

DIY Morality: Choice, body and authenticity

Nicholas Hookway

School of Sociology and Social Work, University of Tasmania,

Abstract

This article is a qualitative exploration of how contemporary morality is understood and constructed using Australian blog data. The central finding is that the bloggers depict morality as an actively created and autonomous do-it-yourself project based in three main configurations of self-responsibility, bodily encounter and authentic-feeling. The findings are suggestive of how self, body, emotions and authenticity may play an important role in contemporary moralities.

Key words: authenticity; blogs; body; emotions; morality; self

Introduction

Concern regarding the deterioration of morality feature prominently in a conservative tradition of moral decline sociology. 'Decline' sociology can be traced to the pioneering work of Durkheim, who laid important foundations for the sociological study of morality and ethics. Durkheim's concerns regarding the deterioration of morality as a corollary of weakening community and traditional sources of authority casts a long shadow over contemporary appraisals of morality in the late-modern consumer West.

Durkheim's influence can be seen in the two dominant camps of modern 'decline' social theory. In the first camp are the 'cultural pessimists' who maintain that with the decline of religion and traditional forms of authority, Westerners have become 'narcissistic' and uncaring as they become absorbed by a 'therapeutic' culture of hedonism, consumption and self-improvement (Reiff 1987[1966]; Bell 1976; Lasch 1979). In the other camp are the 'communitarians' who argue that a breakdown of community and an ensuing individualism has undermined a common moral culture and a shared sense of responsibility toward others (Etzioni 1994; Bellah et al. 1996; MacIntyre 1985). Common to both assessments is the view that morality has little hope in a contemporary social and cultural context in which the individual is allowed to create their 'own set of rules', where 'no' has disappeared from our moral vocabulary, and where foundational moral laws enforced by religious tradition and higher moral authorities have disappeared.

While pronouncements concerning the 'end of morality' proliferate in the West there is a lack of empirical research that addresses what the ostensible social condition of moral 'decline' looks like 'on the ground', that is, in the everyday understandings, practices and experiences of contemporary individuals. The aim of this article then is to examine how late-modern subjects construct, understand and experience morality

in a contemporary climate of moral ambiguity. The article shows how the bloggers construct a ‘do-it-yourself’ morality that takes three main configurations: choosing, embodied and authentic-feeling.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of 44 Australian blogs or online diaries combined with 25 online in-depth interviews. Blogs are treated as a distinct way of accessing moral stories, offering highly nuanced, idiosyncratic and honest accounts of how morality emerges concretely within the ‘sphere of the everyday’. Blogs were selected as a form of personal life record (Thomas and Znaniecki, [1918], 1958:1833) that allowed access to the complex and messy way in which individuals ‘write’ and ‘talk’ their everyday moral world into existence from their own perspectives. Blogs are a useful empirical technique for making the morally invisible visible, capturing the immediate and transitory moments that constitute everyday life (Hookway, 2008).

The blogs were sampled from the blog hosting website LiveJournal. The sample comprised predominantly of white, urban, mainly tertiary educated, middle-class and young service professions. The age range for the 44 bloggers was 19–53 with a mean age of 31. Twenty-five of the bloggers were female and 19 were male. The blog data were complemented with online in-depth interviews (conducted via instant messaging programs) to further develop and explore important themes emerging from the textual accounts. While blogs offer an innovative tool for accessing constructions of everyday life, a key limitation is that it produces a relatively homogenous, small and selective sample.

Results and Discussion

DIY Morality: ‘Esteeming the Self’

The first DIY configuration is distinctly Foucauldian, resting in a self-stylising ethics based on radical freedom, self-care and personal responsibility. This is a DIY mode that rejects externalised modes of moral authority sourced from ‘society’ and ‘religion’ and privileges personal responsibility, self-knowledge and self-care as structures of moral action.

Brantherb and Nightstar were key examples of this approach. Brantherb is a 30-year-old male engineer from Melbourne and Nightstar, a 33-year-old female IT programmer from Sydney. Nightstar explains that morality boils down to a decision between what is ‘right’ and what is ‘easy’; between the easiness of following society and the difficulty of choosing with what ‘you believe is right’. Hitting a similar DIY note, Brantherb attests that it is ‘immoral to take action that you don’t personally, actively, believe’. He declares: ‘let your beliefs be based upon your own understanding’ and ‘don’t take action just because you’ve been told to ... that’s negating yourself’ (interview).

