

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### ALEKSANDRA VLADIMIROVNA

So far each of my interlocutors has been from what we might call the first post-Soviet generation. That is, those persons living in Russia today who are around thirty years old. While we have seen some differences in terms of the intensity of the influence on each of them of the wave of global images, rhetorics, ideas, and practices that hit post-Soviet Russia, it is fair to say that all of them have had their life trajectories significantly shaped by this transnational context of global assemblages (Ong and Collier 2005). The person portrayed in this chapter, Aleksandra Vladimirovna, however, differs from the others in that she is a generation older and therefore her life trajectory was primarily shaped in the Soviet period. Thus, while one particular trip to England and reading world literature and religious books have had particular influence on reshaping her post-Soviet moral personhood, her embodied morality was mostly cultivated within the Soviet context. It will be of particular interest in this chapter and again in the concluding chapter, then, to notice to what degree Aleksandra Vladimirovna's moral narratives coincide or diverge from the narratives portrayed above.

Aleksandra Vladimirovna is a fifty-one year-old woman, who although still officially married has not lived with her husband in nearly ten years. She does, however, still live with her only child, her son Oleg who is in his mid-twenties 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. Since she usually teaches classes at the institute on weekday evenings, Aleksandra Vladimirovna supplements her low teacher's salary by tutoring university students, children, and professionals in her free time during the afternoon and weekends, and in the spring of 2004 began teaching part-time at a private elementary school, in which are enrolled children of some of the richest individuals in all of Russia. Despite her very busy schedule, she felt it was her duty to meet with me and help with my research. For Aleksandra Vladimirovna believes that it is her fate to pass the word of God to as many people as possible.

In fact, as with the Branch Davidian James Faubion interviewed, Aleksandra Vladimirovna once told me that even though it is often difficult to find time to speak with me or to speak of such personal issues, she believes God had sent me to act as a messenger to spread her experiences to others in order to help them (Faubion 2001a: 158). Thus, what follows serves two purposes, that of my own intention of a moral portrait and that of Aleksandra Vladimirovna.

Aleksandra Vladimirovna is a dedicated teacher and has loved to study foreign languages since childhood. This love, so she once told me, comes from her mother, who worked as an interpreter in the Soviet military. As a child her mother would often speak to Aleksandra Vladimirovna in German and English, as well as read her fairy tales in both languages and Russian. These moments made a lasting impression on her as she spoke of them as some of her most cherished childhood memories. She also mentioned that these fairy tales taught her a lot about how to behave and act properly. Most importantly, Aleksandra Vladimirovna said that it struck her as a child that many of these fairy tales from different countries had similar themes and lessons, and because of this she thought from an early age that all peoples must have some shared ideal of how individuals should act and treat one another. This is a notion that she still holds today.

This notion was supported by her grandmother, her mother's mother, who was "a very religious woman." Like many others of her generation (Pankhurst 1996: 142–3), it was from her grandmother that Aleksandra Vladimirovna as a child learned 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 1990's. It was also because of her grandmother's religious convictions that her father, a Soviet military officer of some importance, and her mother were illegally married by a priest in a church and Aleksandra Vladimirovna was illegally baptized as a child. Today, Aleksandra Vladimirovna attributes her own heightened sense of morality and positive moral dispositions to these familial circumstances. As a practicing Orthodox, Aleksandra Vladimirovna follows the Church's stance that a church wedding and baptism are integral to a good family (ROC 2000: 47–56). Because her parents took the risk of a church wedding and baptism during the time of Stalin, she was born into a blessed family and has benefited from God's grace.

It also helped that Aleksandra Vladimirovna was born into a high-ranking military family that was stationed for most of her childhood

in East Germany. Because of this Aleksandra Vladimirovna enjoyed many of the perks due to a family of such status. Thus, for example, Aleksandra Vladimirovna and her family lived in their own, noncommunal apartment, had access to some of the highest quality vacation resorts in the Soviet Empire, and were able to send her to the best Soviet schools that eventually led her to Moscow State University. One aspect of this high road of education was the many pioneer and youth camps that Aleksandra Vladimirovna attended throughout her childhood and youth. In these camps, which she remembers with fondness and believes should still be available to children today, Aleksandra Vladimirovna was taught at an early age the values of Communist society. These pioneer camps, and this is especially true of the ones for the children of elites, represented to many, in the words of Paul Thorez, the son of the French Communist Party leader Maurice Thorez, “paradise on earth ... the end-point of history. It was the achievement yet to come, the world to struggle for” (Thorez 1991: 145).

It was here that Aleksandra Vladimirovna learned the importance of teamwork and fellowship, the primacy of social goals over personal goals, and the organizational skills necessary to accomplish them. But she also learned that none of this was possible without self-discipline. An individual became a good Soviet person not only through the external discipline imposed by teachers and leaders as Makarenko taught, but also through the self-training that was embodied by means of this external disciplining (Oushakine 2004: 414–15). It was taught to all of these children that the glory of the Soviet Union would only come about through the disciplined hard work of the new Soviet man. Aleksandra Vladimirovna from a very early age was trained to be one of these self-disciplined agitators. This personal characteristic was easily transferred to her life as an Orthodox Christian in the 1990s, and today she sees it as her mission to spread the word of God to as many people who will listen.

With this childhood it was only a matter of time before Aleksandra Vladimirovna was asked to join the Party. In 1970 one of her professors at Moscow State University recommended Aleksandra Vladimirovna for membership in the Communist Party. This honor was bestowed upon her at an unusually young age, and as she put it, “even some of my professors weren’t yet asked into the Party.” As a young member of the Party and the Komsomol, she helped organize youth events such as dances, social-economic events such as helping with the crops, and

educational events such as going door to door explaining the recently mandated Moral Code of the Builders of Communism. Aleksandra Vladimirovna remembers this Code as an exemplary instance of the deep moral values of Communism and the kind of world she was working for. Even now, over thirty years later, she still claims to think of this Code, so similar to the Ten Commandments, as outlining the foundations of any morally good society.

The code was originally promulgated in 1961 by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and was held up by both the Soviet leaders and Soviet moral philosophers as an outline of the “all-human” morality of communism. According to De George the code was a general set of principals that does not explicitly offer a guide to practical, real life conduct and thus requires interpretation (De George 1969: 87). Because of this, like with the Ten Commandments, the Code was perhaps better thought of as “educative [and promoting] those qualities which are in some way important or distinctive to socialist morality and so need special emphasis, repetition, and inculcation” (De George 1969: 87). The “Moral Code of the Builders of Communism” was highly publicized throughout the sixties and early seventies and was used as the foundation for moral and ethical teaching at the time. When considered as an educative tool, the Code can be thought of, as Kharkhordin argues, as just one of many attempts throughout the twentieth century by the Soviet regime to compel Soviet citizens to train themselves into new Soviet men and women (Kharkhordin 1999).

As a child Aleksandra Vladimirovna was taught the Code. As a Pioneer she received special instructions on it. When she eventually became a member of the Komsomol she went out with other members going from apartment to apartment explaining the teaching and uses of the Code. As a leader in the Komsomol she often had to settle disputes between other members, a process she told me she tried to govern with mutual respect for the participants and use the principles of the Code as a guide for her decisions. Once when telling me of her childhood and young adult years, Aleksandra Vladimirovna said: “we were brought up to be moral (*moral’nyi*). And by the way, there was a code of morality of the Communist Party – it was very, very moral.” Indeed, she went on to tell me that this Code should be interpreted to express moral values shared by all humans. “Yes,” she said, “Communism is a very moral ideal. We all believed in the brotherhood of humanity.” Even though she is no longer a communist, she still believes this today and continues to try to teach it to her students.

