

CHAPTER EIGHT

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Morality and personhood

What I have tried to show with these moral portraits is the various ways in which individual persons have had to confront the unique experience of living through an historical moment of radical social and cultural change, and in so doing remake themselves into new post-Soviet persons. Joel Robbins has argued that these moments of radical change provide an opportunity for the anthropological study of local moralities because they are also moments of radical moral questioning (Robbins 2004; 2007), or what I call moral breakdown. I would agree with Robbins but go one step further in saying that because morality and personhood are intimately connected (Butler 2005), such historical moments provide an opportunity to study the dialogical relationship between social life, and particularly what I call morality and ethics, and the remaking of personhood.

Although I have tried to show how individuals' moral worlds and personhood are most closely associated with what I have called their personal experiences, it is important to recognize that personal experience is limited by the socio-historic-cultural world in which one finds herself. This socio-historic-cultural world, then, limits the range of possibility for the kinds of experience, and therefore the kind of moral world and personhood, one can have. What became clear in the moral portraits above is that my interlocutors' narratives not only revealed the experiences and ethical processes by which they have crafted their present moral personhoods, but they also disclose what Charles Taylor calls the socio-historic-cultural frameworks and backgrounds that make this process meaningful (Taylor 1989: 26).

Increasingly, however, it must be recognized that the global and interconnected nature of the world is effecting this limiting imposition of the socio-historic-cultural. As I argued in chapter one, the feeling of in-betweenness that Oushakine has described as post-Soviet aphasia is not only brought about as a result of being caught in-between the various dichotomies of the Soviet past and present that he describes. But

rather this feeling that has resulted in much questioning of post-Soviet subjectivity has come about in response to these dichotomies in triangulation with global otherness. Thus, the questioning of subjectivity and the new moral persons being cultivated in contemporary Russia must be understood, similar to the Ukrainian Evangelicals described by Wanner (2007), as hybrid subjectivities. That is to say, there is no doubt that as inhabitants of Moscow, the experiences of these five Muscovites have been significantly influenced, on the one hand, by such things as the existence and eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union, the social, politico-economic, and epistemological breakdowns of the so-called transition years, the institutionally authoritative voice of the Russian Orthodox Church, and various efforts to reconstruct an authentic Russian past as a guide for the future. At the same time my interlocutors are residents of a city with a unique position in Russia as one of the preeminent global cities in the contemporary world, which has exposed them and their social networks to global media and entertainment, global institutions and ideas, transnational religious institutions and networks, and travel abroad to name only a few. These possibilities have also been just as significant. In this context, then, it is clear that it is impossible to analyze the process of making new moral persons only in terms of a continuation of an imagined authentic Russian tradition and that the post-Soviet context of Moscow must be considered from the point of view of what Ong and Collier have called global assemblages (2005).

The influence of the range of possibilities made available through these assemblages in post-Soviet Moscow – from Russian Orthodoxy to the Hari Krishna, from the memory of socialist work relations to interpretations of capitalist work expectations, from travel abroad to global media images and the allure of consumption – is clearly seen in the moral portraits presented above and can shed light on the similarities and differences found between the moral personhoods articulated. Thus, for example, because Olya and Aleksandra Vladimirovna, despite their many differences, have shared similar kinds of experiences in terms of their relationship to the Church, referencing the same foundational literature, most specifically the Bible, reading similar secondary literature, and participating in the same Church sanctioned rituals and practices, they also share similar conceptions of morality – most clearly articulated in their distinction between social and Godly morality.

On the other hand, there is a much greater difference of moral conceptions between, for example, Aleksandra Vladimirovna and Dima.

Although Dima does on occasion reference God and does consider himself a religious person, and it should be remembered that both Dima and Aleksandra Vladimirovna had significant contact and participation with non-Russian religious groups, he is not speaking of God and religion in Russian Orthodox terms as does Aleksandra Vladimirovna. More importantly, however, is the real difference that exists between the two of them in terms of motivation for acting “morally.” I mark morally here in quotes because one similarity that does exist between the two of them is that both claim to reject a social notion of morality. For Aleksandra Vladimirovna, true morality is Godly morality, which is acquired when one’s heart and will is in harmony with God’s will. For Dima, on the other hand, morality as social expectation is for the most part rhetorically rejected, and instead he focuses on a personal morality of self-interest. That is, a morality of doing what he wants for himself as long as it does not hurt others. As can be seen, then, the greater or lesser differences between individuals can ebb and flow not only across individuals, but also within their various narratives so that at different times people can be more or less similar in their way of speaking about their moral worlds and ethical practices.