Brantherb and Nightstar give testimony to moral structures rooted in choice, originality and self-creation. Morality is invested within the authority of the choosing self rather than external rules or the authoritative structures of society, law or religion.

The self is not denigrated as untrustworthy or narcissistic, as in decline models, but taken as a vital source of morality. Rather than being ‘enforced-from-outside’, morality is the ‘autonomous responsibility of the moral self’ (Bauman 1993: 12); something to be made and created rather than emulated and copied. It is spoken of as a do-it-yourself project.

Brantherb’s moral approach had a distinctly Foucauldian flavour. If the opposite of being moral is to ‘obey’, to be moral centres on what Brantherb calls ‘esteeming the self’. He writes:

Self-esteem is the most important virtue a person can possess. To stand up in front of the cold dark universe and say ‘I am. I have knowledge of myself. I am capable of virtue. ME is an entity worthy of the highest rewards it can get for itself.’

Like Foucault’s (1986: 50) ‘care of the self’, ‘esteeming the self’ works for Brantherb as a particular ethical mode for relating to the other – it implies a social practice and a particular form of responsibility between self and other. Brantherb writes that ‘self-respect can be a way of treating people’, adding that ‘to treat others well is a form of self-respect for me ... it’s a bit of a stretch I suppose. I guess it’s something along the lines of treating people how you want to be treated’. While ‘esteeming the self’ could be subsumed within decline accounts of narcissism, Brantherb illustrates how ‘self-respect can be a way of treating people’; how ‘care of the self’ can operate within a moral mode focused on helping others ‘care for themselves’. In Foucault’s (1986: 53) terms, the emphasis on self-care is not an exercise in narcissism but an ‘intensification of social relations’.

Other bloggers share Nightstar and Brantherb’s emphasis on a self-creating and choosing form of morality. For example, Willowot, a 37-year-old male IT support worker and Raintimetx86 a 40-year-old legal advisor from Brisbane both exemplify an aversion to the notion of morality derived from the external guides of religious authority. Raintimetx86 questions ‘why we are so focused on religion rather than on “being good people?”’, while Willowot contends that religion diminishes the important moral skills of ‘thinking for yourself’ and ‘taking responsibility for my own actions’. Similarly, Steinerpants, a 30-year-old biomedical engineer living in Sydney, says that religion can be tolerated as long as its practitioners do not turn into ‘another bunch of assholes who use their religion as a bludgeon instead of a compass’. Steinerpants claims that morality is ‘not blindly following somebody else’s rules’ and ‘doing what my own sense of morality tells me is right’ (interview). Steinerpants urges for the value of taking responsibility for one’s choices and evading the temptation to externalise choice and responsibility to something ‘beyond my control’. Again the DIY theme of a self-created and non-conformist morality with a Foucauldian emphasis on self-responsibility is prominent.

Embodied Encounters

The second DIY configuration highlights a self-creating morality based in ‘particularised’ ethical encounters with the metropolitan stranger, rooted in an embodied and emotional receptivity to the Other. In this configuration, the focus is

on the singular story of Viney, which is used as an exemplary and exceptional case. While Viney's story is atypical – showing care toward the homeless who are typically ignored in contemporary societies – she highlights the importance of incorporating the embodied relationship into an ethics of Otherness (Bauman, 1993) and how an embodied sense of humanness can transform the 'reserve' (Simmel, 1903) that characterises urban encounters.

Viney is a 19-year-old female university student from Sydney. Picking up the DIY moral thread, Viney states that when it comes to matters of morality: 'you can [only] do what you believe is right, not what you think someone else believes is right, i.e., [sic] the congregation or whatever'. She adds, 'all I have is what I believe is right and wrong' adding, 'I've just been taught to ... do good, if it's in your power. And if it's not, do what you can' (interview). Her engagement with 'Carol', a homeless Aboriginal woman on the streets of Sydney, is provided as an instance of Viney's commitment to 'helping people' and 'doing good'.

Moving to the city from a small coastal town in northern NSW, 'where homeless people "didn't exist"', Carol, although somewhat 'intriguing', was a danger carrying 'Other' to be feared and avoided: 'My old friends back home told me they, homeless people were dangerous – they'd steal money from you and rob you for food and most were nuts' (interview). Carol as a homeless Aboriginal woman is a 'recognised stranger' (Ahmed 2000: 30): the stranger that is already known as 'dangerous' and to be 'avoided' – just like 'everyone else did'.

