An anthropology of morality

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Anthropologists frequently make reference to the moral aspects of the institutions, groups or societies they study. However, while the economy, religion, politics and so on have been constituted as subfields within anthropology (even if it is understood that these are not in the end clearly bounded domains), it is much less common to talk about the anthropology of morality. This essay is an attempt to contribute to the relatively small body of literature which aims to establish such a field through a comparative examination of two ethnographic sketches, one taken from Uzbekistan and the other from Romania. It does not set out to give a definitive answer to the question of what morality is, nor to draw exclusive boundaries around a field of morality. Such an exercise would be as futile in the case of morality as it has proved to be for the fields of politics, kinship, religion and the economy. At the same time, however, if we want to develop analytical tools for the study of morality, we need explore what is distinctive about this when approached from an anthropological standpoint. We will set out the framework within which we mean to deal with this through a brief discussion of the ideas of some of the authors who have recently taken up the issue of morality as a field for study within anthropology.

Framing the study of morality

Forty years ago Abraham Edel, a philosopher working together with his wife, an anthropologist, proposed a concept of morality which he suggested could be studied cross-culturally. This would contain:

“selected rules enjoining or forbidding (e.g. a set of commandments), character-traits cultivated or avoided (virtues and vices), patterns of goals and means (ideals and instrumental values); a bounding concept of the moral community and a set of qualifications for a responsible person; a more or less distinctive selection of linguistic terms and rules for moral discourse; some patterns of systematisation; some selected modes of justification; some selection from the range of human feelings which in complex ways is tied into the regulative procedures; and, involved in all of these, some specific existential perspective or view of man, his equipment, his place in nature, the human condition and predicament.”

This definition assumes that a coherent and encompassing moral system exists in every society, and focuses on how it is institutionalised, encoded and enforced. What must be added to this definition is a recognition that multiple moralities exist within any given society, and an emphasis on the dynamic relation between larger systems and actual practice. The effects of relations of power in constituting and regulating moral ideals and practices must also be acknowledged. Actual behaviour and practice is influenced by larger values but these values are in turn influenced by practice. An anthropology of morality must ask who defines and enforces what is right and wrong and explore how different moral rules are applied to different categories of people.

Rather than locating an anthropology of morality in the comparative study of moral systems, James Laidlaw places the anthropology of ethics, as he terms it, in the sphere of reflection by individuals as they strive to make of themselves a certain kind of person. He draws upon Kant’s concept of moral reasoning as the free act of a rational agent, and Foucault’s “technologies of the self”. Human nature is not fixed but rather individuals continually modify themselves through choice and action. However, this freedom is
historically produced as practices of self-formation are derived from models which are “proposed, suggested, imposed upon [the individual] by his culture, his society, and his social group” . Here the link between larger systems of values and practice is located in the creation of subjectivities. Relations of power are present in the determination of the choices available, the models within which people develop their sense of moral selfhood, and in shaping of the freedom which people are able to exercise.

Central to this is the issue of agency. Following Foucault, Laidlaw rejects a concept of agency located in the free desires of the individual which are ultimately outside or independent of relations of power. Instead the ability to exercise ‘free’ choice is produced within regimes of social and epistemic power. Howell goes further in problematising free choice in connection with the moral. She questions the idea that moral codes or values must always involve reflexive choices and individual self-awareness. Rather, she supports a shift from the content of morality to a comparative study of forms of moral reasoning. Degrees of reflexivity and the availability of alternative evaluations vary across and within societies and we must ask what kind of reasoning a person or group engages in when justifying or condemning acts and decisions.

A concept which sidesteps the issue of agency and freedom is that of ethical sensibilities. For Talal Asad, this arises from the habitus (as developed by Mauss). The habitus is “an embodied capacity that is more than physical ability in that it also includes cultivated sensibilities and passions, an orchestration of the senses”. Thus, moral acts are not always the responsible acts of free agents answerable to God, society or conscience. They can also be produced within, or may be felt to be in contravention of, ethical sensibilities which are particular to a society or group. These sensibilities are not something ‘timeless’ or ‘natural’, but must be actively reproduced though disciplined practice and are continually revised as they adjust to changing material conditions.

