of morality. In other words, like Urapmin society, Russia is also experiencing a societal-wide moral breakdown.

Although I would not go as far as some who have argued that Russia today has no moral limits (Kon, 1996: 205), it is clear that Russia is characterized by the constant questioning of a moral breakdown, part of which consists of the struggle over competing moral conceptualizations. This seemed to me to be a unique opportunity to talk with people about, and observe how they attempt to articulate, their conceptions of morality (Zigon, 2006). While my research made clear that many Muscovites are indeed affected by the societal-wide moral breakdown that Russia is currently experiencing, it also made clear that individuals are also particularly concerned over their own personal moral breakdowns. While these personal moral breakdowns are certainly at times related to the greater societal-wide breakdown, they are not always so. For this reason, I found these personal experiences much more interesting. The rest of this section, then, will focus on two examples of moral breakdowns experienced by one Muscovite and the ways in which she performed ethics in response to the ethical demands of these moments. These examples were reported to me in various narratives I collected during fieldwork in Moscow between 2002 and 2005.

Aleksandra Vladimirovna is a 51-year-old woman who, although still officially married, has not lived with her husband in nearly 10 years. She does, however, still live with her only child, her son Oleg who is in his mid-20s and currently unemployed. She holds a doctorate in philology from Moscow State University and teaches English at a language institute near the Park Kul'tury metro station. Although at one time Aleksandra Vladimirovna was a member of the Communist Party and Komsomol leader, today she is a very strict Russian Orthodox believer. Like many others of her generation (Pankhurst, 1996: 142–3), it was from her grandmother that Aleksandra Vladimirovna learned as a child some of the basics of Christianity, which laid a foundation, so she claims, for her attraction to the high moral standards of Communism and eventually to Orthodox Christianity in the 1990s. It was also because of her grandmother's religious convictions that her father, a Soviet military officer of some importance, and her mother were secretly married by a priest in an Orthodox church and Aleksandra Vladimirovna was secretly baptized as a child. Today, Aleksandra Vladimirovna attributes her own heightened sense of morality and positive moral dispositions to these familial circumstances.

One evening in the spring of 2003 Aleksandra Vladimirovna and I were speaking about how one must sometimes accept a disconnect between one's moral ideals and real-life ethical dilemmas. I asked her how she deals with this disconnect in her own life. She responded:

A.V. I pray and ask the Lord to help me. This is the best solution. I can give an example. Either every week or twice a month I go to the country to visit my

aunt and I go by train. And I came and there was a large line for tickets and if I would have bought a ticket I would have missed the train, and so I just got onto the train. But if you have to pay a fine for this on the train, then often you can just pay something like 20 rubles to the person and they are satisfied and they go on their way. But if you say – well I want a receipt or something – then you have to pay much more. And many people just give 20 rubles and they are quite happy. And I thought of the situation and I decided I was ready to pay to go to see my aunt. And I prayed to the Lord to help me. And then I also thought that if no inspector comes by, then I will give the money that I saved to some charity or something. But I didn't want to feel embarrassed. And then no one came, so I took the money and gave it to someone, some beggar or church or something. Because I thought that this was not my money any more, this is how I solved it for myself.

**Jarrett** And by praying this helped you come to this solution?

**A.V.** I don't know how, but I didn't have to be embarrassed by inspectors, I didn't have to decide whether to pay the bribe of 20 rubles or to pay the fine, which is much more. So I decided, ok, I will pay the fine, this is the best. But fortunately I didn't have to face this situation. But I knew, because as God disciplines me, I knew that if I didn't give the money to someone and just saved it I would be punished. Because things like that have happened before and I don't want to make the same mistakes and be disciplined again. You see?

When I asked Aleksandra Vladimirovna to explain how she overcomes the disconnect between her moral ideals and the complexities of real life, she did not provide an example of such an instance. Rather, she told me how she goes about the process of making an ethical decision in the moment of ethical dilemma or moral breakdown. While it is possible that she misunderstood my question, I think it is more likely that Aleksandra Vladimirovna's telling of this story in response to this particular question reveals the difficulties and the tension involved in all everyday, real-life ethical decision making. First, the very disconnect between one's moral ideals and real-life ethical dilemmas forces one to step out of their everyday mode of moral being and into the ethical moment. A breakdown occurs. Second, in this moment it may be tempting to act in ways that might be considered immoral by others or by oneself. It is tempting to pay 20 rubles instead of the full price of the ticket. Who would even notice? This is a very common occurrence in Russia today. So much so, that most probably wouldn't even think of this as immoral. But the situation posed a problem for Aleksandra Vladimirovna, not necessarily the problem I asked about, but the very important problem of how she performs the ethical reasoning process.

It is of little surprise that the technique for ethical reasoning Aleksandra Vladimirovna spoke about was that of prayer. As she tells it, she addresses God directly for help in a particular moment of an ethical dilemma. This kind of petitionary prayer, then, is an informal, situational and personal prayer that seeks to establish a communicative relationship with God. As a communicative relationship, this example of prayer is a form



of *obshchenie*, or communing talk. Indeed, once Aleksandra Vladimirovna described prayer to me as a conversation, a description supported by the Orthodox notion that prayer is a conversation between two persons, God and the one who prays (Ware, 2001: 105–28).

