

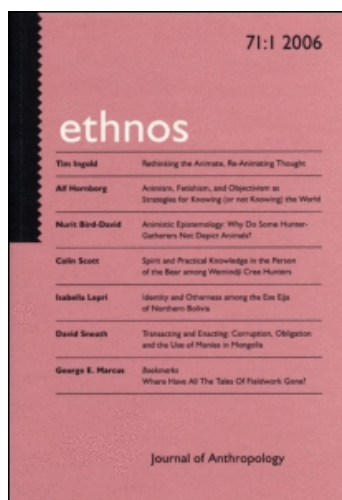
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### Within a Range of Possibilities: Morality and Ethics in Social Life

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# Within a Range of Possibilities: Morality and Ethics in Social Life

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**ABSTRACT** *Despite its now common currency the anthropological concept of morality remains underdeveloped. One anthropologist who has made several important attempts to work out a more precise theoretical concept of morality is Joel Robbins. In his most recent contribution to this endeavor Robbins addresses the tension in anthropology between what he calls the morality of reproduction and the morality of freedom. In this article, I suggest an alternative solution to the problem of conceiving the distinction between a nonconsciously enacted morality and the conscious awareness of ethical dilemmas and moral questioning. I will support this distinction with ethnographic and life-historical material from my research on the moral lives of some Muscovites.*

**KEYWORDS** *Morality, ethics, range of possibilities, phenomenology, Russia*

In the last decade or so anthropologists have increasingly turned their ethnographic and analytic gaze on the concept of morality (e.g., Howell 1997; Rydström 2003; Robbins 2004). It is a concern, however, that the anthropological study of moralities still lacks a theoretical basis (Faubion 2001; Laidlaw 2002). For the most part, these studies have attempted to infuse their analysis with a theoretical basis by borrowing heavily from moral philosophy. I suggest there are two predominant approaches to the anthropological study of local moralities: the moral reasoning and choice approach (e.g., Howell 1997; Robbins 2004), which is significantly influenced by deontology, and the Neo-Aristotelian and Foucauldian approach (e.g., Mahmood 2005; Widlok 2004), which are forms of virtue theory. While both approaches offer interesting starting points for an anthropological study of moralities, neither have yet to be formulated specifically in anthropological

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terms. Therefore, among those anthropologists who have undertaken an anthropological study of local moralities, there is little agreement about what constitutes the moral, or how we should go about studying it. In this article, I address this lacuna and argue for an anthropological theory of morality that emphasizes a phenomenological focus on what I call moral breakdowns, which is an existential state in which a distinction between morality and ethics becomes possible. In order to make this argument, I first consider an important article by Joel Robbins on the anthropology of moralities recently published in this journal, in order to discuss what I see as the strengths and weaknesses of his theory, after which, in the second section, I delineate my own theory of moral breakdown as a way to address these critiques. In the third and fourth section, ethnographic material from contemporary Moscow, Russia will show how the theory of moral breakdown can help disclose the intricacies of individuals' moral lives.

### **'Between Reproduction and Freedom'**

One anthropologist who has made several important attempts to work out a more precise theoretical concept of morality is Joel Robbins. In his most recent contribution to this endeavor, Robbins addresses the tension several anthropologists have felt between what he calls the morality of reproduction and the morality of freedom (2007). The former notion of morality is characterized in generally Durkheimian terms where morality is essentially equated with social normativity, stability and unquestioned reproductivity, while the latter is a morality of choice, change, and reflexivity. Robbins argues that anthropologists need not give in to the alluring temptation of choosing one over the other, but instead would be better served with finding a way to make room for both notions in an anthropological theory of morality.

Although I am sympathetic with the need to make a distinction between nonconsciously enacted morality and what I call below the conscious process of ethics, as will become clear, I am not convinced by the way Robbins attempts to make this distinction. Finding inspiration in both Dumont's theory of values and Weber's conception of society as consisting of competing value spheres, Robbins argues that morality becomes a more workable anthropological concept when society is conceived as consisting of several distinct and incompatible moral-value spheres. Each of these spheres is 'governed by different laws,' and therefore, rationally consistent within its own cultural domain (2007:298). Because of this logical and moral consistency it is only when individuals or social groups find themselves stuck, as it were, between

incompatible moral-value spheres that morality becomes a problem. Morality within any one of these particular spheres is what Robbins calls a morality of reproduction, while morality at the conflicting points of two or more different spheres is a morality of freedom (p. 299).

The strength of Robbins' view is that he provides a way in which we can conceive of the moral lives of people as encompassing both an unquestioned and nonconscious aspect, as well as a conscious questioning that allows for freedom and choice. What is particularly appealing about this view is that Robbins adopts Laidlaw's Foucauldian notion of freedom in which it is 'constructed out of the role given to choice in various cultures and in various domains within specific cultures' (p. 295; see Laidlaw 2002). This move takes us a long way from the more common anthropological views of morality as either Durkheimian social norm-following, or to borrow from Mahmood's description of anthropological uses of the concept of agency, a secular-liberal judgment (2005).

To a great extent I agree with Robbins' assessment of the current underdeveloped state of the anthropology of moralities, and the path he has helped to establish by making a clear distinction between nonconsciously enacted morality and what he calls the morality of freedom. Nevertheless, I hesitate to follow Robbins' suggestion that society is constituted by incompatible moral-value spheres, for in my view it not only misses out on the complex subtleties of everyday moral life, but as a theory seems to remain incomplete. Before turning to an alternative solution to the problem of conceiving of both a nonconsciously enacted morality and the conscious awareness of ethical dilemmas and moral questioning, I will briefly explicate in more detail my concerns with Robbins' position.

### **What Do Spheres Do?**

Robbins succinctly outlines his theory in the following way:

the unreflective moments of life do not 'run on as an event in nature,' but rather unfold within domains of culture in which value hierarchies are stably organized and hence the relations between values are well worked out. It is where this is not the case, where conflict between values arises, that a morality of freedom and choice comes into play and people become consciously aware of choosing their own fates. And it is because in such cases people become aware of choosing between values that they come to see their decision-making process as one engaged with moral issues (2007:300).