Forced to walk past Carol when taking her usual route home from her casual work at Subway, Viney would ritually avoid eye contact with her and ignore her requests for money. This habitual practice of 'mismeeting' was transformed one day when Viney 'focused' an interaction by verbally responding to Carol's customary request for money: 'No, sorry, not today'. 'And she stops me. Now, she isn't old. I'm guess late 20s – early 30s aboriginal woman. She isn't crazy. She asks me if I'm scared of her'. Viney writes:

She tells me she's homeless because of domestic violence. She showed me her scars. She told me she had her periods, and she just wanted some money for some pads. It really kinda made me realise that she is just like me. Like she's not just a creature on the side of the road. She has her period, she's hungry, she's cold. She's human (interview).

It is through the 'bodily world of feeling' (Ahmed 2004: 171) – through scars, periods, hunger and cold – that Carol is re-constituted as human. Viney captures how the emotions (can) work at the surface of the body, not to differentiate and to other, but to bring together and humanise. The female body becomes a site of ethical exchange and emotional relatedness. In Irigaray's (1991: 180) terms, the sexed body is a site of 'communion' that crosses the gulfs of racial and class difference. Embodied in menstruation, Viney moves from 'the boundary of the skin', the boundaries of the racialised Other, to the 'mucous membranes of the body' (Irigaray 1991: 180). Viney's story highlights how bodies may confront us in urban spaces not only as aesthetic objects, but as entities of moral value that can connect and open us out to Others. She moves toward the Other in recognition of what they share: female bodies that can feel, hurt and be injured.

Authentic-Feeling Morality

The third configuration of DIY morality is an emotionally-driven form of morality with two variants. The first emphasises the interiorisation of moral authority to the emotions such as ‘going with your gut’ and ‘doing what feels right’ while the second links the internal authority of emotion and feeling to values of being-true-to-yourself and authenticity.

Variant 1: ‘I do what feels right’

Roofrider, a 33-year-old gay male travel consultant from Melbourne evidences a DIY moral belief in the self and the importance of the inward authority of feeling as a moral guide. Sounding the familiar DIY theme, Roofrider writes in his blog that doing morality is not a matter of following the dictates of God but doing ‘things that are in my view right’, by following his ‘conscience’ and ‘doing what feels right’. As he succinctly puts it: ‘I do not believe in God, I believe in my conscience’ (interview).

Roofrider captures a DIY form that is less Foucauldian and more rooted in the feeling and emotional power of ‘conscience’. Morality for Roofrider is about being attentive to the power of inward and intuitive feelings and affections. Roofrider takes the conscience as a ‘gut feeling’, that acts as a sensual and embodied prompt for deciphering right from wrong. He states, ‘everyone has a gut feeling if what they are doing is right or wrong’ (interview).

This is a type of morality that clearly speaks to Taylor’s (1992) argument that moral sources of the self in contemporary society have shifted from external moral voices (i.e., theistic foundations) to the inner authority of the individual. Morality is not about ‘being in touch’ with God but connecting to an imagined moral source within us. It is this social process of interiorisation that enables Roofrider to imagine and speak of possessing an inner moral sense; an intuitive feeling for what is right and wrong.

Variant 2: ‘Being True to Yourself’

In some of the blog accounts a feeling morality is directly linked and strengthened by its connection to values of personal authenticity. Doing ‘what feels right’ is positioned within a framework of acting according to the ‘real’, ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ you – according to the ethical ideal of ‘being true to yourself’. As one blogger put it: ‘if you feel one thing and do something else, then you’re not being true to yourself’.

Queen_Extremist, a 26-year-old female university student from Melbourne and president of a university student association, highlights feelings as a key source of morality authority but in this variant shows how ‘doing what feels right’ is linked to authenticity (Taylor, 1992). She writes:

I know what I feel. I know when something feels wrong to me. I know when something feels right. And I know that it feels terrible when I do something that feels wrong. It’s not logical. It’s not rational. I don’t know if it’s the right thing to do or if it’s selfish or arrogant. But I don’t like being something I’m not. I don’t like being false or changing my personality for others. I’m really happy with who I am.

Similarly, Snifflethebouncer, a 22-year old PhD student from Sydney, writes that ‘one of the things that matters most to me, with morality, is that you feel genuine about what you’re doing’ (interview). Feeling emerges again as a strategy to validate being ‘genuine’, being authentic to the self:

[Y]ou feel in your heart that it’s the right thing. If you feel one thing and do something else, then you’re not being true to yourself. If I feel one thing is the right thing to do, but I do something else (to benefit myself, most probably), then I’ll feel bad about it, and I’ll feel I haven’t followed my morals (interview).