What I have tried to make clear throughout this book is that the narratives of my five interlocutors do not simply reproduce the dominant Russian and non-Russian institutional and public discourses of morality found in Russia today. Rather, by articulating their embodied moralities my interlocutors have in fact contributed an additional aspect to the public discourse of morality, for as I argued in chapter one, individual articulations of moral beliefs and conceptions are just one aspect of what I call the public discourses of morality. Therefore, by reflectively verbalizing their embodied moral ways of being, and in turn, my analysis of this verbalization here, each of us have further contributed to this public discourse. Additionally, this reflective verbalization in the context of a dialogical interview can also be seen as an example of ethics as I described it earlier. For in the very process of this verbalization, as well as the responses to my questioning, both my interlocutors and I worked through an ethical process that altered our embodied moral way of being if in no other way than to reinforce our already cultivated dispositions. As such, in this book we have seen how all three spheres of morality – the institutional, public discourses, and embodied – interrelate with one another in the lives of my interlocutors, as well as the centrality the experiences of ethics play in making these moralities part of their personhoods.

While it is true that moral personhood can never be completely separated from the socio-historic-cultural world, this does not lead to the assumption that we can speak of one unique and shared Russian morality that can be analytically discovered if we could only sift through all of the inconsequential differences between individuals and find a core foundation to what all Russians experience and articulate about morality. This is not only because of the global influence on post-Soviet moral personhood that I've been arguing for, but also because the inherent intersubjectivity of morality and ethics shatters any possibility for a totalizing and coherent conception of them. For just because moral personhood is intersubjective, this does not mean that it necessarily leads to a shared notion of morality (Jackson 1998: 4). Instead, the intersubjectivity of experience belies the Cartesian distinction between the subjective and the objective upon which the traditional anthropological notions of culture, agency, and sharedness rely. When experience is no longer conceived as the relationship of a subject with other subjects or with a so-called Third (Crapanzano 1992), then such a distinction collapses. What is left, then, is a world of intersubjective relations where no subjects and no objects exist, except for in those rare moments of what Heidegger calls the breakdown (Heidegger 1996[1927]: 68-9) or what Foucault calls problematization (Fourcault 1984: 388), when subjects step out of the world of intersubjectivity in order to reflect upon the objects this very stepping out creates. This book has offered several portraits of the experience of such intersubjectivity and its breakdown.

Range of possibilities

Therefore, while these moral portraits make clear the analytical difficulties of a so-called Russian morality, they do, nevertheless, reveal a range of possibility for being moral and ethical in post-Soviet Russia. In this sense, they also reveal the range of possibilities for moral personhood and intersubjective relations as well. In this section I would like to consider some of these possibilities and the importance they have for understanding social and moral life during this unique transformative period of Russian and world history. What is clear is that each of these possibilities has a history within Russian conceptions and practices of morality and ethics that for some predate the Soviet period. But this should not lead to the false conclusion that this socio-historic-cultural repertoire simply reproduces a line of traditional conceptions

and practices and along with them authentic Russian persons. Rather, these conceptions and practices have been taken up as familiarly at-hand and reshaped in useful ways to be re-utilized in a new global context. As Stephen Collier has pointed out in his analysis of the new global assemblage of neo-liberal business and budgetary practices in Russia, Soviet values have been re-inscribed and rationalized in order to be instrumentalized in the new global post-Soviet context (Collier 2005: 373). Thus, these conceptions and practices are better understood as providing a familiar framework for understanding, living in, and working through the new range of global and “traditional” possibilities that constitute the newly arranged assemblages within the post-Soviet context.

Perhaps the most obvious similarity across these five moral portraits is the appearance of *obshchenie*. As I have noted several times, *obshchenie* can be translated as communication or interaction, but is perhaps best translated as communing talk (Wierzkicka 2003: 427), and is a common everyday concept for describing intimate social and moral relations. As Yurchak shows, *obshchenie* had already become a central part of shaping personhood and sociality in the late-Soviet period (Yurchak 2006: 148), and was central to the kinds of sociality that took part outside official Soviet discourses and practices. With the increasingly open discrediting of Soviet ideology during perestroika and the eventual expansion of the range of moral possibilities in the post-Soviet period, *obshchenie* has become even more widespread as a description for and practice of moral relations (Pesmen 2000b: 299).

Unlike a simple conversation, *obshchenie* is an intimate and dialogical sociality during which participants mutually develop one another and each come away in some sense as different persons. This is so because *obshchenie*, which is closely related to other “*obshch-*” words indicating sharing, commonality, and being together with, is more than the exchange of words, but is instead a dialogical being-together-with that results in the creation of new, even if ever so subtle, moral persons. As Yurchak describes it, *obshchenie* is “both a process and a sociality that emerges in that process, and both an exchange of ideas and information as well as a space of affect and togetherness” (Yurchak 2006: 148). And while I certainly agree with Yurchak that an important result of *obshchenie* was creating bonds between persons that brought them together as *svoi* (ours) (Yurchak 2006: 149), as was clearly seen in the portraits of Olya, Larisa, and Dima, I here want to emphasize the centrality of *obshchenie* for creating new moral persons.

Each of the five portrayed here used *obshchenie* explicitly in their narrative articulations to describe this process of ethically making themselves into new moral persons. And yet, they did not all use *obshchenie* in the same way or to describe similar interactions. Similar to how Pesman describes *obshchenie* as communion with anything with a “voice” (Pesman 2000b: 165), so too my interlocutors articulated a diverse range of possible voices with whom they *obshchat’sia*. Thus, for example, while Olya and Larisa spoke of *obshchenie* as the way in which they have come to understand one another and remain friends despite their differences, Anna used *obshchenie* to describe the process she continues to go through in acquiring her moral way of being in interactions with her mother. And while Dima speaks of needing to share common interests with someone in order to engage in *obshchenie* with them in the first place, this does not stop him from engaging in it with an open racist whom he finds interesting despite their radical difference of opinion on this particular topic. And while each of them speak of *obshchenie* as something they do with other human individuals, Aleksandra Vladimirovna only mentioned it in terms of the conversations she has with God as a person through prayer. Thus, as can be seen, although *obshchenie* seems to be a keyword across each of these five moral portraits, it can be utilized in different ways in order to accommodate the particular moral experiences, conceptions, and dilemmas each have had.

What appears to be significant about *obshchenie* in each of these variants, however, is that it is a way of articulating the intersubjectivity, the being together with, of moral experience. In each case, whether for the sake of moral growth as with Anna, or the resolution of an ethical dilemma as with Aleksandra Vladimirovna, or the fulfillment of a personal desire as with Dima, it is a way of describing a relationship that can after the fact be articulated as having been moral. As such, when these individuals describe certain relationships as examples of *obshchenie*, they are indeed utilizing a certain cultural script (Jacobson-Widding 1997: 50; Wierzbicka 2003: 401) for the purpose of marking these relationships as exemplary instances of moral experience. The fact that this cultural script can be applied to such a wide variety of experiences only reveals the way in which personal experience can fracture a seemingly unifying concept.

And yet because the concept can be applied to a variety of personal experiences, it too must carry something across to each of these disparate uses. This, then, further suggests the dialogical nature or the hermeneutic circle of not only experience but intersubjectivity itself

(Bruner 1986: 6). That is, each of these disparate uses of *obshchenie* in my interlocutors' narratives cannot be understood without an understanding of what the word implies, but at the same time the word can have no implication without these disparate uses. Thus, *obshchenie* is one of those words that truly can have no meaning, that is, no use, outside of a particular context of utterance. As such, when my interlocutors speak of *obshchenie* in their narratives, they are utilizing a recognizable cultural script to articulate a particular way of being together with others in very particular circumstances that give rise to certain moral ways of being. Thus, Larisa and Olya only spoke of it as the way they interact with one another and how they have come to understand the kind of person the other is, and Anna only spoke of it to describe those certain interactions with her mother that she saw as providing her with moral growth. In both cases *obshchenie* provides a socially recognizable way for articulating significant ethical processes these individuals practice in the re-making of their moral personhoods.