Robbins goes on to explain that this theory allows an anthropology of moralities to describe and account for both a morality of reproduction and a morality of freedom. Robbins' theory, despite his inspiration from Weber and Dumont, basically takes the Durkheimian view of society as one coherent sphere of 'overwhelming' moral force (p. 294), and splits it into several coherent, but incompatible, moral-value spheres, within which 'the moral component of action consists primarily of adherence to norms understood in binding, Durkheimian fashion' (p. 296). Therefore, Robbins has essentially reproduced a quasi-Durkheimian view of society, in which several, rather than only one, moral-value spheres seemingly determine moral action.

Robbins' theory of morality is worked out through an ethnographic analysis of the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. According to Robbins, the Urapmin have been living in a perpetual mode of moral questioning since they were introduced to a form of Pentecostal Christianity because the introduction of this form of Christianity was also an introduction of a new and incompatible moral-value sphere. As Robbins describes it, this moral questioning is the result of the conflicting moral-value spheres of the traditional Urapmin social structure dominated by the value of relationalism, and the new charismatic Christianity sphere dominated by the value of individualism. Because the Urapmin are stuck between these two spheres, they are left in a perpetual state of moral questioning.

One example of how this conflict between paramount values results in moral questioning can be seen in how the will is conceptualized within each moral-value sphere. Within the sphere of the traditional Urapmin social structure, Robbins tells us, the will holds a morally ambiguous position. On the one hand, a willful person can endanger already existing relationships by willfully beginning a new relationship, for example, by giving a gift to someone with whom a previous relationship did not exist. On the other hand, a person who can properly balance this willfulness of creating new relations with the laws requiring him to maintain already existing relations will be judged morally successful for the ability to both maintain and expand his social relationships (pp. 308–9). Thus, within traditional Urapmin morality the will, if properly attuned, can enhance one's moral standing.

This view of the will is in contrast to how it is conceptualized within the charismatic Christian moral-value sphere. According to Robbins, within this sphere 'all willfulness is deemed immoral in its effects on the self' (p. 309). This is so because willfulness is seen as often leading to the sin of anger, which in turn endangers the possibility of eternal salvation for that person. Therefore,

this view of the moral danger of willfulness often leads individual Urapmin to abstain from engaging in the kinds of relationship-creating activities that are important to traditional Urapmin morality. In Robbins' view, then, the incompatibility between the paramount values of relationalism and individualism within the respective moral-value spheres not only creates a contradictory logic of action vis-à-vis the will, but also leaves Urapmin in a constant state of moral torment in terms of how to resolve this contradiction.

This example raises several questions: is it in fact plausible to consider society as made up of such moral-value spheres, in which it appears there is unquestioned moral reproduction of a single primary moral-value? Is there no room for plurality or negotiation *within* these moral-value spheres? Or does this only happen outside the spheres, or at points of conflict between spheres? In the example above, it certainly seems as though the place of the will within the traditional Urapmin moral-value sphere is somewhat negotiable, and if this is the case, then it would seem that Robbins' morality of freedom would also be enacted within a particular moral-value sphere due to this necessary negotiation. Unfortunately, Robbins does not address this and how it might affect his conception of paramount values.

Furthermore, the question should be asked: how can an outside or a between spheres be conceived if society as a whole is made up of them? In fact, Robbins does not provide examples of other moral-value spheres within Urapmin society besides the two discussed above. This leaves his theory open to the critique that he characterizes traditional Urapmin society in an overly Durkheimian fashion consisting of only one moral-value sphere dominated by one paramount value, which, in turn, is only shaken from nonconscious reproduction through cultural contact and conversion. Leaving this concern aside, more importantly for the purposes of this article is that even if traditional Urapmin society had only one moral-value sphere, there would still be moments of moral questioning within that sphere. For as I have just suggested based on the example of the will within the traditional Urapmin moral-value sphere, it seems likely that a morality of freedom is also possible within this one sphere due to the negotiations necessary between lawfulness and willfulness. Therefore, while I am certain that Robbins has accurately described the moral questioning that has arisen for the Urapmin in their current social state, the questions I have raised here suggest that his theoretical approach may not accurately represent the intricate subtleties, improvisations, and negotiations necessary in such a fragmented moral world.

Related to this point, one wonders if a theory of moral-value spheres

better helps us understand an Urapmin's *experience* of what is most likely at times a dreadful, moral questioning? Unfortunately, the actual life-experience of struggling-through such moral torment is left largely unaddressed, and therefore offers little to help us describe and understand the situational struggles, stresses, and anxiety of real persons morally questioning. This, in turn, makes it difficult to comprehend the process of enacting the freedom of moral questioning at the conflicting points of moral-value spheres. More specifically, it is difficult to comprehend what it might be like to experience the shift from a mode of reproduction to a mode of freedom. It would seem that an anthropological theory of moralities needs to account for this shift of moral consciousness. Robbins' theory, unfortunately, does not account for it, and instead only provides a mechanism for conceiving of what might instigate a shift between a morality of reproduction and a morality of freedom. It is my contention that such a theory cannot fully account for morality because it leaves out the actual experience of living a moral life. Social experientially, then, Robbins' theory does not account for what Rogers calls 'the shades of similarity and difference' between differing moralities within societies (2004: 36), the experience of living with both the morality of reproduction and the morality of freedom, nor does it describe how one comes to enact these moralities in the shifting modes of reproduction and freedom.

Ultimately, these concerns stem from one problem raised by Robbins' theory of moral-value spheres. If society is to be understood as consisting of several coherent but incompatible moral-value spheres, and moral questioning only occurs outside or at points of conflict of these different spheres, then there seems to be nothing to which persons can refer for guidance in the resolution of their moral torment. The moral question *arises due to the very fact* of the incompatibility of the two or more moral-value spheres. Because of this, the moral values of none of the spheres can provide a resolution to the moral questioning because they contradict and cancel one another out. This is seen clearly in Robbins' example of the conflicting moral values of relationalism and individualism among the Urapmin. Having found oneself in this state of moral questioning, where there is no value referent to help resolve the question, how does one return to an unreflective state of moral reproduction?