This dialogical opening is seen in Aleksandra Vladimirovna's narrative. After praying for help she is able to think what she will do in the situation. 'And *I thought (Ia dumala) of the situation* and *I decided* I was ready to pay to go to see my aunt. And I prayed to the Lord to help me. And then *I also thought* that if no inspector comes by, then I will give the money that I saved to some charity or something.' Prayer opened Aleksandra Vladimirovna to God's advice. By engaging God in prayerful *obshchenie*, she was able to create the possibility that God could help her decide whether to pay the fine or the bribe. But prayer as *obshchenie* is not just God telling her what to do, it is creating the possibility that she can resolve the dilemma herself. As she describes it, the resolution to this dilemma appears to her as her own thought (*Ia dumala*). To say that *obshchenie* is dialogical, then, is not to say that advice, ideas or meaning is simply transferred between two persons. Rather, prayer as a form of dialogical *obshchenie* opened Aleksandra Vladimirovna to herself and allowed her to resolve the ethical dilemma and in so doing, perhaps, further strengthened her moral character and her dedication to prayer.

This situation, however, involved two ethical dilemmas. Not only did Aleksandra Vladimirovna need to decide whether to pay the fine or the bribe, she also had to decide what to do with the money once she did not have to pay anything. It was this second dilemma, so it seems, that provides the real concern for her. It is the possibility of keeping money that was no longer hers that raised concerns about God disciplining or punishing her. Why the strong concern over this issue? Is it the influence of Christian notions of charity that inspired her? Or perhaps the residue of Soviet anti-profit and anti-money ideology that led her to believe that she should not keep this money (e.g. Lemon, 1998)? Whatever the reason, it is around this particular dilemma that she speaks of God imposing discipline upon her and forcing her to recall past instances of God doing so, perhaps even because of similar cases.

What is truly interesting about Aleksandra Vladimirovna's concern with what to do with the money is that she doesn't actually remember what she did with it. As she put it, 'And then no one came, so I took the money and gave it to someone, some beggar or church or something.' Although it did not strike me at the time of the interview, the question certainly arises: Well, to whom did she give this money? If this example is one that made enough impact on her to remember and retell, then how could she not remember, or if she did remember, why was she not specific in telling exactly to whom she gave the money? I had the opportunity in later interviews to ask her about this, but chose not to. I decided it was not important to find out the truth of what actually happened to the money. And it certainly was not important enough to risk offending Aleksandra Vladimirovna. What is truly significant about this lacunae in her narrative, however, is that it once again raises the question of the distinction between the ideal moral conception of an individual and their everyday ethical performance in the moments of ethical dilemma. For in leaving out the details of to whom she gave the money, Aleksandra Vladimirovna gives the impression that she may have slipped back into an ideal telling of her moral conceptions in the midst of an apparently otherwise real example of an everyday ethical dilemma.



In the winter of 2005 Aleksandra Vladimirovna told me of another dilemma. Similar to the last example, this dilemma was brought on by a discrepancy between what she knew she should do according to her religious moral beliefs and what she wanted to do as a person finding herself in a particularly difficult situation. Aleksandra Vladimirovna's husband left her and their son about 10 years ago. They have had very little contact since, except for one time a few years ago when he contacted her and asked her if she could loan him some money. Not only did she not want to give money to someone who hurt her, but this person was the very one who had hurt her more than anyone ever has. This already understandable difficulty was further compounded by the fact that he could have asked any number of other people for the money. Additionally, Aleksandra Vladimirovna must work several jobs just to survive. So the insult was even further exacerbated by a successful lawyer asking his poor wife, whom he had left, for money. I think it is fairly clear why Aleksandra Vladimirovna did not want to give him the money.

Nevertheless, she knew she had to give it. This is what a good Christian would do; thus, she must do it. Aleksandra Vladimirovna, unlike the Branch Davidian Ms Roden that James Faubion has done similar research with, conceives of God's morality not only as a morality of law, but one of obedience (Faubion, 2001a: 144–5). Because the Bible, and thus God, says that she must give the money, then she must, despite her own feelings. But similar to Ms Roden, Aleksandra Vladimirovna does not conceive of this morality of law in terms of simple rule following, but in terms of finding examples from the Bible that can serve as a guide in situational dilemmas. It is only by following God's rules as examples that Aleksandra Vladimirovna can conceive of herself as being happy in the end despite her situational resistance to doing so.

We met again later that week and I brought up this situation again:

**Jarrett** On Monday you were telling me about the situation with your husband and money and it was very difficult and you only did it because this is what God wanted you to do.

**A.V.** Yes, absolutely, I felt hurt, wounded and I didn't want to do it.

**Jarrett** It's understandable.

**A.V.** He never gave any money for the son. So why should I? And he works. So why should I give him money? It was only because the Bible said so, this is the only reason, that is for sure.

**Jarrett** Was it a long process of coming to this decision or did you just . . .

**A.V.** It was not instant, but it was a short one.

**Jarrett** And you said this is what the Bible said you should do. Did you actually look through the Bible?

**A.V.** No, no I felt it. No, no, no, I know that this is what it says, OK. It says, give to the one who asks for it. And he was my husband officially for quite a long time and he needed money.

**Jarrett** And because you know a good Christian gives to charity or a person in need . . .

**A.V.** I just know that is what God wants from me. To overcome myself, despite all my likes and dislikes I need to do it. It is emotion, you know, and you shouldn't base your life on emotions. They betray you all the time. Even mothers, one day they will say oh I adore you, and the next they will say oh I could kill you. Some Russian mothers say this. So what should you trust then?

**Jarrett** After you gave him the money did that change the way you felt at all?

**A.V.** No, I did my duty and that is all. I'm still grumbling inside.

**Jarrett** I can see it on your face.

**A.V.** Yes, because I didn't want to do it at all. But I did it. Because I knew that the holy fathers say you should overcome yourself, and this was overcoming myself, my emotions.

When I asked her about this situation again, it is even more clear that by doing what the Bible and God had told her to do, she was acting against what she herself would have chosen to do. Despite all her efforts over the years to embody God's morality, Aleksandra Vladimirovna still has difficulty doing so in some particularly difficult – or perhaps it is more accurate to say particularly personal – situations. In such a situation she cannot rely on her own cultivated moral strength, but must instead turn to an exemplified rule from the Bible. By following the rule despite her own inclinations she is, as she or Kant would put it, fulfilling her duty.

Yet in fulfilling such a duty despite her inclinations, Aleksandra Vladimirovna conceives of this as helping her to continue to develop and work on herself. She recognized that she did not want to give the money because of the deep pain she felt at the hands of her husband. She recognized that her desire to not help him was motivated by her emotions. But as she put it, one cannot act according to emotions. They are untrustworthy. Only God's will as understood through the Bible or as perceived through prayer is a reliable source for moral action. For He will always lead Aleksandra Vladimirovna to act rightly regardless of her own desires.

Ironically, when I asked her if she had actually read a passage in the Bible that told her she should give the money, she responded adamantly, 'No, no I felt it. No, no, no, I know that this is what it says, OK. It says, give to the one who asks for it . . . I just know that is what God wants from me.' Not only does God want her to give the money, but God wants her to 'overcome' herself, that is, overcome her emotions. Thus, Aleksandra Vladimirovna never actually read a passage that told her to give the money; instead she 'felt' that God wanted her to do it and in so doing overcome her emotions. The very idea, then, of her duty to overcome emotions to act as God wants is itself an embodied and felt knowledge.

These two examples of how one Muscovite finds herself in a moment of ethical dilemma, responds to its particular ethical demand and, in so doing, Keeps Going!, provide another illustration of how an anthropological study of moralities that focuses on moral breakdown is able to isolate moral conceptions and ethical tactics for analysis. Just as Robbins' study of the Urapmin societal-wide moral breakdown shows how an entire society of people can be studied, so too the example of Aleksandra Vladimirovna

shows that an entirely different methodology, that of the life-historical and narrative approach, can be just as successful at isolating morality and ethics when the methodology is focused on the moral breakdown.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have tried to respond to the lacunae in anthropological theory concerning morality and ethics. With the increasing reference to morality in the work of anthropologists, this lacunae has become more and more evident. I have suggested that the major obstacle to a coherent and defined anthropology of moralities is the still prevalent Durkheimian assumption that the moral is congruent with the social. In opposition to this assumption, I have argued throughout this article that a distinction must be made between the unreflective moral dispositions of everyday life and the conscious ethical tactics performed in the ethical moment, or what I have also called the moral breakdown. Two examples were given from two very different societies, each of which utilized two very different methodologies, to show that when the focus is on the moment of moral breakdown, a well-defined anthropology of moralities is possible. For only when anthropological studies of moralities focus their analytic attention on these moments of breakdown will an anthropology of moralities, as distinct from, for example, an anthropology of religion, law or exchange, become possible.

One final word should also be mentioned on why I continue to refer to the anthropology of moralities if I have articulated a theory that focuses attention on the breakdown of moral dispositions and the ethical tactics performed in this moment. If it is true, as I have suggested, that the motivation and end of ethical action is to return once again to the unreflective moral dispositions of everyday being-in-the-world, then ethics is a way of not only achieving this, but also of engaging in a dialogical relationship with these very moral dispositions. In this way, then, although ethics stands outside moral dispositions, it is that which is primarily responsible for the subtle shifts and alterations that make up what Douglas Rogers calls the shades of similarity and difference (2004: 36) between individual experiences and expressions of these moral dispositions. Thus, in studying the performance of ethics in the moments of moral breakdown, we not only witness how individuals and social groups respond to the breakdown but, perhaps more importantly, we are better able to see the ways in which the moral dispositions themselves are shaped and reshaped. It is for this reason, then, and still with some hesitation, that I prefer to call the theory articulated in this article an anthropological theory of moralities.

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## Note

- 1 It should be noted that Badiou is himself anti-relativist and would not describe his ethics in relativist terms, but for reasons of space and complexity I will not explicate his reasons for maintaining this position, nor my own for disagreeing with his position.

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