These bloggers testify to an ‘ethics of authenticity’, where the notion of ‘being true to yourself’ is sourced from the ‘romantic solace’ of moral feeling. To be authentic means not ‘being something I’m not’ (Queen_Extremist); not leading a false life (Universal_cloak); and not ‘inventing’ yourself ‘as someone else’. Like reality television contestants, their job is to sort the real from the fake, from those ‘playing the game’ and those being themselves – to work out who’s being ‘real’ and who’s not.

‘Being true to yourself’ as an ethical ideal appears inconsistent with current sociological accounts of identity and self that emphasise self as fragmentary, multiple and liquid. The blog of Philcarbis (a 37-year-old male technical writer from Melbourne), is interesting here in how he underlines the potential problems of ‘being true to yourself’. Philcarbis describes how he has arrived at a point in life where he is compelled to return to the activity of ‘working on rebuilding myself’. He writes: ‘in this state where I’m not quite sure who I am, what kind of man I am, how can I say for sure what is moral for me?’. Philcarbis flags the bigger question of what the ideal of ‘being true to yourself’ means in a ‘liquid’ modern world in which experiences of self and identity are increasingly shaped by individualising processes of ‘reinvention’, ‘updating’ and ‘makeover’ (Elliott and Lemert, 2006:31; Bauman, 2005).

Conclusion

This article has established the centrality of a DIY morality formulated in terms of the driving moral force of self rather than the external authority of society or religion. Three different configurations or versions of DIY morality were identified. The DIY form can be seen to be generally consistent with the theorised moralities of Bauman (1993), Foucault (1986) and Taylor (1992) who focus on the subject as morally capable rather than inherently failed. The first DIY configuration was shown to be distinctly Foucauldian, resting in a self-stylising ethics based on radical freedom, self-care and personal responsibility. The second version of DIY morality discussed it in terms of specific ethical encounters with the metropolitan stranger. Here the blog of Viney was used to highlight a particular mode of responsibility to the urban stranger via a shared embodied reality that confirmed the Other as human. The third type of DIY morality was argued to be an emotionally driven morality, based in two variants. The first variant showed feeling as a key source of moral authority that emphasised ‘what feels right’ or ‘going with your gut’ (Taylor 1992) while the second variant showed how embodied feeling is connected to the ethical ideal of ‘being true to yourself’. Being true to yourself is a moral strategy that invokes a modernist assumption of a stable and unitary model of self, which is interesting to

consider in relations to theorising of the ‘liquidity’ of self.

Taken together, these different configurations of DIY morality – the choosing, the embodied, the authentic-feeling – suggest powerful moral strategies for navigating everyday moral action. Rather than being cause or symptom of moral decline the self, body, and emotions, combined with the search for personal authenticity, form the bedrock of the blogged accounts of moral understanding and practice. Further research is needed to determine whether these bloggers are rebels of their time or whether they capture something more widespread in how contemporary morality is reflected upon by ordinary people.

References

- Ahmed, S (2000) *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London: Routledge.
- Ahmed, S. (2004) *Cultural Politics of Emotion*. London: Routledge.
- Bauman, Z. (1993) *Postmodern Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2005) *Liquid Life*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bell, D. (1976) *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bellah, R., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W.M., Swidler, A. and Tipton, S. (1996) *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Elliott, A. and Lemert, C. (2006) *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization*. New York: Routledge.
- Etzioni, A. (1994) *The Spirit of Community: The Reinvention of American Society*. London: Simon and Schuster.
- Foucault, M. (1986) *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3, New York: Random House.
- Hookway, N. (2008) ‘Entering the Blogosphere’: Some Strategies for Using Blogs in Social Research’, *Qualitative Research* 8(1): 91–103.
- Irigaray, L. (1991) ‘Questions to Emmanuel Levinas’ in M. Whitford (ed.) *The Irigaray Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell: 178–189.
- Lasch, C. (1979) *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co.
- MacIntyre, A. (1985) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. London: Duckworth.

Reiff, P. ([1987]1966) *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*, New York: Harper and Row.

Simmel, G. [1903](1950) 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', adapted by D. Weinstein from K. Wolff (trans.) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: The Free Press: 409–424.

Taylor, C. (1992) *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Thomas, W.I. and Znaniecki, F. ([1918] 1958) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. New York: Dover Publications.