Robbins' theory seems to provide only two possible answers, neither of which seems plausible. The first is that moral questioning can only be resolved by means of power. This seems to be the conclusion Weber came to with his image of value spheres as warring gods, but it does not appear to



be what Robbins is suggesting. Unfortunately, he does not provide us with a way for understanding how a person, group of persons, or an entire society can resolve a moral conflict. Because of this all that remains is the kind of Weberian power play that does not realistically describe the way in which most everyday moral questions are resolved.

The second possible answer to how one resolves moral conflicts and returns to an unreflective state of moral reproduction is that one does not. Instead, one is stuck, perhaps forever, in this state of constant moral questioning. One is perhaps left waiting for resolution by means of power or intervention from an outsider, which is itself the infusion of another relationship of power. Whatever the case may be, this perpetual state of moral questioning appears to be in fact how Robbins describes the current state of the Urapmin (2007:310). While this may be a possible way to describe an entire society as Robbins is mostly doing in his article, although I have my doubts, I do not see how this could be a possible way of living a social life for individual persons. And it seems that an adequate anthropological theory of moralities must be able to account for both the moral world of a society as well as that of the individuals who live in that society. While Robbins' theory may to some extent help us understand the former, it does not the latter.

As can be seen, Robbins theory, though important for setting the scene for what a future anthropology of moralities could look like, raises more questions than it answers. In the next section I will offer an alternative theory that is similarly concerned with the shift between what Robbins calls the morality of reproduction and the morality of freedom, but one which I hope helps answer some of the questions I have raised in this section. In particular, the theory that I offer shows that because society is much more complex, fragmented, interconnected, and negotiable than how Robbins portrays it, a range of possibilities always exists for persons to utilize in their attempt to overcome moral questioning. Thus, the theory I present in the next section is not a procedural theory for guiding persons through moments of what I call moral breakdown, but rather an analytical theory that makes more clear the complexity and subtlety of moral life.

### **Moral Breakdown and Ranges of Possibilities**

An anthropology of moralities is best begun with a distinction between morality and ethics (see Zigon 2007, 2008a). While there are some similarities between this distinction and Robbins' morality of reproduction and morality of freedom, there are important differences. It should also be noted that others



such as Arthur Kleinman (2006) and Zygmunt Bauman (1993) have also made this distinction, but in ways quite different from how I will do it here. For example, according to Kleinman ethics is 'a set of moral principles that aspire to universal application,' while moral experience seems to be something like what we might call everyday intersubjective sociality (Kleinman 2006:25-6). As will be clear, this is quite different from how I conceive of the distinction. Before turning to how I conceive of ethics, I will begin with morality. Morality can be considered as three different, but certainly interrelated, aspects that are themselves pluralistic: (1) the institutional; (2) that of public discourse; and (3) embodied dispositions. I will take each of these in turn.

Institutions can be very loosely defined as those formal and non-formal social organizations and groups that are a part of all societies and that wield varying amounts of power over individual persons (Foucault 1990:141). It can be said that all human persons have at least some nominal contact with or participation in some of the institutions that make up their respective societies. However, most human persons are intimately entwined within the overlapping spheres of influence of several different institutions within and beyond their own society. Lastly, it can be said that most, if not all, institutions proclaim the truth or the rightness of a particular morality. Some examples of such institutions are governments, organized religions, village elder councils, the work place, and international organizations such as the UN or the IMF.

Part of what it is to be an institution is to claim that it is the bearer and securer of the truth or rightness of a particular kind of morality. And while institutions have varying levels of power available to them in order to propagate and enforce their version of morality, it is generally a formal prerequisite of interacting with the institution that one, at least publicly, adheres to this morality. Thus, for example, the Russian Orthodox Church has a particular moral view on sexuality, which is part of the Church's larger moral system, and it is expected that all Orthodox live according to this moral doctrine.

At the same time it is obvious that not all Russian Orthodox, or those related to any institution for that matter, always follow to the letter the claimed morality of the institution. It is also obvious that those who do not follow the institutional morality are not always punished or reprimanded for not doing so. In fact, it may oftentimes go unnoticed. Furthermore, it is clear that all institutions, to some extent, consist of a range of moral positions that are debated and contested from within. Despite this internal debate, institutions usually and for the most part publicly articulate a morality *as though* it were internally unquestioned. Additionally, it is also clear that all societies,

including small-scale societies, are made up of a plurality of institutional moralities. Despite these contestations and pluralities within institutions and within societies, the influences that institutional moralities have on individual persons are clearly real and substantial. For this reason it is not uncommon that when asked what morality is, a person will often give some version of, for example, the Ten Commandments, the law, societal tradition, or something of the kind. Institutional morality, then, is a significantly influential moral discourse that is oftentimes supported by very real expressions of power, but which, nevertheless is not totalizing and is more akin to a very persuasive rhetoric than it is to a truth (Carrithers 2005:434).

Closely related to institutional morality, but yet not quite the same, is what I will call the public discourse of morality. This distinction is very similar to the distinction Voloshinov made between official ideology and behavioral ideology (2000), where the former is that which is upheld by official and state institutions and the latter is the result of the everyday dialogical interactions between persons. Although these two kinds of ideologies, like the institutional and public discourse of morality, are separate and distinct from one another, they are in constant dialogue with one another. Thus, both of the ideologies about which Voloshinov speaks, and the two moralities about which I am here speaking (as well as the third kind I will discuss next), not only support and authorize one another, but at times also undermine and subvert one another (Caton 2006:51). The public discourse of morality, then, is all those public articulations of moral beliefs, conceptions, and hopes that are not *directly* articulated by an institution. Some examples of the public discourse of morality are the media, protest, philosophical discourse, everyday articulated beliefs, opinions, and conceptions, moral expressions in the arts, literature and stories, and familial teachings.

As is clear from some of these examples, and as I have already said, the public discourse of morality can be very closely related to institutional morality, but need not be. Yet, the two types of moralities are always in a dialogical relationship with one another. Thus for example, certain television news networks may articulate a moral discourse that is very similar to that of the institutional morality of the government, but when the network is not itself run by the government, it cannot be said that it is itself a part of that institutional moral voice. This is so because given even relative independence from the institution of the government, there is always the possibility of dissent and debate within the network and by speakers on its broadcasts.

