

Name: Dr Nicholas Hookway

Affiliation: School of Sociology and Social Work, University of
Tasmania

Address: University of Tasmania
Newnham Campus, Arts Building, Room L205
University of Tasmania, School of Sociology
and Social Work, Locked Bag 1340,
Launceston TAS 7250
Australia

Phone: +61 +03 +63243270

Email: Nicholas.Hookway@utas.edu.au

Beyond Durkheim and Decline Sociology: Theorising Alternative Moral Structures

Abstract

This paper critically evaluates key assumptions within classical and contemporary 'decline' moral sociology. It argues that two dominant assessments of moral decline in the contemporary West – the 'cultural pessimist' and 'communitarians' – are underwritten by a set of Durkheimian assumptions concerning human nature and 'society' as the necessary source of morality. Drawing primarily upon the work of Bauman (1993), but also Taylor (1992), Ahmed (2000) and Irigaray (1991), these assumptions are critiqued as offering an overly pessimistic account of contemporary morality that deny the ethical significance of self, emotions and therapeutic ideals of self-improvement and authenticity.

Key Words: Durkheim, morality, 'decline' sociology, authenticity, emotion.

Introduction

The contemporary Western world today is often imagined as morally worse than the 'world' we used to inhabit (Fevre, 2000; Tester, 1994:113). Contemporary subjects are supposedly morally lost, morally cut adrift, as the old moral anchors and certainties become merely choices and we are left to bicker and fumble over what might constitute 'right' or 'wrong' (Fevre, 2000:9; Wilson, 2001:49). Narratives of

moral decline are influential in current popular and intellectual Western debate but also run deep in a sociological tradition of moral crisis or loss. This paper argues that the 'decline' genre of sociology has its antecedents in Durkheim's diagnosis of the moral infirmity of modernity and maps onto more recent diagnoses of moral breakdown.

Durkheim's theory is briefly contextualised and examined before two more recent influential strands of moral 'decline' sociology are critiqued: Reiff ([1987]1966), Bell (1976) and Lasch (1979) in the 'cultural pessimist' camp; and Etzioni (1994), Bellah et al. (1996) and MacIntyre (1985) in the 'communitarian' camp. It is argued that Durkheim's moral assumptions concerning the asocial dimensions of human nature and the necessity for morality to be rooted in higher authoritative structures undermined by declining community and rising individualism, are key assumptions shared by the 'cultural pessimists' and the 'communitarian' assessments of the moral present. These assumptions are critiqued as offering an overly disparaging and one-dimensional view of the self, body and emotions and an unnecessary insistence on morality achieved outside the self in the sanctifying agents of 'society', 'religion' or 'community'.

Durkheim and Moral Decline Sociology

Of the classical thinkers, it was Durkheim ([1893]1933:345) who developed the most systematic sociological conceptualisation of a science of morality. Durkheim's insistence upon explanation situated in 'society' is central to his treatment of morality (Nisbet, 1965:40; Smart, 2001:511; Hearn, 1997:79). According to Durkheim,

morality is a product of society, an expression of collective social life and therefore a super-individual phenomenon. Durkheim ([1895]1982:50; [1925]1961:80)) suggests that '[morality] consists in the individual's attachment to those groups of which he is a member' and that accordingly individuals are moral only when they 'perform duties which are defined externally to myself and my acts, in law and custom'.

Although Durkheim was optimistic that a moral social science would be key to re-establishing the foundations of morality in the brave new world of modernity, a central feature of his sociology was a concern with the inevitable moral crisis accompanying modernisation. He worried that the weakening grip of tradition, community and religion would result in the wholesale release of egoistic desire and bodily impulse, leaving a normative vacuum in which a nightmarish vision 'of nature as a war against all' could thrive (Junge, 2001:107). Durkheim's worry concerning the moral crisis of modernity is underpinned by a belief that humans are *homo duplex*: they are constituted by a perpetual struggle between the opposing 'qualities of body and soul', between 'sensations and sensory appetites, on the one hand, and the intellectual and moral life, on the other' (Durkheim, 1960: 326, 328 cited in Smart, 2001:513).