For twenty years Aleksandra Vladimirovna lived the life of a good member of the Soviet intelligentsia. She supported the goals of the system, despite the recognizable flaws of the regime. She took her job as a university professor of foreign languages serious and continued to participate in various Party organizations and events. Thus, although it has been argued that many people during the late-Soviet period took a cynical stance toward their participation in official and public life (Yurchak 1997), Aleksandra Vladimirovna actively and enthusiastically involved herself in this life. Things slowly began to change, however, in the late-1980s when she spent time in England as a visiting scholar. She had already begun to take an interest in what she now calls the occult, so when she had the opportunity in England to join a small group of teachers practicing Raja yoga, Aleksandra Vladimirovna took advantage of the chance to learn more about “the spiritual world.”

This moment in her life signaled the beginning of a radical change in lifestyle and belief for Aleksandra Vladimirovna. Upon her return to Russia she spent the summer at her dacha more or less alone reading about and practicing yoga, meditation, and fasting. By the time the summer was over Aleksandra Vladimirovna knew that she had discovered something that was always missing from her life – God. When she returned to Moscow at the end of the summer she began to seek out some of the various so-called spirituality cults that were becoming so popular all over Russia in the late years of the Soviet Union (Borenstein 1999), and which were a significant part of the religious renaissance I described in Chapter One. Aleksandra Vladimirovna joined several of these groups which combined aspects of all the world’s major religions, as well as aspects of astrology, numerology, and animism. By 1990 Aleksandra Vladimirovna could no longer accept the Party’s stance on religion and resigned from the Party despite her still strong feelings for the positive characteristics of their values and accomplishments. But by this time Aleksandra Vladimirovna had found new values and new ways of living them. In other words, she was increasingly influenced by the widening range of possibilities for institutional and public discourses of morality in the late-Soviet Union, and actively working on herself in an ethical process of self-transformation.

Soon afterwards, however, she began to feel as if the values and practices of these various spirituality groups were leading her astray. It was no longer clear to her that these disparate practices and beliefs were delivering what they promised. More and more Aleksandra Vladimirovna began to realize that the only true path to God was through the Russian

Orthodox Church. By 1994 she had all but given up on the various spirituality groups and dedicated herself, along with so many other Russians at this time, to the Church. But unlike many of the others who came to the Church at this time in the mid-1990s, Aleksandra Vladimirovna remains today a dedicated and active member. In many ways she continues to use the embodied moral skills of self-discipline she learned during the mid and late-Soviet years for her personal and proselytizing practices with the Church. For today she not only strictly monitors her own behavior and thoughts so as to keep them in line with what she calls the morality of God, but she also spends a significant amount of time and money passing out Orthodox literature and cassette tapes with lectures and sermons to those she deems in need of their message. I was but one of the many to whom she gave such materials.

*It is dawn*

Throughout all of our conversations each of these experiences of Aleksandra Vladimirovna are often visible contributing to the depth of her narratives. One such example is from an interview we had in November of 2002. I had asked her about the perceived increase of violence in the post-Soviet years and she went on to tell me that this was caused by the social instability felt by many Russians and the hopelessness and immorality this feeling brings about. I asked her about this feeling of hopelessness and its relation to how Russians act.

JARRETT - You mentioned that people have lost hope and that they don't have examples of how to live a life, how to act, who do you think should provide that?

ALEKSANDRA VLADIMIROVNA (A.V.) - I think it is being restored now. We had ten years of confusion, of mess, and now there is going to be some restoration. People in the government are beginning to talk about it and now they try to encourage such things. They encourage all sorts of initiatives in the schools and the provinces and various places, to set up any organizations that are useful to children. So it is both from above and from the local places themselves.

After having just told me about the social instability and lack of morality in contemporary Russia, Aleksandra Vladimirovna begins to vacillate in her characterization of it. While on the one hand people are

losing confidence, hope, and have no examples to follow, there are also signs that the government at the local and federal level are initiating what she calls a restoration (*restavratsiia*). This is an interesting choice of words, for to restore is to bring back or to set in place again. Unlike others who have talked about a restoration in the post-Soviet period, Aleksandra Vladimirovna is not talking about a restoration of the monarchy. Nor is she talking about a restoration of Soviet power. Rather, she means that initiatives are being made, mainly by the government, to provide for a more stable life for Russians, which for her is to a large extent equated with the possibility for a moral life. It seems that for Aleksandra Vladimirovna structural stability, which will eventually lead to moral stability, is brought about through top-down efforts. It is up to the government to establish the conditions for a moral society.

I continued our conversation on the gradual restoration of stability and morality in Russia by offering a possible example of the current attempts by the government to restore moral values.

JARRETT - I actually just read yesterday that Putin and the government are thinking about banning some toys from the United States and Western Europe. For example, the Barbie doll.

A.V. - I think this has little to do with the restoration.

JARRETT - You don't think that will be very helpful?

A.V. - We used to have Russian dolls and they were very nice ones. I used to live in Germany, my father was a military man, and I had very nice toys and a doll house, which was nice, and furniture and it didn't spoil me.

JARRETT - The thing with the Barbie doll, and this is a concern back in the US as well, is that she is not a very natural woman, she has a very large chest, and very thin body, people think she is overly sexual.

A.V. - I don't think children think this. This is what adults think. If you ask children I don't think they will say this. I think today there is the cult of top models. That is the ideal beauty in their eyes. They see girls in magazines, on the screen and then they see this toy. There is nothing really sexual about it for kids of ten years or something.

JARRETT - How about with women in their twenties or even teenagers? It seems that in the last ten years there has been quite an increase of sexuality in Russia. What do you think of this?

A.V. - Yes, that is true. As a Christian I see it as just another step toward the end as it is described in the Bible.

JARRETT - Toward the what?

A.V. - Toward the end. Immorality as it will proceed the end of the world. But I think it will be reduced, it was just those ten years of mess (*besporyadok*). I think the pornography on the screen will be reduced, and in books, those ten years were very special and without control. Now there is some control. More and more people are expressing their indignation for all this. There will be less. But still if it is not considered a sin, there is nothing bad about it unless you get pregnant or get some kind of disease. So it doesn't ... for many people it is not considered immoral because it is not a sin, it is just normal.

Here Aleksandra Vladimirovna seamlessly turns to the Christian perspective on contemporary Russia to help account for the rise of sexual behavior and the inability of individuals to resist the societal pressures to engage in this behavior. But the turn to this perspective did not stop her from vacillating once again on how she interprets contemporary Russia. Here it is not just instability that has led to immorality and various forms of violence, but rather it is the sin that foretells the end of the world. She immediately, however, backs off from this apocalyptic characterization. One wonders why she would do so? One possibility is that Aleksandra Vladimirovna is not the kind of person, despite her strong Christian faith, who lives by end of the world scenarios. Her entire life has been working for the betterment of the world in which she lives. Whether this work takes the form of going door to door in the late 1960's to teach the basic tenets of the Moral Code of the Builders of Communism, or her work as a Komsomol leader in settling disputes between members, or her current "mission" to bring the word of God to as many people as she can, Aleksandra Vladimirovna has invested too much of herself in her world to so easily give it up to apocalyptic visions.