To recognise that multiple moralities exist in any society and that these are locally produced is not to surrender to a moral relativism which precludes cross-cultural comparison. What can be compared, and what we attempt to describe in this essay, are the ways models for moral action are produced, the processes of moral reasoning by which actions are justified or condemned with reference to these models, and the degree to which people are able to interact creatively with them. What makes this activity ‘moral’ is that it refers to ideas of right and wrong and ideals of what constitutes a virtuous life which appeal to ‘truths’ beyond the immediate interests of the individual. These might be founded on religious truths, political ideologies, ideas reified as the timeless and essential ‘culture’ particular to the group and so on. Comparison of this sort can only be carried out on the basis of fine grained ethnographic study. Both of the contexts we explore in this essay have experienced recent and dramatic transformations after the collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. These two cases suggest that the field of morality is always in a dynamic state of negotiation and flux as people relate to wider societal norms in the context of everyday practical action.

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1 Saba Mahmood has developed this idea through an ethnography of women’s piety movements in Cairo. Mahmood describes how through bodily practices, spiritual exercises and the cultivation of modes of conduct women create ‘pious selves’. She offers an alternative view of agency which does not originate in the ‘authentic’ and ‘free’ internal dispositions of the subject, but argues that desires and aptitudes are themselves produced through disciplined practices.

2 Recent monographs such as Joel Robbins’s study of Urapmin ‘sinners’ in Papua New Guinea or Helle Rydstrøm’s study of the moral education of girls in Northern Vietnam show the insights that an empirically based research could bring to the conceptualisation of field research on morality. See also Michael Lambek’s work on morality
Moral models in Uzbekistan
The case study from Uzbekistan takes up the link between societal models and practical action. Ideas about what constitutes correct or desirable behaviour and norms of what ‘ought to be done’ are to a large extent adopted from models found in society. However, these models are not merely imposed on passive subjects, but can be actively adopted and reworked as sincerely held value commitments.

Abdumajid-aka is in his late 50s. He is a lecturer in mathematics at the University of Samarkand and director of a secondary school. In 2003 he was elected as the chairman, or oqsoqol (literally meaning ‘white beard’), of his mahalla committee (a mahalla is an residential unit in a city or village). Abdumajid-aka is what you might call a social activist. He is widely travelled, having visited Iceland and Israel for academic conferences and courses, and a few years ago he visited the United States on a project promoting the creation of civil society sponsored by the US government. On his return, he founded an association of heads of mahalla committees with the aim of protecting their members and increasing awareness of their legal rights and status. This is something unprecedented in Uzbekistan, and not a little dangerous given the authoritarian nature of the regime. In the course of this work he has more than once come into direct conflict with local government officials, including the vice mayor and the city public prosecutor, protecting members of his organisation from their extra-legal interventions.

Abdumajid-aka has developed his own highly individual conception of God, religion and the ideal form of society through his particular life experiences. This includes his upbringing within a Muslim home, his Soviet socialist education, work experience, foreign travel and so on. A cultural model which is particularly relevant to him is the communitarian ideal of the mahalla. The mahalla is perceived and operationalised by different actors in society in diverse ways. The regime uses the ideal of the mahalla as a way to legitimise authoritarian rule under the guise of communitarian values. Local government officials use the administrative structures of the mahalla as an extension of their own personal authority, forcing mahalla leaders to collect payments for utilities such as gas and electricity, to collect taxes, and even to aid in the fulfilment of production targets set by central government ministries. For some residents, the mahalla is an oppressive institution of social control where people’s actions are constantly the subject of gossip, judgement and even intervention by the mahalla leadership and neighbours.