The moral order depends, then, in Durkheim's sociology on the unquenchable 'sensual appetites' that engulf individuals being regulated and constrained by external social constraints. The goal of society, according to Durkheim, is to maintain stability and cohesion through successful regulation and integration of the pre-social self (egoistic, impulsive, and instinctual) into the prevailing norms and values of a society. Durkheim worried that this control mechanism was being upset in the face of 19th industrialisation, secularisation, and individualism. Durkheim was apprehensive that modernity was not only reconfiguring social and moral relationships, it was potentially tearing them apart.

Contemporary Assessments of Moral Decline

Durkheim's pessimism concerning the crisis of morality in modernity can be traced in 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, [1966]1987; 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).

Phillip Reiff ([1966]1987), Christopher Lasch (1979) and Daniel Bell (1976) are key figures in the 'cultural pessimistic' camp. These theorists, despite their particularities, all give testimony to a reorganisation of Western culture, which has hollowed out

cultural and moral life with negative effects upon self and personhood. This is evident in Reiff's ([1966]1987) and Lasch's (1979) psychoanalytic based discussions of cultures of 'therapy' and 'narcissism' and Bell's (1976) concerns regarding a consumer based 'fun morality'. The refrain is that the breakdown of traditional forms of moral and religious authority and the rise of 'narcissistic' and 'therapeutic' cultures, means contemporary social life has little to offer beyond empty and meaningless self-gratification and self-actualisation.

Lasch (1979:4), for example, argues that in the struggle to alleviate anxiety and psychological unrest, Western culture is pathologically preoccupied with the care and well-being of the self:

Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to 'relate', overcoming the 'fear of pleasure'.

Communitarian authors form a second strand of social theory influential in diagnosing moral decline in contemporary Western society. Communitarian thought is similarly critical of any move to the self and individual as a potential source of morality emphasising the importance of communal based moral frameworks. For Etzioni (1994), Bellah (1996) and MacIntyre (1985), a modern culture postulating the uniqueness and authenticity of the individual can only result in a diminishing care for

others and a self-defeating culture of self-fulfilment. Morality cannot be left to a de-socialised and emotional self guided only by the ends of its 'own personal wants and inner impulses (Bellah, 1996:77). The proper place of morality is not self-interested or emotionally irrational individuals but 'agreed-upon standards of right and wrong' or 'basic settled values' formed and transmitted by community and social roles (Bellah, 1996:140; Etzioni, 1994:25; MacIntyre, 1985). Thus, communitarians argue that the social foundations of morality need to be shored up across the spheres of education, family, community, religion and politics.

Problematizing The Durkheimian Legacy

This section outlines and critiques two core assumptions built into Durkheim's theoretical system and shows how they underpin the recent 'cultural pessimistic' and 'communitarian' strands of 'decline' sociology. The assumptions are presented as: 1. view of human nature and 2. origins of morality. It is argued that these assumptions bestow a distrust of the individual, body and emotions, ignore the moral positives of self-fulfilment cultures and offer a romanticised picture of the society-morality nexus. Challenging these assumptions built into diagnoses of moral decline works to problematise their excessive negativity, and provides the basis for building an alternative standpoint for theorising moral engagement in contemporary life. This opens possibilities for constructing a positive, or at least more optimistic, interpretation of contemporary moral culture utilising the social theory of Bauman (1993;1995), Taylor (1992) and feminist thinkers like Ahmed (2000) and Irigaray (1991).

1. View of human nature and the self

The Durkheimian fear that not far beneath the surface of the socialised self lurks a wolf-like individual ready to puncture a functioning social order cuts through the ‘cultural pessimistic’ and ‘communitarian’ takes on moral decline in the contemporary West. For Durkheim, in the absence of the sanctifying structures of society and community, the unregulated body, the self and its passions are always ‘profane’ and never ‘sacred’. The ‘cultural pessimistic’ and ‘communitarian’ assessments share this disparaging view of the individual, body and emotions.