Here it is possible to see how her various personal experiences have led her to balance the possibility of pessimism with optimism. While certain aspects of Christianity, such as the Apocalypse and the Fall, can be seen as pessimistic, in our discussions Aleksandra Vladimirovna is



often able to counter it with a mix of Soviet and Christian optimism. It should be pointed out as well that perhaps she is also expressing a little bit of nostalgia. In her many references to her childhood throughout our conversations, she expresses a longing for a time that is both lost and better than the present. But as Boym claims, nostalgia is not only a longing for a better past, it can also be a prospective expression of a better future (Boym 2001: xvi). Thus, it is of little surprise that she so quickly backtracks on her claim of the end of the world. There may be sin in this world, and many people may not recognize it as such, especially if they do not immediately suffer negative consequences for it, but the mess is slowly being recognized as such. And in telling herself this, Aleksandra Vladimirovna has reason to believe that life is slowly beginning to change for the better in contemporary Russia. As she told me in an interview we later had about overcoming personal failings, recognition is the first step to changing for the better. Because what she calls the post-Soviet mess is now slowly being recognized, Aleksandra Vladimirovna claims to believe that Russia can finally begin to restore itself in terms of societal and personal stability, hope, and morality. As she put it in another interview, "The worst has passed, I believe, so there is dawn already. It is dawn."

### *Spark of God*

Although Aleksandra Vladimirovna is able to pull herself back from an apocalyptic prognosis for Russia, she still maintains that for most Russians the increased sexuality of the post-Soviet years is not considered immoral or a sin. Most Russians, so Aleksandra Vladimirovna claims, do not think of their acts in terms of immorality or sin, but rather judge them based on the consequences. If one suffers from one's act, such as getting pregnant or a disease, then one might reevaluate this act as having been immoral or sinful. But if no such consequences occur, so Aleksandra Vladimirovna portrays it, then such acts are considered perfectly acceptable, or as she put it, "just normal." Aleksandra Vladimirovna continued making this distinction between those who consider such acts immoral and those who do not.

A.V. - But since about ninety percent of our society is not Christian, for most of them there is nothing bad about [the increased sexuality]. But for most people there is some idea inside them, the conscience (*sovest'*) or something, I remember I used to have it before

I was a Christian, but it is not that good. As people say, the conscience is such a fragile thing, and if you don't listen to it all the time and develop it you stop it, you won't hear its voice. And you forget about it.

Similar to Olya who made a distinction between the immoral *they* and the moral *our*, Aleksandra Vladimirovna immediately distinguishes herself from the majority of Russians. While she sees this increased sexuality as a sin that could potentially be a sign of the coming end of the world, most Russians do not. The difference rests on whether or not one is Christian; for although the non-Christian has a moral conscience, it is a conscience that is fragile and unreliable in that if one does not listen it goes away. It is a voice that calls but does not demand. There is no obligation for an individual to listen to the conscience. It is, so it would seem, nothing more than one of a multitude of opinions available to the non-Christian. In calling the conscience "not that good," Aleksandra Vladimirovna has in effect called into question what she imagines "ninety percent" of Russians believe is the foundation of their morality.

She ends the utterance with the phrase, "And you forget about it," which provides a double significance. First, the conscience can be forgotten because it is not that good, fragile, and ephemeral. The conscience, Aleksandra Vladimirovna might say, cannot be counted on in the moment of need. Secondly, in exposing the limits of the conscience Aleksandra Vladimirovna articulates another realm of morality that transcends and improves upon this moral opinion that can so easily be forgotten. She herself now only remembers that she used to have one. The very suggestion by Aleksandra Vladimirovna that she no longer has a moral conscience may raise eyebrows, but for her it is an expression of having finally understood the true morality. As she put it to me several months later: "I finally understood what it was inside me that guided my life through all those years. It is God." In claiming that she now only *remembers* having a conscience, Aleksandra Vladimirovna places her possession of it in the past, a past which she views as being somewhat morally deficient in comparison to her present way of being. In doing so, Aleksandra Vladimirovna articulates a position that is similar to Olya in that the conscience, just like Olya's social morality, stands in for a position or stage along the path of moral development that inevitably leads to the Christian morality of God.

Ironically, the conscience that Aleksandra Vladimirovna portrayed as not that good, fragile, and ephemeral is in fact God. When I responded to her characterization of the moral conscience by asking her what she thought was the origin of this conscience, she said.

A.V. - It comes from God. You know, no atheist can explain what it is. We used to have lectures on this sort of thing, and no one could explain why and what it is. But it's a spark of God (*iskra bozh'ia*).

JARRETT - Are you saying it is a part of God inside you?

A.V. - Yes, yes. We are born with it and it is His presence in us.

This helps explain the distinction Aleksandra Vladimirovna made earlier between those who rely on a conscience that is not that good and those who have moved beyond reliance on it. It now appears that it is not the conscience itself that is not that good, but the lack of knowledge of the truth of this conscience that leads one to disregard it. For non-Christians have the same spark of God (*iskra bozh'ia*) in them as do Christians, the difference is simply a matter of knowing that it is God and developing the capability to always listen and follow God as conscience. It seems that when one knows that conscience is God, what was once considered unreliable becomes absolutely obligatory. Aleksandra Vladimirovna throughout her narratives portrays herself as one who has developed this capability and as such has embodied a different, higher level of morality than those who have not yet had this realization.

The centrality of development within one's lifetime is revealed in Aleksandra Vladimirovna's use of the phrase *iskra bozh'ia* (spark of God) to describe conscience. *Iskra bozh'ia* is more commonly used in colloquial language to indicate that an individual has a talent or a gift for something, for example, an artistic talent. Much like the seed and gene of which Olya spoke, the spark of God is something with which one is born and must be developed by an individual so that this spark of God can become a fully realized talent. It is not surprising that Aleksandra Vladimirovna speaks of conscience and morality in this way. For not only does she think of herself as blessed because of the illegal church marriage and baptism that provided her with God's grace, but as will become clear soon, she also emphasizes the need to continuously work on herself so as to become a better, more Christian person.

The *iskra bozh'ia*, then, becomes a self referential concept that indexes her own experiences that she interprets as leading to her present moral way of being. I am not trying to suggest that Aleksandra Vladimirovna does not believe that the spark of God is that which one must develop in order to live a moral life, I am simply pointing out that moral concepts are much more acceptable to one when it fits with one's own experiences. Because the concept of *iskra bozh'ia* fits so well with Aleksandra Vladimirovna's life experiences, it becomes available to her not only as a truth that can be convincingly uttered, but more importantly a truth that can be convincingly lived.

### *Morality of God*

Our interview continued:

JARRETT - So you would say that God is necessary for the existence of morality.

A.V. - God is necessary. But you know, morality (*moral'*) is one thing and being Godly is another. Being moral means to act morally, not to hurt people. But you never know what is going on inside you. But being Godly means that you feel your heart full of God. You understand? As an example, you see a beggar but you are poor yourself and you do not have a ruble to give to him. But you wish him the best and you pray for him. For some outsider it will seem that you have not done anything good. But inside you have compassion and love for him. But if you give someone a hundred rubles but you are thinking 'oh you beggar, I wish you were ...' So people will think he is very moral, very moral, but in fact he is not, because his heart is full of envy and looks down on people. So morality is what we see. Sometimes it coincides with Godly behavior but not always.