Abdumajid-aka translates the ideals and practice of social solidarity and equality within the mahalla in the context of the modern nation state as a genuine basis for democracy. In doing so he plays upon the regime’s legitimating discourse. He reverses the President’s slogan ‘from a strong state to a strong society’ which is used to justify the need for firm executive control. Instead, Abdumajid-aka takes seriously the regime’s own propaganda to argue that a strong state depends on a truly democratic mahalla. In day-to-day interaction he encounters local government officials who have very different ideas of this institution and in these struggles and negotiations with these officials Abdumajid-aka is attempting to realise his own vision of the ideal society.

Islam is another model which Abdumajid-aka draws upon. He professes himself to be a believing Muslim. He performs the daily prayers as much as his work commitments allow and he is well respected by the local Islamic leadership, the imam of the local mosque and leader of the city Islamic administration who is also a member of his mahalla committee. However, he has developed a personal interpretation of God and religion derived from his experience of illness and healing, dream encounters with what he interprets as divine agency, books he has studied and perhaps also his intellectualist approach. He sees God as a kind of universal consciousness, of which each individual’s consciousness is a small part. He understands levels of consciousness to constitute a scale, with humans attaining a certain
level of development. Animals occupy a lower position on this scale than humans, and between humans and God there are angels and other beings. These beliefs combine with his Marxist education in forming Abdumajid-aka’s view of an ideal society. He claims to still believe that one day people will attain what he calls a communist society, where people receive according to their needs and give according to their ability, but does not think it could have been achieved within the former Soviet socialist system. He also dismisses the current regime’s ideology as unconvincing and not reflective of people’s lived experience. The ideal society might be arrived at through religious education and upbringing.

Abdumajid-aka is able to use the mahalla and Islam in this way because they are conventionally accepted modes of action and experience. For example, dream encounters and experiences of healing, which in some societies might be interpreted as the playing out of an individual’s inner psychological issues or as exotic or irrational belief, are intelligible for many people in Uzbekistan as the intervention of divine agency. At the same time intelligibility is not only ‘cultural’ but is also a formed through what is made possible or otherwise through existing relations of power.

An example of this is the institution of the mahalla itself. Despite the claims of regime discourses that the mahalla is an ancient institution and carrier of Uzbek cultural values, the form the mahalla takes today is very different from how it might have existed at any time in the past. During the Soviet period and particularly since independence in 1991, the institution of the mahalla has been standardised as a residential unit with a leadership and a set of personnel with defined duties. It has been imposed in areas where it had never had any history before, such as urban multi-story residential districts, and variations in local forms of social organisation have been regularised through the now official structures. Moreover the relationship of the oqsoqol both with state authorities and residents is to a large extent shaped by duties and practical power bestowed by the state. For example, the official mahalla committee is responsible for the distribution of state funded poverty relief and child benefit, it issues documents and certificates which everyone has need for at one time or another, and the state judicial system often refers back to the mahalla domestic disputes and other cases which judges consider of minor importance. Thus, although the mahalla might be a ‘cultural model’, the way it can be operationalised within Abdumajid-aka’s ideas about what constitutes ‘the good’ is shaped by relations of power, within which state actors play a prominent role.

Were Abdumajid-aka to exceed the bounds of expression considered politically acceptable by the regime, he would be forced into the position of political opposition activist with all the dangers and restrictions on personal freedoms and forms of expression that that would entail. Were he to express his ideas on religion more publicly and attempt to persuade others to his view, as some in Samarkand have done who have founded what might be called ‘new age’ movements in Western Europe, he would be shunned by practicing Muslims and would not hold the respected and prominent position he does at the moment. Abdumajid-aka engages creatively with the cultural models of the mahalla and Islam, but personal freedom is not unbounded. The way he is able to use these models, and the limits of his public action, are to a large extent shaped by relations of power.