Reiff ([1966]1987), Bell (1976) and Lasch (1979), for instance, in the first camp of moral decline, assume that culture should be built on the restriction of aggressive and sensual impulses – a prohibitive culture that must treat ‘the sensual part of the self as an enemy’ (Reiff, [1966]1987:49) or otherwise be left to ‘the shambles of appetite and self-interest’ (Bell, 1976:171). The essence of moral decline is diagnosed in this tradition as a push toward the emotional and bodily self without externally imposed limitation. Similar concerns are explicit in the communitarian camp. For instance, MacIntyre (1985:32) laments the rise of an ‘emotivist’ self, Bellah (1996:76) fears a turn to the ‘self and its feelings’ and Etzioni (2001:360) worries about the unleashing of ‘sexual urges’ and ‘aggressive feelings’. These theorists all give testimony to a Durkheimian denigration of the individual. The self and the emotions are morally distrustworthy, if not destructive, needing to be tutored in the communitarian foundations of family, school and community life.

The problem with Durkheim and the ‘cultural pessimists’ and ‘communitarians’ is that the individual is curtailed into a Freudian realm of anti-social instincts and desires at the expense of seeing the positive dimensions of self, emotion and embodiment (Bauman, 1993; Ahmed, 2000; Irigaray, 1991). In doing so, they rule out the possibility that emotions and embodied feeling can be morally generative and performative: how emotions might morally ‘do things’ (Ahmed, 2000). In accepting Durkheim’s claim that emotions generated in collective or ritualised forms are only useful for binding individuals to the higher social body, these theorists simultaneously dismiss the possibility of individual embodied emotion – moral feeling – as a source of moral action.

Bauman’s (1993;1995) postmodern ethics, in combination with feminists thinkers like Ahmed (2000) and Irigaray (1991) are significant here, restoring the self, emotions and body as morally capable. Bauman (1993:67-69), for example, emphasises the significance of ‘acting of affection’ rather than ‘heteronomous rules’ in contemporary conditions while Ahmed (2004) and Irigaray (1991) underline the value of emotion, feelings and bodies in ethical encounters and how this is implicated in particularised relations with gendered, sexed, racialised and even non-human Others.

Further, cultural pessimist and communitarian diagnoses of the moral present deny how therapeutic and self-fulfilment cultures defined by the search for personal authenticity or self-discovery could be positive for morality (Taylor, 1992). This can be seen first in the analysis of therapy and, second, in relation to practices of self-improvement. Theorists like Reiff, Lasch and Bellah and MacIntyre seem to always read the therapeutic self as amoral. While not denying the possibility for narcissism, it

is equally important to recognise how contemporary therapeutic and confessional cultures, such as talk-shows, reality TV and blogging, can place an accent on questions of emotion, suffering and ‘moral makeover’ – on becoming a ‘better’ person (Elliott and Lemert, 2006:124; Wright, 2008:333).

A similar argument can be made concerning the one-dimensional readings of practices of self-fulfilment and self-improvement advanced in theories of ‘narcissism’. For example, do Lasch’s (1979:4) examples of the turn to ‘the wisdom of the east’ or ‘eating health food’ have to be read as indices of a meaningless and narcissistic moral impoverishment? Could these practices not be re-interpreted as self-originating acts of ethics – as acts of personal authenticity that morally recognise the Other? (Taylor, 1992). The yoga practitioner teaches their disciples that ‘everything is connected’, how nature, humans and the environment form an integral whole which places ‘us’ as ‘species’ in multiple relationships of responsibility to both self and Others. Does the ‘wisdom of the East’, captured for example in the recent growth of Buddhism in the West (Phillips and Aarons, 2007), not centre on an ethics of minimising suffering for self and Others?

Further, why read eating ‘health food’ as simply self-indulgent? Recent research in the area of food and the ethics of consumption shows how the growth of fair-trade and cruelty-free products, the slow food movement, practices of ‘boycotting’ and vegetarianism can figure in new forms of life-style politics, engender new modes of ethical citizenship and encourage a virtuous ‘politics of the self’ (Lewis, 2008; Littler, 2005; Melucci, 1996; Micheletti, 2003; Soper, 2004). What decline theories overlook is how cultures of therapy and self-fulfilment can be constructed within a more

positive frame of ethical regards for others. This resonates with Taylor's (1992:66) 'ethics of authenticity' (1992:66), which suggests that values of self-discovery and self-fulfilment – placed within 'horizons of significance' (i.e., intimate relationships, nature, community, religion) – are worthwhile contemporary moral ideals.

2. Origins of Morality

Morality is unequivocally top-down in Durkheim. The corollary of his *homo duplex* ontology is that morality must be rooted in higher authoritative structures – either religion or alternative rational substitutes – that preside over and regulate the inherently egoistic and appetitive individual. Morality must come from something higher than the self; the self cannot be a source of morality. This assumption is also explicit in the two perspectives of moral decline focused as they are on the negative moral consequences of weakening tradition, religious authority and community.

This criticism is particularly relevant to the communitarian agenda of Bellah, Etzioni and MacIntyre. These theorists demonstrate an unambiguous allegiance to the Durkheimian idea that community is the only, proper source of morality. It is only through communities that individual moral commitments and sentiments can be harnessed, endorsed and affirmed (Smart, 1999:168). This not only excludes the individual as a potential source of morality but also ignores how 'society' or 'community' can operate, as Bauman (1989:174) defines it, as 'a "morality-silencing" force'. Durkheim and the communitarians preclude the possibility that society and community, those revered sites of moral production, could themselves be sources of immorality.

A parallel argument can be made concerning the emphasis on religion as a generator of moral precepts. Durkheim's insistence that the purpose of religion is to create ordered and cohesive societies through the moral regulation of individuals, disregards its potential for the promotion of immorality. As Coser (1977:224) points out, Durkheim seems blind to an obvious 'social fact': that religion is historically connected to systematised acts of hatred, violence, genocide, colonialism, terrorism and war.

This critique applies to the cultural pessimists and the communitarians who share an overly optimistic reading of religion as a positive moral force. An obvious point is that religion arguably 'tears' as it much as it 'binds'. It fragments and punctures societies, groups and the individual body as much as it anoints and sacralises. This is not to simply castigate or pigeon-hole religion as a poisoning and irrational force – as provocateurs such as Richard Dawkins (2006) and Christopher Hitchens (2007) do – but to point out a glaring hole in decline accounts of morality and to offer a more ambivalent reading of religion. Durkheim and others seem to deny that morality from above (religious or otherwise) may not always provide an assured path to 'right' moral action.

Bauman offers a particularly scathing critique of 'society cum religion', arguing that it is the 'individual's burden and bane' (1995:271) 'expropriating' individual moral responsibility for commands from above and actively excluding alternative moral voices. The worry for Bauman is that the communitarian promise of togetherness, cosiness and mutual understandings is sold for the cost of freedom, autonomy and a

promised release from the 'torments of moral responsibility' (1995:278). The value of Bauman's position is that it forces communitarianism to come to terms with the construction of otherness as a corollary of a shared moral community and to ask what this means for relations to others outside one's own preference – one's own child, family, community or 'neo-tribe' (Maffesoli, 1996).

Bauman's question to the communitarians – and to Durkheim – is what happens to those outside the social role, the community, the tribe, or the nation? If morality is always defined relative to community goals, what happens to individuals or groups who do not share the communal position (Hall, 1991:102)? Bauman's answer is that they are branded as strangers or others, dangerous threats to the shared values and beliefs that hold the community together – or as outsiders who provoke nothing but 'indifference' from the 'we' (Tester, 1997). Bauman encourages an acceptance of moral contingency and uncertainty rather than a desperate attempt to shore up moral ambivalence in the false safety of moral islands of sameness and certainty. His analysis begs the question of whether Etzioni, Bellah, and MacIntyre are offering anything more than a nostalgic wish to return to a time when moral certainty was possible.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Durkheim's moral sociology is underpinned by a set of problematic assumptions concerning the necessity of 'society' to control the amoral inclinations of human beings and that these assumptions, in similar but different configurations, underwrite the 'cultural pessimist' and 'communitarian' approaches to

morality. Two specific assumptions were highlighted as problematic: first, Durkheim's Freudian model of human nature and second, his emphasis on the necessity of society as a morally productive force. It was argued that both strands of contemporary 'decline' theory share Durkheim's *homo duplex* ontology, which assumes human nature to be essentially dichotomous, split between lower asocial desires and higher moral needs that must be enforced by external 'societal' regulation.

Drawing primarily on Bauman (1993), but also Taylor (1992), Ahmed (2000) and Irigaray (1991), the paper suggests that these two assumptions of 'decline' moral sociology preclude the distinct ways in which 'society', 'community' and 'religion' can work as 'morality-silencing-force[s]' (Bauman, 1989:174) and accordingly ignore the moral possibilities of self-creating moral forms grounded in emotion, feeling, embodiment and cultures of self-authenticity. Theorists like Bauman, Taylor, Foucault, Ahmed and Irigaray are helpful therefore in moving social theory away from decline models, and show how moral structures rooted in self, emotion, body and authenticity can provide powerful moral frameworks for everyday moral action.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2000) *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*.
London: Routledge.
- Ahmed, S. (2004) *Cultural Politics of Emotion*. London: Routledge.
- Bauman, Z. (1989) *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (1993) *Postmodern Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (1995) *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*. Cambridge:
Polity Press.
- 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.
- Coser, L. A. (1977) 'Durkheim's Conservatism and its Implications for his
Sociological Theory', in K.H. Wolff (ed.) *Essays on Sociology and Philosophy by
Emile Durkheim*. Harper and Row: New York.
- Durkheim, E. ([1893]1933) *The Division of Labor in Society*. G. Simpson (trans.).
New York: The Free Press.

- Durkheim, E. ([1895](1982) *The Rules of Sociological Method*. S. Lukes (ed.) W. D. Halls (trans.) New York: The Free Press.
- Durkheim, E. ([1925](1961) *Moral Education: A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education*. E.K. Wilson and H. Schnurer (trans.). E.K. Wilson (introduction). New York: The Free 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.
- Etzioni, A. (2001) 'On Social and Moral Revival', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 9(3): 356–371.
- Fevre, R. (2000) *The Demoralization of Western Culture: Social Theory and the Dilemmas of Modern Living*. London: Continuum.
- Hall, R. T. (1991) 'Communitarian Ethics and the Sociology of Morals: Alasdair MacIntyre and Émile Durkheim', *Sociological Focus* 24(2): 93–104.
- Irigaray, L. (1991) 'Questions to Emmanuel Levinas', in *The Irigaray Reader*. M. Whitford (ed.) Oxford: Blackwell: 178–189.

Junge, M. (2001) 'Zygmunt Bauman's Poisoned Gift of Morality', *British Journal of Sociology* 52(1): 105–119.

Lasch, C. (1979) *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co.

Lewis, T. (2008) 'Transforming Citizens? Green Politics and Ethical Consumption on Lifestyle Television', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 22(2): 227–240.

Little, J. (2005) 'Beyond the Boycott', *Cultural Studies* 19(2): 227–252.

MacIntyre, A. (1985) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. London: Duckworth.

Maffesoli, M. (1996) *The Time of the Tribes*. London: Sage.

Micheletti, M. (2003) *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism and Collective Action*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Melucci, A. (1996) *The Playing Self: Person and Meaning in a Planetary Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nisbet, R.A. (1965) *Emile Durkheim: With Selected Essays*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

- Phillips, T. and Aarons, H. (2007) 'Looking 'East': An Exploratory Analysis of Western Disenchantment', *International Sociology* 22(3): 325–341.
- Reiff, P. [1966](1987) *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Smart, B. (1999) *Facing Modernity: Ambivalence, Reflexivity and Morality*. London: Sage.
- Smart, B. (2001) 'Sociology, Morality and Ethics: On Being with Others', in G. Ritzer and B. Smart (eds) *The Handbook of Social Theory*. London: Sage: 509–519.
- Soper, K. (2004) 'Rethinking the "Good Life": The Consumer as Citizen', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 15(3): 111–17.
- Taylor, C. (1992) *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tester, K. (1997) *Moral Culture*. London: Sage.
- Wilson, B.R. (2001) 'Salvation, Secularisation, and De-Moralisation', in R.K. Fenn (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, Oxford: Blackwell: 39–51.
- Wright, K. (2008) 'Theorizing Therapeutic Culture: Past Influences, Future Directions', *Journal of Sociology* 44(1): 321–336.