Because in the contemporary world the media has become so entwined

with many institutions, perhaps it is better to consider some other examples of the public discourse of morality to see how it is a distinct, but yet a dialogically interacting, aspect of morality from institutional morality. Take, for example, people's everyday articulations of their moral beliefs and conceptions. These also offer an alternative moral voice to institutional morality. Above I said that it is not uncommon that one would reference, for example, the Ten Commandments or the law when asked about morality. In my own research I have found this to be certainly true. This shows the pervasive influence of institutional morality, but it is not the end of the story. For once one begins to press a person a bit more, for example, in the kinds of moral debates that arise on occasion in everyday life or in the context of anthropological interviews and conversation, you often find moral articulations that differ, sometimes radically, from the dominant institutional moralities of a society. Such moral articulations are a part of what I have been trying to describe as the public discourse of morality.

They are also, I suggest, an articulation, or a reflected verbalization of the third kind of morality, that is, morality as embodied dispositions. This third kind of morality can be described as what Mauss called a kind of *habitus*, or unreflective and unreflexive dispositions of everyday social life attained over a lifetime of what he called socially performed techniques (1973). Morality in this third sense, unlike the way morality is so often considered as rule-following or conscious reflection on a problem or dilemma, is not thought out beforehand, nor is it noticed when it is performed. It is simply done. Morality as embodied dispositions is one's everyday way of being in the world.

It is because all persons are able to embody morality in this unreflective and unreflexive way that most persons most of the time are able to act in ways that are, for the most part, acceptable to others in their social world seemingly naturally. My own research in post-Soviet Russia, a place where morality is often questioned by the government or Russian Orthodox Church or the media or people in their daily conversations, found that despite this cacophony of moral questioning, most of my interlocutors claim that they and those around them are able to act in ways that are morally appropriate most of the time without considering their actions. I suggest this holds true for all persons and that it is this ability to be nonconsciously moral most of the time that allows humans to be social beings. Thus, it is only occasionally in everyday life that one actually has to stop and consider how to act or be morally appropriate. These moments are what I call ethics.

I will turn to ethics in a moment, but briefly want to turn back to Robbins'

theory in order to consider it in light of what I have outlined so far about the three aspects of morality. Morality as I've described it here is similar to the morality of reproduction Robbins describes within moral-value spheres in that both Robbins and I agree that morality is nonconsciously enacted. There is a significant difference, however, in how we conceptualize our respective notions of morality. Whereas Robbins conceives of society as consisting of various moral-value spheres each governed by a dominant and primary value, I conceive of morality as bounded neither by social context nor societies. In a global world we must begin to conceive of moralities that have global reach and influence. Nevertheless, morality is enacted very locally. But even in these local enactments, morality is multi-aspectual and pluralistic. If Robbins' moral actor is one who nonconsciously reproduces a single moral value within a particular context, then the moral actor within the theory I am setting out nonconsciously shifts between various aspects of morality, as well as the pluralities that constitute these aspects, within one context. Multiple and incompatible moralities are not a problem for persons in the theory of moral breakdown, because the theory takes as its starting point that such multi-aspectual plurality characterizes the human and social condition. This will become clearer in the ethnographic section below.

As I said above, ethics is what is done in those occasional moments when one calls into question any of the three aspects of morality. Ethics is a kind of stepping-away to question and work on any of the three aspects of morality. Indeed, ethics can very often question and work on more than one moral aspect, or all three, at one time. In stepping-away in this ethical moment, a person becomes reflective and reflexive about her moral world and moral personhood and what she must do, say or think in order to appropriately return to her nonconscious moral mode of being. What must be done is a process of working on the self, where the person must perform certain practices on herself or with other persons in order to consciously be and act moral in the social world. Ethics, then, is a conscious acting on oneself either in isolation or with others so as to make oneself into a more morally appropriate and acceptable social person not only in the eyes of others but also for oneself. While this view of ethics is clearly influenced by Foucault's notion of working on the self, I agree with Critchley (2007:11) that for Foucault this ethical process is aimed at self-mastery and authenticity. In contrast to this, I see the ethical process of working on the self as always open-ended and situational, and therefore as a recurring existential moment throughout one's life that can never end in self-mastery or authenticity. For this reason

I reject the *aim* of Foucault's ethics, while adopting his view of the ethical process as work on the self.

This working on oneself in what I call the ethical moment is brought about by a moral breakdown or what Foucault called problematization (2000). This occurs when some event or person intrudes into the everyday life of a person and forces her to consciously reflect upon the appropriate ethical response. Once one has experienced this moral breakdown, she works on herself by utilizing certain ethical tactics to not only return to the unreflective and unreflexive disposition of morality, but in so doing, to create a new moral dispositional person. Thus, this moment of ethics is a creative moment, for by performing ethics, persons create, even if ever so slightly, new moral personhoods and enact new moral worlds.

This ethical moment is a moment in which the multifarious aspects of local moralities, which are all part of the three aspects of morality I described above, come together to *inform* the ways in which a person works on herself. I say *inform* because none of the aspects that belong to the institutional moralities, the public discourses of morality, nor the person's own embodied dispositional morality determine how this person will work on herself in this ethical moment. While it may be true that one or several of these aspects, for example, Russian Orthodox morality, the moral teachings of one's parents, or one's own moral experiences and dispositions, will oftentimes play a very significant role (so significant that some might be tempted to say instead that it or they are determinant) in the workings of the ethical moment, nevertheless, because this is a moment of conscious reflection and dialogue with one's own moral dispositions, as well as with the other two aspects of morality, it is also a moment of freedom, creativity, and emergence.

It is because of this moment, and the way it feeds back into the social world, that not only one's own embodied moral dispositions change throughout a lifetime, but so too does the possibility arise for shifts, alterations, and changes in the institutional and public discourse of moralities. For this reason, I suggest that it is ethics and ethical practices within a moral breakdown that should draw the most attention of anthropologists of moralities. For it is by studying ethics and moral breakdowns that we can see the intersection of the various aspects of morality in the daily lives of individual persons, and see the multifarious ways in which human persons work on themselves not only to enact, but also to alter the moralities of their social worlds.

Lastly it is important to recognize that not only with all three aspects of morality, but so too with the practice of ethics, there is always a range of pos-

sibilities that define the recognizable options for what counts as either morality or ethics. Similar to how MacIntyre (1989, 1991) has characterized tradition as consisting of a recognizable range of debate over its key concepts, ends, and practices, so too with morality and ethics. It is this range of possibilities that is altered, even if ever so slightly, by the creative and free process of ethics.

What I call ethics is similar to what Robbins calls the morality of freedom in that both of us posit this as conscious moments of freedom and choice. The difference, however, is that Robbins seems to describe these moments as relatively rare and occurring for the most part due to major disruptions to a society, such as in times of social change, while I suggest that ethics is a regular and normal part of social life. I have argued that morality is usually unquestioningly enacted, nevertheless, ethics is the necessary conscious work that allows for the cultivation of embodied and nonconscious morality. In other words, in order for there to be such a morality, ethics must be regularly performed. As I argued in the last section, it is not clear how and if a person stuck in Robbins' morality of freedom can return to the morality of reproduction. In the theory of moral breakdown, on the other hand, the ethical moment of the breakdown is defined by the very process of intentionally working oneself back into nonconscious morality.

In this section I have laid out an anthropological theory of morality that differs significantly from Robbins' theory despite some similarities. The two most significant differences are as follows. Firstly, in contrast to Robbins' view that society consists of separate, distinct, and contextualized moral-value spheres each governed by a primary value, I contend that every social context has multi-aspectual moralities that are themselves pluralistic. That is, every social context allows for a range of possible moralities. Therefore, within any particular context each person has several moralities available as a means to morally live-through that context. Secondly, in contrast to Robbins' morality of freedom that only comes about due to a major disruption in everyday life and possibly leaves a person stuck in a state of perpetual moral torment, I contend that ethics is a normal and necessary part of everyday life because it is the work done that allows for morality as I've described it above. These ethical moments of breakdown occur when for one reason or another the range of possible moralities available do not adequately 'fit' the context. In these breakdowns a shift of consciousness occurs in which a person or persons must consciously and creatively find a way to be moral. In the next section I will offer an ethnographic example from my research in Moscow that illustrates this anthropological theory of moralities.

### **The Morality and Ethics of Lying**

Although to some extent moral questioning characterized much of the post-war period in the Soviet Union (e.g., Binyon 1983; Field 1996; Yurchak 2006), much like with the Urapmin described by Robbins, major social and cultural change brought about by the fall of the Soviet Union increased and made more public these expressions of moral uncertainty. This came about because beginning in the late-perestroika years and continuing through the 1990s into the 2000s, Russia experienced a sudden expansion of the range of possible institutional and public discourses of moralities. No longer did the Communist Party hold a monopoly on a publicly allowable morality. Thus, for example, institutions from the Russian Orthodox Church to Hari Krishna to Evangelical Protestants, from the Yeltsin regime to the World Bank to fascist political movements all offered themselves as providing a new institutional morality for a new world. Similarly, such public discourses of moralities as capitalist materialism and work ethic, freedom of sexuality and personal expression, the return to aristocratic virtues, and a wave of new media expressing a wide diversity of moral discourses all suddenly became available to Russians. This sudden and unexpected expansion of the range of moral possibilities led to what I called above a moral breakdown, and thus, the post-Soviet period has also been characterized by a palpable concern by individuals to ethically work on themselves (Ries 1997:119; Fitzpatrick 2005). As an anthropologist interested in morality, I found this a perfect opportunity to research how persons' social experience informs their moral conceptions and dispositions, and began life-historical research in Moscow in 2002. This research focused primarily on five persons and how their life histories provided a way to understand the process by which they came to conceive and embody morality in certain ways (Zigon 2006, 2008b). In the rest of this article, I will show how rather than considering the workplace, as Robbins might, as a moral-value sphere primarily governed by one moral-value, Olya and Larisa, two of the people with whom I did this research, carry over in their embodied dispositions several influences from a variety of the above-mentioned institutional and public discourses of moralities into this social arena. In doing so, they have available to them a range of moral possibilities for ethically working through any breakdowns that may occur there.

Olya and Larisa are best friends. They met at university in 1995 and have been friends ever since. Interestingly they maintain their friendship despite some very real differences. While Olya is a dedicated member of her Russian Orthodox parish, attending at least two services a week and singing in the



choir, Larisa, after trying for about a year to find her faith, no longer considers herself an Orthodox Christian. When I first met Larisa in the fall of 2002 she was in the midst of this struggle to become Orthodox and attended church services about twice a month and then often only out of a sense of obligation. Although Larisa considered herself an Orthodox believer, it was a struggle for her to live the kind of life she thinks a believer ought to live. For this reason she often deferred to Olya as the true believer of the two and the one who lives a truly Christian life, and thus as she puts it, is a better person. Therefore, while both Olya and Larisa have been influenced by Russian Orthodox institutional morality, Olya has been much more so than Larisa.

As a 27-year-old, single woman living in Moscow, Larisa is perhaps the perfect image of the so-called post-Soviet, modern Russian woman. Being unmarried, economically self-sufficient, highly motivated, and an avid shopper for clothes and perfume in many of the foreign boutiques in Moscow, Larisa epitomizes many of the post-Soviet youth who live a life that was not available ten years ago. And like many other post-Soviet women Larisa has come to consider her career a priority in her life, as well as considering the ideal woman a career-oriented woman (Kotovskaia & Shalygina 1996:123). This way of thinking is radically different from just a few decades ago, but as she put it to me, 'Jarrett, I grew up in Russia not the Soviet Union.' It is a life she knows to be different not only from that of the past but also from many of her contemporaries such as Olya. We can say, then, that Larisa has been significantly influenced by the public moral discourses of consumerism and capitalism, and as we will see below, has to a great extent come to embody in her moral habitus what she considers a significant aspect of the latter.

Olya, also 27 and unmarried, has been a very strong Russian Orthodox believer and active member in her parish since she was sixteen. Other than her job, most of her days are filled with church activities, such as choir practice or volunteering to care for elderly members of the community. When I first met Olya she was a language teacher at a private high school, and supplemented her income with private lessons in the evening. Eventually, Larisa helped Olya get a job in the office where she works, so that now these two best friends work together so closely that their desks face one another. Much as Olya had once tried to introduce Larisa to an Orthodox life, now Larisa is helping Olya orient herself to the world of business and office life. What became clear to me over the years that I have known them is that both have significantly influenced the moral conceptions of each other. In the rest of this section I will give just one example of how this is so, and in

doing so offer it as an illustration of the anthropological theory of moralities that I sketched above.

This interview took place one evening in the winter of 2005 in their office after their co-workers had left for the day. Because each of them works such long hours, meeting here at nine at night was the most convenient time and place for all of us to come together. It also provided me with an opportunity to see their workplace and how they interact in this space. After making tea we sat together at their desks and began our interview. Eventually I turned to the topic that Larisa had focused on in many of our interviews and conversations, that of lying. In particular I wanted to see how Olya reacted to Larisa's claim that it is necessary to lie in the workplace. Surely, I thought, Olya would disagree with Larisa, for it runs counter to Olya's strict conception of what she calls the morality of God, which is her own reflective public discourse of her interpretation of Russian Orthodox institutional morality. As becomes clear in the following, I was quite mistaken.

JARRETT Larisa has told me about her discovery of the importance of what she calls bluffing in the work place, which is maybe a nice way of saying that you have to lie at work to be successful or to make others think that you are perfect, I was wondering what you (Olya) think of this?

OLYA Yes, Larisa has succeeded in this...

LARISA (*interjection*) I told you!

OLYA ...and she tries to teach me to do it. And of course I appreciate that she tries, and I see that it is important to be successful here.

JARRETT But this does not seem to match very well with your religious beliefs.

OLYA And that is why I'm not very good at this. Sometimes I will admit right away that I made a mistake...

LARISA (*interjection*) Yes, and she looks stupid when she does this...

JARRETT So for you [Larisa], for example, it is ok to lie to your boss because you don't consider it lying to him as a person but to him as a boss?

LARISA Yes, to lie to him is like lying to a doll, a working doll. But the same boss, if I go out with him, for instance, and he asks about something in his personal life, I would never lie to him because he is another person in this instance, he is not a boss but a person... work is not separate, it is a part of life, but it is an unnatural part of your life...

JARRETT So because you consider work an unnatural part of life, somehow the morality that you live according to in life doesn't count here?

OLYA Yes, that is right . . .

LARISA Well maybe not major lies. For instance I have the opportunity to, every day I have large amounts of money in my hands and I never steal this because I think it is dishonest. For me this is a major lie. But lies, for instance, when they ask you if you did something and you didn't but you say you did, but this is not lying this is protecting.

OLYA Preventing them from being worried about nothing.

LARISA (*speaking to Olya*) I told Jarrett that when you are honest at work, for instance if D. (the boss) comes up and asks if you have done this, and you say no, then he begins to worry.

JARRETT So you (Olya) agree with that?

OLYA Yes, absolutely.

JARRETT So when you tell this lie to D. it is to protect him or to keep the responsibility for yourself.

LARISA Yes, and you know, maybe lying is an exaggeration. At first you should try to generalize as much as possible so that your answer will be in line with reality but still will not cause him any worries. But if you cannot do this, then you should lie.

JARRETT Is this difficult for you (Olya) since you seem to be stricter about this?

OLYA I'm not as good at this as Larisa, but of course sometimes I will say that I have done something even when I haven't, just so they won't worry. But my nature is that I can't invent these lies very quickly and I even get confused sometimes, so when this happens I can't go against myself.

JARRETT Then it is just easier to tell the truth?

OLYA Yes.

JARRETT But I noticed that when I arrived here today and you had to come get me, you had to tell a little lie to the security guard.

OLYA Ah yes . . .

LARISA (*interjection*) What did you tell him?

OLYA The security guard asked who you were and why I should let him in,

and I told him that you are our colleague and that we have to do some work.

LARISA You see, this is a perfect example of what I'm talking about. It is totally innocent. It leads to nothing, well it leads only to good things – that you were let in. And who cares who you are, you will not destroy this building.

OLYA You are not a terrorist.

JARRETT I understand that this is ok for you [Larisa], but I'm a bit more surprised with Olya. For example, the Bible says do not lie, this covers all situations doesn't it?

OLYA Well yes, but sometimes it happens. Life demands it.

JARRETT So you are willing to go against some of your principles when needed?

OLYA Yes, for example, if I didn't say this then you would still be sitting down there...

Here we see how each of their own public discourses of moralities, that is, the articulation of their already embodied moralities, both overlap and diverge as they express the plurality of the range of possible ways of being moral in their workplace. Both agree that sometimes lying at work is, if not necessary, then convenient because it helps alleviate possible tension, worries, and concern. But whereas Larisa recognizes this aspect of it, she tends to focus more on how lying is a way of maintaining responsibility for herself and her own work, as well as presenting an image of capability and success. As she put it, she does not want to look stupid by being too honest around the office as she accuses Olya of being. Olya, on the other hand, recognizes Larisa's concerns about responsibility and image, but tends to focus more on lies as a means of protection. As Olya said later in the interview: 'I have tried to learn to say things that are not true when I need to, but I would not call this a lie, but protection. Just some phrases that protect you like some safe clothes.'

The protective clothes of the lie not only protect her, but also protect her co-workers. First, by learning to tell lies Olya protects her bosses and others in the office from being overly concerned with whether or not the work will be done on time, properly, and if she can handle the task. Secondly, and related to the first, Olya realizes that she can protect herself by lying. That is, by not causing her co-workers to question her ability to do the work, Olya is able to protect herself from being considered a poor worker. This, however, is

something that she is still learning and has not mastered as Larisa has. We can say, then, that while Larisa has already acquired the embodied moral disposition of lying in the workplace, Olya is still ethically training herself to embody this new disposition. Therefore, while Olya is ethically working-through a moral breakdown in the workplace, Larisa is not.

Olya admits that Larisa is better at lying than she is. She is better because it is part of her 'nature.' Although Olya doesn't explicitly say that the capacity to lie with ease is part of Larisa's 'nature,' she suggests this by saying that her own difficulty with lying is due to her own 'nature.' In referencing her own 'nature' as why she is unable to lie with ease, Olya is indicating her embodied moral disposition that she has cultivated over a lifetime and which is now in the process of an ethical transformation as she has entered a new arena of social experience. Because of her 'nature,' Olya sometimes gets confused and cannot lie very quickly. Her embodied sensibility for truth-telling reacts against the cultivation of seemingly opposite dispositions. In these moments it is much easier and 'natural' for Olya to simply speak the truth and risk worrying her co-worker, looking 'stupid,' and potentially putting her job in jeopardy. Her success in this arena and her ability to return to a morally comfortable world of unquestioned action, the world in which Larisa seems to be able to live because of her 'nature,' depends upon the success of this ethical work on herself to cultivate a new moral disposition.

When I pointed out, however, how easily and smoothly she was able to lie to the security guard when I arrived, Olya relied on the contingencies of life to explain her act. Sometimes 'life demands it' she told me. In such moments, as I observed, Olya is able to easily tell what Larisa calls an innocent lie in order to make things go smoothly. As she put it, I am not a terrorist so there is no good reason that I cannot enter the building. Such a lie will not harm anyone, I am told. These are the kinds of lies Larisa believes are just fine to tell, if not necessary. Unlike these innocent lies, Larisa claims she would never tell a major lie such as stealing money from the project's budget. While this is what she claims, I do know that she has forged several documents to cover up her own as well as her boss' errors. Therefore, not all the lies are so innocent.

Be that as it may, since Larisa began controlling the work budget her older brother has been urging her to steal money from the project. Larisa will not do this. Not necessarily because it is dishonest, but primarily because it would risk her future in the work world. As Larisa put it during a casual conversation on the topic, 'my brother has this Soviet mentality that be-

believes he should get as much as he can from his work place right now, while I (Larisa) have the more modern mentality that by being a good worker I can eventually get more from my hard work than from stealing.' Whether or not this distinction is overly stereotypical, the fact remains that Larisa draws an important line between what she considers an appropriate lie or not, and does so by contrasting what I would call two opposing public discourses of morality – the so-called hoarding morality of socialism and the 'hard-worker' morality of capitalism.

Returning to Olya's ability to lie easily to the security guard, the question is begged: if Olya can so easily tell such a lie in the situation with the security guard, then why not with her boss? Perhaps because, despite her desire to be considered a good worker, she does not consider the workplace to be on par with the demands of real life. This is, after all, how Larisa would put it. Both Olya and Larisa agree that work is a different world, a different game than real life, and thus requires different moral sensibilities. But this difference does not, as Robbins might suggest, necessitate that it is a completely different moral-value sphere from other parts of life. Rather, it simply requires an embodied shift to the appropriate already cultivated moral dispositions. Thus, while this difference between real life and work allows Larisa to so easily lie in the office because she already has cultivated such dispositions, it is difficult for Olya because she is still in the ethical process of such cultivation.

One tactic that helps Olya cultivate this new morality is relating it to aspects of her already embodied morality. Thus, while Olya recognizes that by occasionally lying she might be more successful, success does not matter to her nearly as much as it does to Larisa. Unlike Larisa, this cannot be the motivation for Olya lying. Therefore, while Larisa tends to focus on lying in order to preserve her image and sense of responsibility, Olya claims it is a way of protecting others from worrying. Thus, when Olya lies at work, it is for the sake of protecting her co-workers from unnecessary concern. It is an act for the sake of the other, which does fit her already cultivated morality.

But this may not always be enough for her to go against her 'nature' of her already embodied morality. Thus, at times she becomes confused and cannot easily or quickly lie. On the other hand, when confronted with the possibility that I might not be allowed into the building, Olya was able to quickly and easily lie to the security guard. But why so easily? I had come to their workplace to meet them because Olya had been so busy recently that she was unable to meet with me anywhere else. Thus, I was there because she had asked me to come. She had also been putting off the meeting for

nearly a month. Olya, then, probably felt a sense of obligation toward me and was unwilling to let a young, overly zealous security guard get in the way of us doing what I had come to do. Olya, therefore, lied. Life demanded it. Interestingly, then, we see that Olya's already embodied morality allows for lying in some instances even outside the workplace. We will see below how this might have come to be.

If work, according to Larisa, is an unnatural part of life, then its demands for lying are less palpable for Olya. She may do so to protect herself from the scorn of her co-workers or to protect them from unnecessary worrying, but for Olya these concerns have more to do with the real life-like human relations between her and her co-workers, than with the space of work. Unlike Larisa, Olya recognizes that even in the space of work she is engaged in real relations with other persons, and thus struggles with the question of to lie or not. For Larisa, on the other hand, she is not engaged in human relations, but rather in relations with 'working dolls' or 'machines.' Dolls and machines do not merit moral obligations, rather they are simply pawns in a game, the goal of which is to successfully accomplish your tasks and to look good doing so. Larisa's view shows that what I call morality need not be morality in the traditional sense of good and bad or right and wrong. Rather, it might be more appropriate to say that morality can at times simply be the way in which persons and institutions are able to existentially be in the social world comfortably.

Larisa is able to support this position in a number of ways. First, like Olya, she also claims to be lying partly to protect her co-workers from unnecessary worry. But she also claims that she does it because these are the rules of the game. She has learned it, so she told me later in our conversation, from men, the ones who have established these rules and control this unnatural world. Indeed, her boss D., so Larisa claims and Olya agrees, only works as hard as he does in order to prove that he is right about certain things he says and does. In other words, he only works hard in order to maintain an image. Thus, Larisa also lies because this is part of the game. She further rationalizes her lying by emphasizing that this is something she only does in the workplace. While she might lie to her boss at work because there he is a 'working doll,' when they see each other outside of work, which does happen on occasion, Larisa will never lie to him. Outside of work, outside of that particular game, D. is intersubjectively transformed from a boss to a person. As a person, Larisa is unable, so she claims, to lie to him. Thus, Larisa defends her morality of lying at the workplace by claiming that she



is simply acting according to what she sees as the already established public discourse of morality of the capitalist workplace.