*Moral deliberations and moral justifications in Romanian organisations*

The case study from Romania deals with the way in which individuals negotiate their allegiance to different moral models in a time of change (through moral deliberation) and with the construction of justifications of the deviance of practice from these models.

The moral models upon which Romanian urbanites draw are also diverse and sometimes enter in conflict with each other, but the dynamics between these models have radically different consequences than in the above case of Abdumajid-aka. What characterises the
post-1989 period in Romania is the rapid change in economic and political structures, as well as in values. In the sphere of work, for instance, the new values that accompany liberal policies enjoy legitimacy because of their association with European values. The employees are thus faced with competing sets of values: the socialist morality with its emphasis on equality and the satisfaction of needs and the liberal values of competition, efficiency and meritocracy. The new set of liberal values is rhetorically asserted to be superior, because of its link to economically successful societies. The old set of socialist values is closer to actual practices however, and thus can be more easily invoked in order to explain them (it has set a ‘tradition’ of justifications and explanations with respect to these values). To further complicate the landscape of moral frameworks, the Christian morality which has, in its Eastern Christian (Orthodox) version, no concrete discourse related to the sphere of work, shadows individual action, as both an ‘old’ and a ‘new’ framework. The weight and influence of these moral models on individual action is thoroughly negotiated, the novelty of the encounter meaning that no synthesis or even equilibrium between these models has been reached.

If the context of social change means that several moral models are consequently at work in the society, the existence of a socialist past and the appeal of ‘Europe’ are responsible for the strength with which people believe in the power of these models. Indeed, one of the main disappointments with the socialist system was the duplicity existing between socialist values and actual practices (reflected in the work of social scientists in the classic distinction between ‘socialism’ and ‘actually existing socialism’). After 1989, the year in which socialism was rejected, it was hoped that the new social order will not be duplicitous. Therefore there were a strong discourse inciting people to actually believe in the new values and to ‘really’ behave morally in respect to them, because the very act of rejecting socialism meant for them that new democratic values had to be adopted; and because this was a precondition for ‘becoming European’. This led to a high moral exigency, which was publicly praised as one of the newly acquired freedoms. The post-1989 governments, mass media and intellectuals put pressure on ordinary citizens for becoming ‘new men’, on ‘getting rid of the old habits’, if they wanted to ‘get into Europe’.

Apart from the strong and conflicting moral models that characterise Romanian cosmology today, practices also enter into play and shape moral values. The moral justifications given by individuals, in which they explicitly or implicitly relate to moral models in order to justify their actions, show that deviant actions are more mildly judged if they are recurrent or if the existence of conflicting moral models prevents the elaboration of concrete guidelines. As a result of the negotiation between values and practices, the high standard of moral values is diminished and reshaped to accommodate practices that would have been otherwise considered as ‘deviant’ or ‘immoral’.

Traian, a young employee in his mid 20s working in a humanitarian nongovernmental organisation, tried to justify his lack of involvement in the organisation in front of his more dedicated colleagues. He expressed his conviction that work in a humanitarian organisation requires self-sacrifice: extra hours of work and a certain ‘calling’. But he had taken the job of

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3 The official suppression of religion during the socialist period did not lead to an eradication of religious values, thus we might refer to the Christian Orthodox morality as being an ‘old’ set of values. The religious renewal that took place after 1989 generated a new understanding of Orthodoxy in urban areas. Thus a ‘new’ Christian Orthodox morality of mixed Christian inspiration is being created.

4 The public discourse in Romania emphasises the fact that Romanians did not want socialism, that the Soviets imposed it on them. Socialist values were not ‘chosen’, but forced on them (eg the common property).