JARRETT - You just said that morality is what we see?

A.V. - Yes it is the visible parts ... but it doesn't always mean that you are like that inside. Some bad people may pretend to be very nice, and in the eyes of others they will be perfect people.

JARRETT - I'm trying to understand this difference you are making between the inside and the outside, and I understand the difference when you give the example of giving the 100Rubles while

having hatred on the inside, but is it possible to be moral, or God-like, on the inside and be immoral on the outside? Is this possible?

A.V. - In extreme situations, maybe, in extreme situations. But they are so rare that you cannot call them a rule. Because if you are moral (*nravstvennyi*) on the inside, with God, you are going to please the Lord. You know there are some quotations like – he who pleases the Lord fulfills His commandments. If you have it inside, it is practically impossible to do something that is immoral. But there may be some extreme situation, for the sake of something, like saving someone or something.

JARRETT - I'm thinking of an example, let me know if you think this is appropriate. For example, if you don't want to hurt someone and don't want them to be upset, so you tell them a little lie.

A.V. - Yes, that is a difficult situation to explain.

JARRETT - So on the outside you are clearly telling a lie, and most people would consider this immoral, but on the inside you are doing it because you know this person will be very upset and you don't want to hurt them or make them do something inappropriate.

A.V. - This is a situation which people face and the more experienced I am in Christianity the more I understand that you shouldn't lie. But you should tell the truth in a different way. More comforting. It's the way that you tell the truth, somehow you can find different words. But on the other hand, there are examples from the Old Testament. For example, there was a prostitute and she told a lie, she told the soldiers that she hadn't seen the people they were looking for and she saved those people. She lied, she lied to them, but she saved the people. Or for example, partisans were kept in houses during the war, and the Germans would come and ask – well, do you have partisans here? – and the people would say – no, no, no – but it is a lie, isn't it. It is a question that actually embarrasses me, and occasionally I think about it.

Aleksandra Vladimirovna makes a distinction between the visible or public acts which are judged by others as morality (*moral'*) and the internal, nonvisible or private states that are only known by God (*nravstvennyi*). It is important to note that unlike Olya, Aleksandra

Vladimironva makes a distinction between *moral'* and *nravstvennost'*, which both translate as morality. As I have argued elsewhere, *moral'* is often associated with the social world, and this is perhaps so because it is a loan word, and *nravstvennost'* is often articulated as an embodied, emotional, and spiritual morality, and this is perhaps so due to its Russian origins (Zigon 2009c). Thus, Aleksandra Vladimirovna is articulating a common public discourse of morality when she claims that *moral'* and *nravstvennost'* are not the same, although sometimes they can coincide. What counts as *moral'* is visible, it is seen by others and it is they who judge whether or not one's act is moral, and it is this that counts in the world of sociality. Being Godly (*nabozhnyi*), on the other hand, is equated with feeling. To be Godly is to have one's heart full of God, a notion reminiscent of the Orthodox concept of *theosis* (Ware 2001: 23, 74–5), at which point the world of appearances, the world of sociality, is no longer central. The morality (*nravstvennost'*) of God, then, cannot be judged by others because it is not visible, it does not depend upon the public. Only God can know what is in the heart.

This difference between the visible and the nonvisible, and the act and feeling, could suggest a distance from the social world inherent to the morality of God. This is perhaps intimated in Aleksandra Vladimirovna's example of giving money to the beggar. But notice, she does not say the Godly person does not give money to the beggar because she is Godly, rather it is because she herself does not have the money to give. The example is not provided to suggest that the Godly person does not act in this world, but to show that the essence of Godly morality is not the visible act; that it cannot be judged by other people. Thus, Aleksandra Vladimirovna is not claiming that Godly morality is disengaged from the social world. One who is Godly can be just as engaged, and perhaps even more so, than one who is not. Indeed, Aleksandra Vladimirovna herself finds it very important to remain engaged in her social world, helping the poor and needy when she can and educating others about the life of Christ. In fact, she always carries extra money with her for what she calls "spiritual needs," so she can give to the needy or even buy Church literature for someone she thinks needs it at one of the many kiosks around the city selling such material. As Aleksandra Vladimirovna puts it, sometimes visible *moral'* and Godly *nravstvennost'* coincide. When this happens a kind of harmony has been reached between the feeling heart and the act; between the nonvisible and the visible.

But the world is complex and individuals are not always able to live this kind of harmony. For when I pressed Aleksandra Vladimirovna on this distinction she has made between visible morality and nonvisible Godliness a difficulty arises for her. If one can be Godly on the inside and visibly act amorally, which is how I read her example of not giving the 100 rubles while having compassion and love in the heart, is it possible to be internally Godly and visibly immoral? This is the question I posed to Aleksandra Vladimirovna through the example of lying to someone for the purpose of not hurting or upsetting them, an example fresh in my mind from my many conversations with Larisa on this topic. This proposal raised a dilemma for Aleksandra Vladimirovna that she could not easily overcome.

Rhetorically she attempts to deal with this dilemma in three different ways. First, by the use of reported speech (Voloshinov 2000[1929]: 115–24), Aleksandra Vladimirovna begins to try to reason away the dilemma by referencing an authoritative quote that suggests that any act motivated by a Godly heart will result in a moral act (“he who pleases the Lord fulfills His commandments”). After giving this piece of reported speech she follows with its interpretation, “If you have it inside, it is practically impossible to do something that is immoral.” Thus, by first utilizing authoritative reported speech Aleksandra Vladimirovna attempts to render my question a non-dilemma. In effect, she is saying that my question is not legitimate. When I provide a specific example, however, she must change her tactic.

Her second rhetorical tactic, then, is to moralize the problem away. She tells me that as she becomes a more experienced Christian she has learned how to most appropriately deal with such a dilemma – “tell the truth in a different way.” And indeed this may be a way to resolve the problem if the specific situation allowed for a way to both prevent the pain of the other while telling the truth. But Aleksandra Vladimirovna herself realizes that this is not always possible in very difficult situations. These situations, however, are represented by her as extraordinary and as such render the lying person heroic.

This is Aleksandra Vladimirovna’s third tactic for resolving the dilemma posed to her conception of morality. In providing me with examples of the Old Testament prostitute who lies to soldiers to save people or those who lie to Nazis to save partisans, Aleksandra Vladimirovna turns to religious and socio-historic-cultural heroic examples in order to preserve the basic foundation of the conceptual distinction she has made between the visible and the nonvisible, the

moral and the Godly. Only in extraordinary, if not heroic acts can the Godly inner world of feeling lead to an immoral public act, which in its very heroicness is rendered a moral act. Otherwise, the conceptual framework remains intact; Godly inner feelings can, in most normal cases, only lead to either moral public acts or, due to certain structural obstacles such as poverty, amoral public acts. Despite her attempt to rhetorically preserve her conceptual framework, however, Aleksandra Vladimirovna admits that this is a dilemma that “embarrasses” her and that she occasionally thinks about it.

*Prayer as ethical practice*

One can never know just how much Aleksandra Vladimirovna actually thinks about this dilemma and if it ever causes her a moral breakdown. It did, however, raise the question within our interview about the distinction between one’s moral ideals and the practical difficulties of utilizing them in real life ethical dilemmas. After Aleksandra Vladimirovna admitted her embarrassment to me, I suggested that this perhaps reveals a practical disconnect between one’s ideal moral conception and real life 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 20Rubles 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 20Rubles and they are quite happy. And I thought of the situation and I thought 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 this disconnect between her moral ideals and the complexities of real life, Aleksandra Vladimirovna does not provide an example of such an instance. Rather, she tells me how she goes about the process of making a moral decision in the moment of ethical dilemma, or a 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 moral decision making. It is tempting to act in ways that might be considered immoral by others or by oneself. It is tempting to pay twenty roubles 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 Aleksandra Vladimirovna performs the moral reasoning process.

It is of little surprise that the technique for moral reasoning Aleksandra Vladimirovna spoke about was that of prayer. As she tells it, she addresses God directly for help in a particular moment of ethical dilemma. This kind of petitionary prayer 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 she 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. "I prayed to the Lord to help me. And then *I thought of the situation* and *I decided* I was ready to pay to go to see my aunt. 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*, Aleksandra Vladimirovna 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 Aleksandra Vladimirovna can resolve the dilemma herself. As she describes it, the resolution to this dilemma appears to her as her own thought (*Ya 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 dilemma and in so doing, perhaps, further strengthened her already embodied morality and her dedication to prayer as ethical practice.

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 (Lemon 1998; Pesmen 2000b: 126–7; Caldwell 2004: 69–70)? Whatever the reason, it is around this particular dilemma that she speaks of God imposing discipline upon her and forces 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, "then no one came, so I took the money and gave it to someone, some beggar or church or something." Although it didn't strike me at the moment 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 the truth of what really happened to the money, and it certainly was not important enough to risk offending Aleksandra Vladimirovna. What is truly significant about this lacuna in her narrative, however, is that it once again raises the question of the distinction between the articulated moral conception of an individual and their everyday embodied morality and ethical practice in the moments of moral breakdown. 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.

### *Work on the self*

Prayer is not just a tactic for moral reasoning and decision making, it is also a means for Aleksandra Vladimirovna to ethically work on herself. This was revealed a few moments later in our interview as I was still trying to get clear about this distinction Aleksandra Vladimirovna had made between the visible act and the nonvisible Godly feeling. I asked her if it was possible to achieve a unity between the inner feeling and the outer act, and if so, how this was done. She replied:

A.V. - By working on yourself, by changing yourself. And this is always the most difficult thing, changing yourself.

JARRETT - How do you do that, how do you change yourself?

A.V. - Our practice in Christianity is confession. That is what I do. Every 4 to 6 weeks. I analyze the day, and as apostle Paul said, be aware, be awake. So I am aware of what I say and what I do, my motives and my thoughts. And if something I don't like appears in my head, I try to brush it away with prayer so as to make myself pure. But if it stays for some time or if I do something all of a sudden or think and don't get rid of it immediately, then in the evening I take it out. Because you know, sins are in our hearts and in our minds and in our words, not just necessarily actions, but also thoughts. Well then I confess it and try to be more critical and try

not to give way to those temptations again. So I try to keep my thoughts under control and then I catch them. And as one of the *startsy* said, if you have a bad thought it is not a sin, it is like a fly, if you brush it away it flies away immediately. But if you don't it begins to penetrate you and you begin to concentrate on it more and more and little by little it becomes a sin. So the idea is to brush it away as soon as possible. And then you have peace of mind and a peaceful heart. And then you try to pray – in the Church there is a prayer that you can say all the time and this way you will not have ideal or bad thoughts or criticisms and looking at other people and thinking – ah, look at her, there is something ... – but if you are busy then you don't even think about these things.

JARRETT - One of the things I think of immediately is the Jesus Prayer.

A.V. - Yes, that is right. And others too. You know what I noticed, when I read in the metro, I usually try to read, if it's the newspaper it's a catastrophe, because after reading for five minutes I'm absolutely broken, like a corpse, but if I read some spiritual literature, if you read prayers, I have a book of Psalms here with me, then I'm fine, I'm absolutely perfect, I'm so fresh and energetic. You know it's just so much easier to do what ever I have to. This is what I've been doing.

JARRETT - A lot of people have told me that they find dealing with anger the hardest thing about themselves to control. Do you agree with that?

A.V. - Fortunately this is not a problem for me, I can usually control my anger. And if you immediately pray then you will not give way to it. So for me it is not a problem.

JARRETT - You are lucky.

A.V. - That's because I had a happy childhood, maybe. My parents were wedded [in the Church], I don't know, they say it is important. I had a very religious grandmother, but I saw very little of her because I was away. But everything taken together, and prayers, and especially now that I am a Christian I can't even imagine some bursts of anger or loss of control.

JARRETT - How about on the inside? Do you feel anger inside you?

A.V. - No, not now. I could some years ago but not without losing control. I remember getting angry, of course. But you know what, I remember twice I struck my son when he said some bad words or something. Yes, bad words, I remember, twice, I was practically out of control. But actually the reaction was very positive on his part. (We both laugh)

JARRETT - How would you characterize appropriate relations between people? What do you expect of people around you and what do you expect of yourself?

A.V. - I should love my enemies and pray for them. Be quite easy going. I don't think I have many enemies in my life, at least not many that I know of. But I remember that if someone pushes me too much I concentrate not on my anger towards him but on not being hurt myself, and I even give myself points. So I try not to be offended myself. And I got this from a book in six volumes written by some occultist – half Christian, half something – but he proved, and this has become very popular, that our negative emotions hurt us, and cause a lot of illnesses and cause a lot of problems for us. So the idea is not to answer back but not to be hurt and to accept it and to thank him. And that is what I have been practicing doing, so whenever someone does something that I don't like, the concentration is on myself – not to be angry, or praying for the person, and even asking forgiveness for him. A priest even told me one time, if someone does something negative toward you, well ok, pray for him. That is what I do.

In order to try to achieve unity between her inner feelings and her outer actions Aleksandra Vladimirovna utilizes institutionally endorsed techniques of self-discipline. In referencing such Church figures as Paul, startsy (Church elders), and a priest, Aleksandra Vladimirovna provides her narrative explanation of her practices with the backing of the entire history of Christianity. In doing so, she is making claims not only of tradition, but of utility. Similar to how Caroline Humphrey writes of Mongolians using exemplars from history as their moral guide (Humphrey 1997: 34–8), Aleksandra Vladimirovna uses these authoritative references as a way to express that these self-disciplinary practices are proven.

By participating in regular confession and daily prayer Aleksandra Vladimirovna is able to work on herself in order to “control” her

thoughts. And it is her thoughts that she seems most concerned with. By now she has, for the most part, learned to control her outer acts. Perhaps this is why her narrative focuses on thoughts and words. Such things demand strict self-awareness so that any transgressions can be caught before they fester into fully realized sin. It is, so it seems, a developmental race. If Aleksandra Vladimirovna can utilize these tactics of confession, prayer and self-awareness to “brush away” these transgressions quickly enough, she will be able to change herself before the transgression can change itself into a sin. Similar, then, to how Reichard writes of Navaho prayer as warding off evil and allowing for the influx of good or for preserving and maintaining health (Reichard 1944), or Mahmood writing of prayer as a means of cultivating the morality of Islamic piety (Mahmood 2005), so too Alexandra Vladimirovna, at least in part, conceives of prayer as essential to maintaining and developing her moral disposition. Thus, when she reads a prayer book or Psalms on the busy metro she feels “fresh and energetic.”

But when Aleksandra Vladimirovna spoke of reading on the metro in order to keep herself “fresh and energetic,” I thought of how frustrating the Moscow metro can be. I always thought that the Moscow metro can get more crowded and pushy than any train I ever took back in New York City. This thought is what motivated me to ask her about anger. Indeed, several other people with whom I spoke talked about how angry they often get on the metro. Anger, however, is not a problem with which Aleksandra Vladimirovna must wrestle. At first she attributes her lack of anger to her happy childhood and the Church wedding of her parents, but eventually tells about the self-disciplining she goes through in order to control potential anger. Similar to how Talal Asad writes about someone he knows using numbers to structure and engage with her pain, so too Aleksandra Vladimirovna uses numbers in the form of points to control and overcome her anger (Asad 2003: 80). This use of numbers helps her to concentrate on herself and her ability to overcome the anger rather than the anger itself or the person at which the anger is directed. This tactic, unlike the Orthodox practices of confession and prayer, is taken from a volume of books that she characterizes as occult.

Here it is possible to see Aleksandra Vladimirovna utilizing an ethical tactic that she learned in her experience with the various spirituality groups to which she belonged before she dedicated herself solely to the Orthodox faith. Interestingly, Aleksandra Vladimirovna is able to

slip from a reference to this occult book straight into the claim that a priest once told her that she should pray for those who transgress against her. By seamlessly slipping across these institutionally diverse experiences within her narrative, Aleksandra Vladimirovna reveals how her own personal experience with the range of possible moral discourses available in contemporary Russia has been more significant for the way she describes her own moral experiences and self-disciplining than any one institutional or public discourse of morality.

### *Inheriting morality*

In the above narrative Aleksandra Vladimirovna attributes her lack of anger, despite also telling about the self-disciplining tactic she uses to control her anger, to her happy childhood, parents, and grandmother. It was not uncommon in our interviews for her to attribute much of her current moral and personal way of being to her family. Both of her parents were in the military, her father as an officer and her mother as an interpreter, and as such Aleksandra Vladimirovna had, in her words, a very pleasant, comfortable, and interesting childhood always surrounded by “very good people.” But this good childhood atmosphere was not enough. Her successes have also depended on what she received from her parents at birth. Unlike many others with whom I spoke, however, Aleksandra Vladimirovna did not simply conceive of this inheritance as a genetic moral foundation from which she developed her own personal moral way of being. Rather, Aleksandra Vladimirovna, similar to some Greeks with whom Herzfeld has done research (Herzfeld 1981: 564), conceives of this inheritance as the passing on of the consequences of the actions of earlier generations in her family. Because of this, Aleksandra Vladimirovna thinks of herself as being a morally good Christian person not only because she was raised in a favorable family environment, or because her parents had a Church wedding and she was baptized, but also because her parents and grandparents and earlier generations were morally good people, and thus, did not pass on to her any negative consequences of immoral acts.

All of this became clear during an interview we had in May of 2003. I told her that several people with whom I had spoken told me that morality was something with which they were born. Some had said that it was a divine seed, and others had said that it was something which was passed onto them genetically by their parents. Aleksandra

Vladimirovna agreed that one is born with something, but her explanation combined these two positions. While on the one hand every person is born with a divine seed, or what she had in an earlier interview called a spark of God, each of us are also born with the consequences of the actions of earlier familial generations. I asked her to explain this further, and she went on:

A.V. - Sinful people are punished very often through their children too. The punishment passes on. It is quite natural though, if you drink a lot or do other unhealthy things the consequences will pass on to your children. Or now they say if you have some sexual relations with someone who is not your spouse, even the doctors say, one of my students was a doctor and she was telling me that they discovered that your children suffer. That is interesting, she gave me some proofs and facts about this. It is not just an invention, a pure invention, but some very important principles that help people to be moral, it helps people to be healthy and their children to be healthy. It is interesting. So suppose that you are born in a family where your parents and grandparents were awful sinners and still are, then of course you might have some traces of character that are, I would say traces of character, it doesn't mean that you are a criminal or something like that, but maybe that you are bad tempered or something like this. But if you learn something about Jesus Christ and if you learn that he wants you to be perfect, then you will begin to take some steps. And I think that is what Jesus Christ meant when he said that each person has his own talents. But if you are born in a not so good family then it means you will probably have fewer talents, it doesn't mean that you don't have any. And those who are born in favorable circumstances have more. But the idea is that you shouldn't bury your talents in the ground, you need to make the best of it. If you have two, you should make four. If you have ten, you should make twenty. And I think that you have more responsibility when you have more. The more you have the more responsible you are. Priests are more responsible than others. But what God judges is your intention. Suppose that you don't want to be a hooligan and use bad language and you make some efforts, maybe some people don't even see them, but you know that you are trying and God sees this, you know. And that is what you are doing, you are applying your talents.



JARRETT - And what about this idea of morality as some kind of natural seed that we are born with?

A.V. - What is inside of us according to the bible is a seed, a godly, divine seed. We are born with it. All of us have it, even the worst criminals are born with it. As for the sinful nature, that comes from the first sin committed by the first man and these are the consequences of it. We have good and bad, we have both. It is up to you to decide. In any situation you can choose which side you are going to take. So you are born with a seed, a divine seed – that is the conscience by the way and not a single materialist can explain what it is but it exists, that something, no one denies that it exists. So this is the seed.

JARRETT - And does one's family and upbringing make a difference?

A.V. - There are several theories about the nature of people. Some people thought man is a Tabula Rosa, born without any inherited traits, just whatever he hears and sees is imprinted on him. But most scientists came to the conclusion that this is not true and that it is a combination of many factors. So you have the things that you are born with, and if you don't live according to it then how can you live. If you have good parents then you see the results, it is encouraged. If you don't see it around you then it will become spoiled and this very often happens. Therefore parents are responsible for upbringing the bible says, it is the greatest responsibility. In some bad families the children remain very good, they are very pure. Probably they are strong willed. In some good families some children are not so good. A lot depends on the surroundings, the parents the friends the atmosphere, so again it's a combination but if you are lucky enough to be brought up in a religious family then you will be alright.

Although Aleksandra Vladimirovna claims that the consequences of both good and bad families are passed on from generation to generation, she begins by focusing on the inheritance as punishment. To speak of the heritability of morality and its consequences as either punishment or reward, is to shift it from a mechanism of disinterested biology to an interested and involved judgment of individuals and their families. Aleksandra Vladimirovna would not hesitate to name God as the judge. This is a God that is intimately interested and involved in his creation, and Aleksandra Vladimirovna expresses this in her

shift from the divine punishment of sin to the naturalization and medicalization of this very same process. In this way, God is tied to both nature and society in Aleksandra Vladimirovna's narrative of morality. Morality, then, pervades all of being – the divine, the natural, and the social – by means of the inheritance of familial behavior. By alluding to medical science, Aleksandra Vladimirovna provides “proofs” and “facts” for the pervasiveness of God's morality. For “even the doctors say” that when one transgresses morality, the children of the transgressors suffer. It should be noted that the example of transgression that Aleksandra Vladimirovna gives, that of adultery (or premarital sex depending on how having “sexual relations with someone who is not your spouse” is read), is a transgression of both God and society's morality, which further tightens the link between the divine, natural, and the social.

This notion of the heritability of morality as a link between the divine, natural, and social is clearly described in a passage from *The Foundations of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, a Church publication given to me by Aleksandra Vladimirovna, which delineates the Church's position on various social questions.

It is important to remember that a genetic disturbance is quite often a consequence of the neglect of moral foundations, the result of a depraved way of life, as a result of which their descendants suffer. The sinful damage of man's nature overcomes spiritual efforts; if from generation to generation vice rules in the life of the progeny with increasing strength, then the words of the Saints Writings will be realized: “a terrible end awaits the unjust family.” And conversely: “The blessed man is he who fears the Lord and deeply loves His commandments. There will be great strength on the land of his family; the family will be rightly blessed” (Psalms 111, 1–2). In this way, research in the field of genetics only confirms the spiritual law which was revealed to humanity many centuries ago by the word of God (ROC 2000: 66).

This passage sheds light on Aleksandra Vladimirovna's claim that the inheritance of morality and its consequences is not “pure invention.” In this utterance she attempts to return her narrative to the divine nature of this mechanism of morality. Her claim that this mechanism is not “pure invention (*sploshnaya vydumka*)” carries with it a double meaning. On the one hand, she is denying its social construction. It has not been created by the Church or any other social institution or even by herself for that matter. The heritability of morality has been proven scientifically. But this does not mean that it should be

considered as simply a natural phenomenon. And this is the second meaning of her denial of invention. The heritability of morality is not a result of the chaotic chance of nature. Rather, it is an “important principle” given by God, a guide if you will, to “help people to be moral (*nravstvennyi*).” In this sense it is inextricably linked to the divine seed of morality, or what she called in an earlier conversation, the spark of God. This combination of the divine seed and one’s inherited moral disposition, or what she calls character, is what allows one to ethically work on oneself so as to develop into a more moral person.

After fixing the origin of morality in God, Aleksandra Vladimirovna shifts her narrative back to the family and its relationship with and influence on one’s moral foundation. Although in this narrative she does not explicitly refer to the spark of God, Aleksandra Vladimirovna does reference the parable of talents from Matthew 25:14–30 in order to talk about talents as a reflection of the state of one’s moral foundation. Although in Matthew talents refer to monetary coins, Aleksandra Vladimirovna uses talents (*talant*) in the more common way of skill or ability. As I have already noted, spark of God or *iskra bozh’ia* is more commonly used in colloquial Russian to refer to talent or skill. In this sense, we can understand Aleksandra Vladimirovna in this narrative as equating talents with moral foundations.

If this is so, then it is clear from her narrative that not every person is born with the same moral foundation. It is true, according to Aleksandra Vladimirovna, that every one is born with a divine seed that provides each of us with the capability of living morally. Or as she puts it in this narrative, to begin to take the steps to be perfect as Jesus wants. It is a capability, however, that differs between each person according to their familial history, and thus each person’s inherited moral way of being in the world. As a differentially available capacity for being morally in the world, these two combined moral foundations not only provide a possibility for each person, but also a limitation on each person. Each person can only be as moral as her “talents” allow, but it is in their hands to do their best with what they are given. The suggestion that Aleksandra Vladimirovna seems to be making, then, is that because each talent is in fact a moral foundation given by God, even those who have been predisposed with fewer talents for morality can still do their best to be moral individuals. In this way, then, even those who are being punished by their infelicitous inheritance can ultimately be saved through God’s morality.

This is possible in two ways. First, and as already suggested, by means of the individual ethically working on herself to become a more moral person. For Aleksandra Vladimirovna this is best done with the help of God. When one discovers Jesus Christ, then it becomes easier to “begin to take some steps” toward becoming a more moral person. And just as she had earlier spoken of God’s morality centered on the internal feelings and heart of the person, here she claims that these steps can be taken, at least at first, through intention alone. As Aleksandra Vladimirovna put it: “what God judges is your intention. Suppose that you don’t want to be a hooligan and use bad language and you make some efforts, maybe some people don’t even see them, but you know that you are trying and God sees this, you know. And that is what you are doing, you are applying your talents.” Just as others are not in a position to judge the Godly morality of the person who is unable to give to the beggar but prays for him instead, so too others are not in a position to judge whether or not one is attempting to use his talents, or moral foundations, to try to work on himself. Only God can ultimately judge whether or not one is working to become a more moral person.

Secondly, the cultivation of morality can be helped or hindered depending upon one’s surroundings. As Aleksandra Vladimirovna put it: “A lot depends on the surroundings, the parents, the friends, the atmosphere.” But this is where her narrative becomes a bit confused. For if one’s inherited moral foundation is already tainted by the negative consequences of the immorality of past familial generations, then how is it possible for the parents to provide a felicitous atmosphere for one’s moral development? It would seem that the parents themselves would also be marked by this same negative inheritance, if not the root cause of it, and therefore their ability to provide for one’s proper development must be called into question. As Aleksandra Vladimirovna expressed it: “If you have good parents, then you see the results, it is encouraged. If you don’t see it around you, then it will become spoiled and this very often happens.” What becomes spoiled? It can be read in two ways. First, simply one’s moral development can become spoiled by this situation. Second, and more interestingly, one’s very moral foundation can become spoiled. Thus, even if one is born with a felicitous inheritance, if the parents do not provide good examples, then the foundations can be spoiled. In either case, one’s parents are said to have a significant role in the outcome.

This confusion, however, continues one sentence later. “In some bad families the children remain very good, they are very pure. Probably

they are strong willed. In some good families some children are not so good.” Thus, despite the behavior of parents, an individual may turn out the opposite of the family atmosphere they provide. To explain this discrepancy in her own conception, Aleksandra Vladimirovna makes a quick reference to what she apparently considers as an independent essence of each individual, the will. “Probably they are strong willed,” she says. The will, then, stands in as a force that can be strong, and by extension weak, and allows an individual some leeway outside of the more deterministic mechanisms of inherited moral foundation and parentally supplied familial atmosphere. Perhaps at this point in her narrative Aleksandra Vladimirovna begins to see the confusion of her conception and attempts to render it steadfast in her closing claim: “but if you are lucky enough to be brought up in a religious family then you will be alright.” By returning to religion, and by this she means Orthodox Christianity, Aleksandra Vladimirovna attempts to solidify her description and clear away any incoherence. For her it is quite simple, if one is raised in an Orthodox family or eventually turns to God, then one will without doubt, and regardless of one’s inherited moral foundation, become a moral person. God, and by extension Orthodox Christianity, is the only true source for morality and its development.

### *Moral breakdown*

If this is so, how has this played a role in Aleksandra Vladimirovna’s enactment of her embodied morality? When we met for an interview in the winter of 2005 Aleksandra Vladimirovna revealed to me something that not only shows that Orthodox Christianity is rhetorically central to her moral world, but perhaps more importantly how difficult an act motivated by such an institutional morality can be for her. As will be seen, just because Aleksandra Vladimirovna makes lofty claims about her source of morality, she is not always able to live up to these claims.

Earlier in the interview I had asked her if she could recall any moral decisions that she had to make that were particularly difficult for her. She responded by telling me of something in very general terms:

A.V. - Oh, yes, there was some thing. A person who actually hurt me quite a lot and I was hurt in the heart of hearts and then the person asked for help, material help. And of course as a human

being I did not feel like helping him because I knew I wasn't the only one who could help him. But then I thought about the gospels, and I thought, if you are a Christian then you should do this. So there are some standards so you know what to do, ok, what does it say, it says to help, so I did. This happened several times. And I thought, what does this mean ... but I try to remember what the Bible says about this. And there was a situation when I don't feel like doing this, and I think what does the Bible say, then well ok. You know if I begin to think logically I would never have agreed to do it, I would think oh how terrible it will be and just imagine what will happen, but I try to do what the Bible says and I do it.

JARRETT - Could you tell me what was specifically asked of you?

A.V. - No I cannot tell you, it is personal, I cannot say. It was about money, with a person who is quite unpleasant to me, but the Bible says I should, so I did. And the thing is, when you don't want to do something even when the Bible says, there is this voice behind you that says why, what for, he is a such and such, don't do this. And then I realize that there is someone who doesn't want me to do this, and I feel this, and then this is another reason that you should do it. The moment I do it, I am rewarded and I am glad.

Aleksandra Vladimirovna begins by telling this story in very general terms without mentioning who the person was who asked her for money and why, and why it was so difficult for her to give it. Yet she does disclose that she only gave the money because she believed she was obliged to do so according to what her religion, its sacred book, and ultimately her God would want her to do. Yes this obligation went against what she calls thinking "logically," which in fact seems to be her way of saying that it went against her negative feelings for the person and her desire not to help him. Nevertheless, as a Christian she was obliged, so she gave the money. The fact that she claims to recognize a voice telling her to go against what the Bible said was just further proof that she should give the money. At this point, so she claims, she felt "rewarded" and "glad."

As our interview continued and the topic changed we eventually began to talk about her husband and the circumstances of him leaving her. Without going into too much detail, it is sufficient to say that Aleksandra Vladimirovna was very shocked and upset by him leaving.

These feelings remain today, several years later, and came out as she told me about him. After speaking of him and the separation for a few minutes Aleksandra Vladimirovna returned to the same story, this time with more specific detail.

A.V. - Yes, well ok. Since I have mentioned my husband, I must say that after he left me, well, I will not go into it and say bad things about him, but actually it was very hurtful, but as it is written, without getting over obstacles you cannot overcome your ego, the battle with your ego, and it was actually he who asked for money, and it was a large amount of money, and I was the one who suffered, and he wanted money and of course I didn't feel like giving him anything, especially since he didn't give me any money or nothing for my son, but I said well, yes, ok. And that was a very difficult decision. I didn't do it for me, it was only because the Lord wants it. I don't want this, but He does, and I will do it only because the Bible says so. And so three times I did this.

JARRETT - Three times?

A.V. - Yes, three times. And he didn't give it back for a long time, but eventually he gave it back.

JARRETT - So this is an example where there is a real divide between what God wants you to do and what you want to do.

A.V. - Absolutely.

JARRETT - So was this a real struggle for you to do what God wanted you to do?

A.V. - Yes it was. Because I was in pain, you know this is so strange for me, I couldn't believe the situation. The person that says bad things about you and hurts you and doesn't want you, and then out of all the people he could have asked, he asked me for help. He doesn't help me or my son with anything.

JARRETT - So that must have done a lot to strengthen you through this process.

A.V. - Yes, and another thing he used to say that he loved me and he wanted me back. And he began to drink a lot. It was difficult for him. And he told one of his students that he wanted me back and that I was so good, and he said this when he was a little drunk.

And this student, such a noble man, he called me and told me, you know, your husband wants you back and he says all these wonderful things about you, how about seeing him. I didn't feel like it all. And I said again, what does the Lord want. And I couldn't imagine how I could meet with him and that we could be back together, so I didn't feel like it at all. But then I said what does the Bible say, and it says that a wife should make every effort she can to stay together with her husband, so I decided to do it because of this. I couldn't even imagine, but the Bible said that I should, so I said ok, and I went. And this poor student thought that my husband would start trying to convince me to come back or something like this, but he was sober this time, and he didn't do it. We just sat and talked, and my son was there too, and then we left. But I was glad actually because I didn't feel like starting it all over, I couldn't even imagine how it could be.

JARRETT - So you did what you were supposed to do and it showed you what was supposed to be.

A.V. - Yes.

JARRETT - And maybe if you didn't go, you wouldn't be certain.

A.V. - If you are Christian you do what He says. He who loves me follows my rules, that is what Jesus said. So I do it.

JARRETT - Do you think of Christianity as rules to follow or an example to follow or how?

A.V. - I know the rules, but loving God and knowing that He wants to do you good, and whatever He wants you to do is for the good. If you follow His ways, then you will be happy in the end.

When Aleksandra Vladimirovna tells the same story with detail, the real difficulties and stresses for her show. Not only did she not want to give money to someone who hurt her, but this person was the very one who hurt her more than anyone ever has. So much the harder, then, to give him money, not once, but three times. This already understandable difficulty was further compounded by the fact that he could have asked any number of other people for the money. Additionally, as has been already pointed out, Aleksandra Vladimirovna must work several jobs just to survive. So the insult was even further imposed by a successful lawyer asking his poor wife whom he 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 Faubion has done similar research with (Faubion 2001a: 144–5), conceives of God's morality not only as a morality of Law, but of one of obedience. Because the Bible, and thus God, says that she must give the money (or try to reconcile with her husband), 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 me.

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.

JARRETT - So it seems to me if you could overcome that, you could probably overcome a lot.

A.V. - You shouldn't ask for temptations, it is a sin, if you ask for it you could be punished for it. You know Seraphim Sarovskii, he had a pupil who wanted to spend a lot of time with him and one day he thought to himself that some people say that people become demon possessed but I don't think that could happen to me, and that was a challenge and then he physically felt that something was entering him through his mouth and he became possessed and this lasted for years and nothing could help him. He challenged God and he was punished and suffered and eventually he was freed from this and that is when he wrote about it. You should avoid temptation, and deliver us from evil.

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 already cultivated embodied morality, 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.

But 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 to become a good Christian. 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, similar to the materialist conscience she spoke of in earlier interviews, untrustworthy. Only God's will as understood through the Bible or as perceived through prayer is a reliable source for ethical action. For He will always lead Aleksandra Vladimirovna to act rightly no matter 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 (*chuvstvovala*) 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 (*preodolevat*)" herself, that is, overcome or surmount 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. The very idea, then, of her duty to overcome emotions to act as God wants is itself an embodied and felt knowledge.

As this final example of giving money to her husband suggests, despite Aleksandra Vladimirovna having a very complex and well integrated conception of morality that combines notions of natural law, development, and self-discipline, she is not always able to enact this conception straightforwardly. Morality, then, even for someone who apparently has it as fully conceptualized as Aleksandra Vladimirovna does, is not necessarily always applicable to real life situations. In these moments Aleksandra Vladimirovna relies on her felt sense of an embodied tradition. The very idea that she was reacting so negatively to her husband's request suggested to her that she must give the money. In this way, then, although she did not immediately react the way she knew she should, the fact that she felt she must give the money anyway is evidence to her of her embodied sense of morality.

In this ethical moment of moral breakdown, she felt that she must do her duty and in so doing continue to overcome herself on the path toward God's morality, on the path toward harmony with God's will. This, however, she knows is a long journey and she must not take time to praise herself for doing what she must do as a good Christian. For as

the story of Seraphim Sarovskii's pupil indicates, pride itself is one of those emotions that must be overcome. Perhaps the final piece, then, of Aleksandra Vladimirovna's complex conception of morality is the realization that embodying and enacting God's morality is a life long process, a life long struggle, as Dima might have put it, to overcome not only herself, but to overcome this world of temptation.