Another similarity across the five moral portraits is the notion of development. While each of my interlocutors spoke of the importance of developing what they see as the proper moral disposition, none of them spoke of this as a natural, inherent, or necessary movement. Instead, each of them spoke of this development as a more or less self-driven development. That is, a development that can occur if one puts in the effort, if one works on oneself in certain ways that will lead to the goal of the kind of moral development one hopes for.

As I argued in Chapter One, this notion of moral development is an aspect of the Russian cultural concept of working on the self that has a discursive tradition within Russia dating back prior to the Bolshevik revolution. Whether associated with Russian Orthodox practices of *theosis*, or Soviet attempts to construct the New Soviet Man, or neoliberal influences on post-Soviet institutional and everyday life, working on the self as a process of moral development has been for some time a common way of articulating and conceptualizing the ethical process of crafting moral personhood in Russia. The moral portraits above, however, reveal that what may appear to be a unified cultural concept, in fact falls within a range of possibilities for articulating and enacting this ethical process of moral development, and therefore continues to be useful for articulating this process in a new post-Soviet context consisting of various global assemblages.

Thus, for example, Olya and Aleksandra Vladimirovna share the desire to develop their embodied moral dispositions to increasingly

coincide with a Godly morality, and do such things as pray, confess, and maintain vigilance over their acts and thoughts so as to work toward this goal. That this process often occurs in contexts previously unimaginable, such as in an international company's office space, only adds to the uncanniness of the ethical process. Larisa hopes to maintain a strong sense of independence while working toward a successful career in Russia's new international market economy, and in so doing continually cultivates a work ethic that she finds necessary for such goals. In doing so she often runs up against business practices and expectations she would describe as Soviet, which provides motivation for what she does *not* want to be like. Over the years Dima has increasingly worked to limit his life to the people, activities, and interactions that he thinks will support his desire to become the kind of person he hopes to be. This process has led him to be one of the leading figures in an internationally supported harm reduction and HIV prevention network stretching throughout and beyond Russia. And Anna has struggled along the circuitous road to happiness conceived as family, having finally found herself in the kinds of relations she had always hoped to have with her parents and perhaps having finally met the man who she will be able to marry. That this road has passed through one Polish man and led to a German man only helps to make more obvious that not only ideas, words, and images, but very real relations such as family are also spaces of global assemblages in today's Russia.

Each of these examples reveals the range of possibilities available in contemporary Russia for conceiving of moral development and ethical work on the self. If they do not all resemble the kind of moral development many have come to think of as proper moral development, this reveals not a lack of conceptual thinking on the part of these five Muscovites, but instead reveals the prejudices of certain kinds of academic thinking on the subject. For as Faubion has suggested, too often Western social scientists and philosophers view the world through their own moral lens, and in so doing impose this sense of morality onto others where those very others may not recognize it (Faubion 2001c: 84). In the process of doing so, they too often overlook the moral conceptions of the very people they claim to be studying.

This tendency is even more prevalent in disciplines that tend to focus their analytical gaze at the level of the group rather than the individual. For at the individual level, things get even murkier. Thus, while I believe it is possible to claim that each of my five interlocutors have some notion of morality as development, clearly each of them hold

their own conception of how this development works and toward what end it moves. It is my contention that while the notion of moral development has a history of its own in the pre-Soviet and Soviet past, a history that surely plays a role in its centrality in these narratives, the way in which it is conceptualized and lived largely depends on the life trajectory and projects of personhood of each of my interlocutors.

Thus, finally, it is important to note that each of my interlocutors at times also spoke of morality as a way of articulating the kind of person they hoped they could be. While this was obvious in the narratives of Dima, I believe it also holds true for the others. For example, although Aleksandra Vladimirovna often speaks about the goal of harmonizing her own will with that of God's, she admits that this is something she cannot always do. This, in fact, is revealed in the examples she gave of paying for the train ticket and giving her husband the money he asked for. Similarly, Olya says she strives for God's morality, but finds it difficult to actually realize this in the midst of the everyday situations she faces in her workplace and at home. While from the first time I met Anna she spoke to me about the ideal of morality as family and happiness, it was only after knowing her for over two years that she was finally able to take steps toward possibly achieving such a goal. These steps, it should be further noted, only occurred when they did because Anna had no other options but to move back in with her parents. Thus, at least in terms of trying to find happiness with her parents, this seemed to only come about out of necessity rather than choice. And finally Larisa. While I have no doubts that Larisa wants to achieve success in her career, I also have no doubts that she often uses her career and the rhetoric of independence in order to cover over her desire to find someone to love and love her in return. She has all but admitted this to me in several late night conversations. What is obvious from each of these examples is the way in which both morality/ethics and personhood are inextricably bound to a particular socio-historic-cultural world and the range of possibilities available within it.

All of this suggests that what I have been describing in this book is not simply the moral worlds of these five individuals, but also an ideal portrait of the kind of persons each of them would like to be. Thomas Blom Hansen has recently argued that part of what he calls the global grammar of interiority is the increased tendency of notions of self and personhood throughout the world to "exist as moral discourses that enunciate cultural *ideals* rather than deep and fixed cultural *ideas*. Such discourses of the self always *proscribe* rather than *describe*" (Hansen

2009: 19). I entirely agree with this but with one qualification with which I believe Hansen would agree: the ideals articulated are cultural not in the sense of one totalizing possibility, but rather, as I have been arguing throughout this book, as one of various possibilities within a recognizable range. Thus, one of the main points I have been arguing is that increasingly in the world today, as seen in the lives of my Muscovite interlocutors, this range of possibility for the articulated ideals of moral personhood is increasingly broadened beyond traditional borders of nations, cultures, and localities, if these borders, in fact, ever really worked in the first place to halt such transnational flows of ideals, discourses, and practices.

Hansen primarily describes this global grammar of interiority in terms of conviction, which he illustrates through the conviction of political activists to change their social worlds. Thus, for Hansen the moral discourse of personhood is primarily that of the articulation of politico-moral ideals. While I certainly agree that this is one possibility for articulating the ideal of moral personhood in today's global world dominated by a liberal ideology of sincerity, what I have tried to show is how five, everyday, "normal" persons articulate their ideal moral personhoods in terms of their experientially accumulated desires. Sometimes these articulations work to project the ideal of who they someday hope to become. Other times it works to cover over the kind of person they actually are. In both cases it is clear that these narratives cannot be read as simple, straightforward declarations of moral worlds. Instead they should be read as part of a larger project that includes the desire to be viewed by others in a certain light and the hope to be a kind of person that one may not actually be. It also entails the recognition that both of these can only happen in real, actual, everyday interactions with others, only one of which is a very odd, but yet still actual interaction with a nosey anthropologist. In other words, these narratives did not simply reveal the persons already there, but were a significant part of the process of my interlocutors crafting their post-Soviet personhoods.

Morality and new post-Soviet personhood

Morality is a concept that carries with it much weight in both its everyday and theoretical uses. For this reason the anthropological study of moralities is vital for understanding everyday ways of living in the world. But as these narratives suggest, the study of moralities must go

beyond questions of right and wrong, good and evil, and the assumption of shared rules, obligations, and expectations, which are generally the ways in which morality is represented in social scientific and philosophical analyses. In recognizing that there is no one local (in this case Russian or Muscovite) morality as such to speak of, but rather a range of possibilities informed by both Russian and non-Russian influences for being moral and articulating it, researchers need *not* give up looking at how morality and ethics play a significant role in everyday social life and person-making. For if it is true that there is no one universally or culturally shared morality, then it is certainly just as true that morality is often invoked in various contexts by individuals and institutions. It is how the range of possibilities for morality and ethics as a discursive, rhetorical, and pragmatic concept is utilized and to what ends, therefore, that an anthropology of morality should address itself.

In the end, then, I suggest that each of these moral portraits should be read as articulations of how morality and ethics are ways in which these individuals express their hopes and struggles in being and becoming a certain kind of person in the unique historical moment of post-Soviet Russia. Perhaps it is not surprising that morality and ethics were invoked by these individuals to describe this process of struggle and hope. For if these narratives have said nothing else, I believe they have each in their own way made it clear that this unique period has been a time of remaking oneself in a new global context, and because this is so often conceived as a social process done with others, it is also an ethical process of moral development. In this way, then, these moral portraits should also be read as narratives of ethically cultivating new post-Soviet persons.