Nevertheless, both Larisa and Olya's distinction between the workplace and real life brings to mind a similar distinction social scientists observed in the late-Soviet period. For example, Kharkhordin has claimed that everyday life in the late-Soviet period was characterized by dissimulation practices that came to constitute the public/private divide (1999:270), and Yurchak has convincingly argued that the performative enactment of official discourse and practice played a significant role in the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union (2006). At first glance it would appear that such a legacy of distinctions may support Robbins' theory of distinct moral-value spheres. I would argue to the contrary, however, that, on the one hand, it reveals the ways in which public discourses of morality from the past continue unrecognized in the present as aspects of individual's embodied moralities, as well as local public interpretations of capitalist morality. On the other hand, this legacy shows, and as Yurchak's analysis clearly reveals, embodied moralities are carried across into different social contexts. Thus, just as Yurchak shows how the embodied morality of responsibility was carried by his late-Soviet informants from a social context of friendship over to a context of a Komsomol meetings or the workplace (2006:109), so too, as I have shown above, Olya's already embodied morality significantly influences how she behaves in her new workplace and the kind of ethical work she does on herself in order to feel more morally comfortable in this new context.

### Some Closing Words

Here we have seen an example of the complexity of people's moral lives. This example illustrates how within one social context, in fact within a social context that Robbins might call a sphere governed by one primary moral value, there are competing and negotiable conceptions and acts of what counts as morality. Furthermore, this example illustrates various possibilities of all three (institutional, public discourses, and embodied) of the aspects of moralities I outlined above, as well as ethics. Additionally, as I argued at the end of the last section, it also reveals the way in which moralities from the past remain influential in the present, even if unrecognized. Thus, for example, we have seen how Russian Orthodox institutional morality influences Olya, the desire to avoid the public moral discourse of the socialist work influences Larisa, even if aspects of socialist morality remain unrecognizably influential, and the public moral discourse of the capitalist work influences both Larisa and

Olya to differing degrees. We have also seen how Olya ethically works on herself in the conscious attempt to fully cultivate and embody this capitalist work morality.

This notion of a range of possibilities becomes even more important for understanding persons' moral lives when we realize that despite what Olya and Larisa claim in this interview, this is not the end of the story. For I have observed them both lying and heard stories that support these observations that further complicate the issue. Larisa has lied in ways that she claims were morally appropriate on numerous occasions, including to myself, outside of the workplace. And Olya regularly lies to her brother, with a priest's blessing I should add, to protect him from committing such sins as stealing money from her, which he has done on several occasions. It is clear that the range of possibilities that constitute the morality of lying extends beyond the social context of the workplace, and further complicates the task of attempting to draw moral boundaries around certain social contexts.

I may be oversimplifying Robbins' view, but it would seem that according to his theory Larisa and Olya's workplace, and perhaps all of labor and economy, would be one singular and distinct moral-value sphere incompatible with any other. If so, then this sphere would be characterized by a dominant value of perhaps 'truth-telling,' or more interestingly, 'lying.' But as is seen from this example, this is clearly not the case. Truth-telling and lying are situationally negotiated, questioned, and worked-through in different ways by different persons within and beyond this social context. There is no dominant value that persons feel compelled to follow, but rather there is a range of possibilities for morally and ethically acting.

Similarly, unlike with Robbins' theory where the distinct moral-value spheres stand in such opposition to one another that persons are seemingly left in a state of constant moral questioning when stuck betwixt and between them, this example shows how persons carry with them from one context to another the various moral dispositions and sensibilities they have acquired throughout a lifetime. Finding oneself in a context of moral breakdown and questioning, as with Olya in this example, does not leave her perpetually in moral torment, but instead provides an opportunity for her to ethically work on herself to find new and creative ways to fit her already embodied morality into the new context, as well as how to recreate her moral habitus so that she acquires new dispositions and sensibilities adapted to the new workplace. It goes without saying that these new moral dispositions and sensibilities would then be available to her if and when needed in other, non-workplace, social

contexts for nonconscious use. That is, until once again Olya finds herself in a position of moral breakdown and must, yet again, alter her moral way of being in the world through conscious ethical work.

There is no doubt that Robbins has contributed significantly to the anthropology of moralities, and in particular for showing one way that we can conceive of individual and social moral worlds as consisting of both a non-consciously enacted morality and conscious attempts to be moral, or what I call ethics. In this article, I have tried to point out what I see as some of the shortcomings of his theory, and have offered an alternative theory that I suggest better captures the complexity of social and moral life. Although here I have focused on how the theory of moral breakdown is applicable to individual persons in a specific social context, I have argued elsewhere that it can also help describe and explicate larger societal-wide moral breakdowns not only in Russia but elsewhere as well (Zigon 2007). This is so because as a theory it does not simply describe the moral world of individuals or a society, and as such perhaps may only be pertinent to the post-Soviet Russian context, but instead offers a general framework for understanding the processes by which morality may become possible in the first place within any society as a human way of being in the world. Because of this, the theory of moral breakdown does not necessitate radical cultural change for explaining moral questioning, but instead recognizes that what I call ethics is part of everyday social life. That is, it recognizes that to live a human life is to spend a lifetime shifting between morality and ethics.

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### Notes

1. Robbins follows Weber and uses the term value sphere. However, in this article I use the term moral-value sphere to describe Robbins' usage because I believe it more accurately captures what he intends. It also, I suggest, makes a more clear distinction between his view and that of both Weber and Dumont.
2. I use aspect in the phenomenological sense of one of many that when put together

construct what is considered a whole. For example, the perception of two sides (aspects) of a cube allow for the cognitive construction of the whole of the cube although all the sides are never perceived.

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