5 Expressions used by the Prime Minister Mugur Isarescu in his public discourse when launching the "Economic Strategy for Romania on Medium Term (2000-2004/5)" (Antena 1, 2000a), a major document realised in view of the negotiations with the European Union.
public relations coordinator here because he needed money and needed to be in the Capital in order to prepare the entry exams for the Academy of Theatre and Film to become a film director, a profession for which he had a ‘calling’. While respecting his working hours, Traian let his mind wander into the realm of Shakespeare and made numerous mistakes when writing his more down-to-earth correspondence with partner institutions, thus affecting the NGO’s activity and reputation. Traian was aware that none of the moral models that he invoked in order to justify his absentmindedness would absolve him from fault. Nonetheless he pointed out to his colleagues that he was working steadily, eight hours per day, under difficult conditions (during the summer it was 40 degrees Celsius with no air conditioning in the office), which would satisfy the socialist work ethic. He invoked also the fact that his whole life was dedicated to work, because after his eight hours in the NGO he continued working until late at night for his entry exams- that would satisfy the requirements of even the most extreme variants of the protestant work ethic. Finally, he pointed out that he was deeply compassionate towards the beneficiaries of the NGO activities (HIV infected children), a fact that was visible in his interaction with them and their parents.

None of Traian’s justifications were lies and he probably embraced all the values he invoked, but none of these justifications actually excused him for not doing his job properly. According to all the moral models he himself referred to, he was guilty and his actions did not fit his stated values. His justifications were constructed for the purpose of appearing less deviant in front of his colleagues. As an excuse strategy, he also invoked the poor performance and work involvement of the state employees from the institutions with which he had contacts, the even more important mistakes they were making in their relation with him, their lack of immediate response to letters and so on. These statements together with arguments linked to the lack of clear norms from the NGO management, were meant to diminish the importance of his deviant behaviour, by lowering the work values that his actions had to fit. He was negotiating, both with his consciousness and with his colleagues, the necessary level of involvement in a humanitarian organisation, and he was doing this by proposing lower standards.

This behaviour is current today among many service sector employees in Bucharest, who are aware of the fact that their performance does not match their values and the others’ values, but ‘cannot help it’. Despite attempts to bring values closer to practices, most employees still remain ‘in between’, knowing what ‘ought’ to be done and doing what they can do, in the difficult social conditions generated by rapid change.

Conclusion
The two cases we have presented, though derived from different social contexts, both show the dynamic nature of the processes by which models for moral action are incorporated within personal life projects. Depending upon their particular position within society and their own life trajectories, individuals have access to differing models. Agency is located in the choice available when confronted with multiple models, in the way they are combined and adapted. At the same time the form these models take and the way they can be operationalised are to a large extent shaped by relations of power. When people come into contact with new models for a virtuous life, they to not come ‘cold’ as it were. The way new models are perceived are influenced by what Asad has called the ethical sensibilities. Abdumajid-aka adopts the ideal of democracy from his experience of foreign travel, his education, from his involvement in the projects of American NGOs, and from the discourses of the regime itself. However, this is interpreted within the framework of his existing ideas, or ‘sensibilities’, of a ‘good life’ which are shaped within his experience of the mahalla, his Muslim upbringing, and his education and life under Soviet Communism. Traian adopts his work values from the discourses of the NGO managements, media discourses on the
‘Western’ work ethic and the work performance he witness around him. The contradictions existing between these models as well as between these moral models and his needs, desires and practices, leave him overwhelmed and ultimately torn apart.

As a final comment, a focus on morality offers potential for engagement with the already extensive literature within anthropology dealing with selfhood and subjectivities. Laidlaw points us in this direction with his anthropology of ethics which is founded on processes of moral reasoning and self-formation. For both Abdumajid-aka and Traian, their self-representations as a good Muslim, good community leader, and good worker are formed with reference to their value commitments. These are not ‘mere’ justifications or ideologies, but acquire their persuasiveness and force by reference to greater ‘truths’. That these truths are historically produced, as is the freedom which the exercise when they engage with them, does not negate the fact that they are creatively adopted as sincerely held value commitments within their particular life projects.
References: