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The morality of the everyday: An initial step towards a research strategy**Darryl Coulthard**School of Information Systems
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darryl.coulthard@deakin.edu.au**Abstract**

This paper attempts to problematise morality and to locate and investigate morality as an everyday activity. The paper draws extensively on the work of Zygmunt Bauman on the Holocaust and the challenges the Holocaust makes to social theory and to ethics. Following Bauman and Giddens, I argue that morality is pre-social and forms part of the social world in which we live and that it cannot and should not be codified. Some implications for future research on the morality of the everyday are made.

Keywords morality, ethics, every day life

Over a number of years I have had to provide a course on ethics as part of the professional development for Information Systems students studying in a Business Faculty. I have often felt uneasy about the courses that I had developed and almost all of the business and computer ethics books I had read. Would the students following my course be aware of, let alone take a moral course of action in their working lives? Would they recognise, even dimly, the key issues facing their world and would they take a moral stand and what would that stand be?

Their essays and examinations on ethics and professional or global issues of computers and information systems showed that almost all could identify a breach of a professional code of ethics reasonably easily, most could tell the difference between consequentialism and the deontological ethics with a bit of an effort and some could even apply such concepts to the textbook and exam ethical dilemmas thrown to them with moderate skill and occasional passion. However, my concern was whether my students would pass the moral test of history. My unease began to be articulated when I read Dillard (2003) on IBM and the Holocaust. What struck me most of all was that not only did it seem plausible that IBM, its managers and professionals may have been implicated in the holocaust in some way, but that my teaching and the textbooks would in all likelihood not prevent my students – decent and law abiding that they appeared to be — making similar choices to those that IBM professionals allegedly had done. Even worse in all

likelihood it would not have prevented them from doing what most German professionals did during the Holocaust when they buried themselves in the technical and managerial problems that their superiors lawfully handed them (Bauman, 1989).

My ongoing questions are: how do we as teachers prepare our students against such things and how do we as researchers theorise, identify and explore how such things may happen in the business world? Indeed, how are not only immoral acts created but also how is goodness possible? Finally, do we aid in the prevention of evil and wrong doing and how do aid and abet the good? My background is in sociology so it is perhaps not surprising that I approach these questions from the point of view of a sociologist. Morality is an empirical issue and my task therefore is to see how and when goodness is created and how and when evil occurs. I leave what morality is as an open question, what is good and what is evil is derived inductively and hermeneutically, such a question is best answered at the end of the journey rather than at the beginning. This paper is very much at the start of the journey at the stage of preparation and puzzle.

Bauman's Challenge to the Sociology

Zygmunt Bauman (1989; 1994) provides an important critique of morality and sociology. He argues that sociology, and by extension I believe, business ethics research, has not adequately recast our sociology of morality in the light of the horrors of the Holocaust. Bauman's key observation of the Holocaust was that Nazi society distorted, twisted, corrupted the ordinary everyday decency of people and how through such distortions people supported and served bureaucratically planned and organised technologies of death (Bauman, 1989).

Germany, but more importantly, modernity, failed the test, as the Final Solution "*arose out of a genuinely rational concern, and it was generated by bureaucracy true to its form and purpose*" (Bauman, 1989; 17 emphasis original). Bureaucracy – instrumental reason, met with "another invention of modernity": "a bold design of a better, more reasonable and rational order" (Bauman, 1989: 106) and basic morality and humanity were systematically addressed, and destroyed.

With this insight he virtually turns our understanding of morality on its head – both secular philosophy and sociology and also its theological predecessors. He argues rather than society producing morality, it is society that distorts morality:

The substance of morality being a duty toward the other (as distinct from an obligation), and a duty which precedes all interestedness — the roots of morality reach well beneath societal arrangements, like structures of domination or culture. Societal processes start when the structure of morality (tantamount to intersubjectivity) is already there. *Morality is not a product of society. Morality is something society manipulates* — exploits, re-directs, jams (Bauman, 1989; 183 emphasis in original)

Bauman is directly challenging our 'etiological myth' that it is the norms, moral sanctions and laws of our society that prevents human life from being "poor, nasty, brutish, and short" as Hobbes once put it. Bauman argues that through the work of Durkheim such a view has been embedded within sociology – that societal norms and sanctions produce morality. However, like Bauman I find that post Holocaust, the Killing Fields of Cambodia and in a time of Weapons of Mass Destruction, of environmental degradation and of political dissembling, lies and spin, it is hard to hold credulity to the view that it is society that makes us moral.

For the sociologist it poses an initial theoretical question as to how can it be that something apparently as social as morality not be a product of society? It also poses the more practical issues of how does society, and how and where do institutions undertake the manipulation, the exploitation, redirection and jamming? It opens up the question of not how do we teach morals, but how do we protect or equip people from being misled, how is the routine and everyday coopted into evil and the immoral? The task at hand is to investigate how the practices of socialization “consist in the manipulation of moral capacity” (Bauman, 1989: 178).

The implications of Bauman’s insight for business and industrial ethics is how business and work as institutions ‘exploit, redirect and jam’ the moral sensibilities of the stakeholders of business ranging from worker, manager and owner, to governments and unions and the community ‘at large’. We must look to how and whether decent law abiding people can do evil things in their daily work without registering that their acts are even remotely immoral, how the decisions they make or ignore affect the well being of others and how the morality of such decision-making is apparently excluded from the well being of others. This I believe is the post-Holocaust, postmodern challenge to the ethics business and work ethics.

Morality as ‘pre-societal’

For Bauman, what morality is and what it means, cannot be universalised into moral codes without contradiction. It is aporetic, an insoluble problem. It is partial and ‘unreasonable’, unamenable to reason. This certainly reflects my struggle with what morality is – that it is something that refuses and cannot be caged by reason. It is a phenomenon rather than a dictate or rational set of rules to be followed. As a phenomenon it has in common with all the other sociological concepts such as self, gender, race and power that are contradictory and contextually based. The focus is not on ‘straightening out’ morality but of following its trajectory, describing its emergence and disappearance.

Morality, Bauman argues does not perform a social function nor is it society that calls morality into being. Morality for Bauman not only precedes society but also the self. Bauman (1994: 13) argues that there is ‘no self before the moral self’ and to think otherwise is to ‘assume tacitly that moral responsibility is a mystery contrary to reason, that selves would not be ‘normally’ moral if not for some special and powerful cause; to become moral, selves have to first give up or curtail some other constituent of themselves...’ (1994: 13). Morality, the practices that constitute how one does and should behave, and selfhood are intertwined. As Levinas (1991), cited by Bauman describes “ethics does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics”. Bauman, following Levinas understands this ethics forming the structure of subjectivity.

Bauman’s theory has been called ‘non-sociological’ (eg Junge, 2001; Davydova and Sharrock, 2003) as a consequence of his insistence that morality precedes both society and self. Bauman is, I believe, following a general postmodern approach to social ontology where neither society nor the self is ontologically prior (Schatzki, 1996). Within this approach, social practices or discourses, the doings and sayings of people precede both society and the self. It is through these practices that both the self and society are constituted and exist within those practices. Morality, in my view, is a social practice that is not dictated by society but as with all social practices produces society. We need to consider the social practices that constitute morality in the same way as we consider those practices that constitute the self or gender (cf Butler, 1990). Similarly, as Bauman recognises, morality forms part of the constitutional processes of the self. It is part of

the subjective knot and structure of the self, possibly similar in the way that gender forms part of the structure of self.

To be clear, Bauman does not appear to make the claim of postmodernist appreciation of social practices that I have presented. However, it is clear that it is the presumed externality of morality, its secondary or derivative and calculable status that Bauman saves for most criticism. He wishes:

To imply, in other words, that the moral tendency, that is concern for the Other for the Others sake, has the character of a pre-reflexive inner compulsion. It is also to imply that if not for extraneous forces (which include the learned and interiorized tendency to the rational calculation of gains and losses, the assessment of adequacy with an abstract rule etc.), the self self-determination of moral agents would invariably express itself in such a concern. It is to imply, finally that if concern with the Other does not appear, or if its effectivity is defused and brought to naught, an operation of extraneous forces and there resulting heteronomy of the agent is to be supposed.

Bauman speaks of a 'moral impulse' that is born in the intersubjective relation with another. This is not I believe a call to a hereditary disposition but to an ontogenetic development that emerges out of intersubjectivity just as our self-identity and our gender also emerge and are incited in intersubjectivity. The moral impulse is as unavoidable as gender or self-identity.

It is in this sense then that morality is pre-societal, but not pre-social. It is therefore in the social practices that we engage in that we must look to find morality and to investigate how society can indeed distort that morality and how it may accentuate some aspects of everyday morality that given the aporetic and contradictory nature of morality such amplification may lead to its opposite – immorality.

Morality and self, norms and intelligibility

For practice theory, the self emerges or is incited and produced within social practice and the continuous ongoing nature of the world (Giddens, 1991). Social reality, including the self and society is not a given where the self is like an actor on an existing stage but both the self and social reality is constructed, existing as an instantiation. We make our social world in a continuous flow of conduct and 'lived through experience' (Giddens, 1976: 73). The self and our social worlds are ongoing social accomplishments, having no independent existence outside our enactment of them.

The self is socially produced as an engagement in the practices of the world that discipline, train, incite or call forth its ongoing production (Schatzki, 1996). Rose (1991) refers to this process as subjectification. This subjectification produces both difference and sameness of the self to others. It is different in that small differences lead to large differences. For example, the small differences between human males and females are disciplined in such a manner to create at times large differences in attitude and character. There is a sameness, although no essence as one gender shares some similar experience. Such 'discipline' or training must be distinguished from theories of passive or deterministic socialisation. The disciplines produce or call forth the active, reflective self (eg Foucault, 1986).

The self is created, constituted at that moment and exists only in its enactment, its reflexivity. As Giddens recognises, such a constitution cannot be ‘wholly fictive but must integrate events in the external world and sort them into an ongoing story of the self’ (Giddens, 1991: 54). To this end, it is an accomplishment, an achievement. It is something that is done well or ill with more or less meaning, coherence and longitudinal integrity to oneself and to others. Morality forms part of this accomplishment.

Morality in this sense of the term, may well, as Bauman suggests forms part of the structure of social reality. How this occurs and how it shapes social interaction and society in different ways needs to be further developed. Cahill (1986) provides an insight into how gender is used by children to create a selfhood which may prove analogous to the development of moral responsibility. Cahill shows that young children wish to distinguish themselves as both competent and different from babies. By using gender appropriately the young child demonstrates competency as a girl or boy. In a similar way, if morality is considered a set of complex social practices, demonstrating the ‘right’ response also demonstrates competency and responsibility. The child gradually increases their engagement with others through these social practices of gender. The key word here, I believe is that of responsibility – the child learns to be responsible to the other and for their actions and by doing so grows and takes on further responsibilities.

Morality so conceived is not a monolithic code, but a set of multiple, complex and contradictory practices. Morality is, as Bauman suggests ‘prior to’ ontology. It is prior in the sense that through the operation of trust and moral responsibility that our social ontology is created and can be created. It is, as Bauman argues “the primary structure of intersubjective relation in its most pristine form, unaffected by any non-moral factors (like interest, calculation of benefit, rational search for optimal solutions, or surrender to coercion)” (Bauman, 1989: 183).

A socially constructed world is nevertheless quite orderly and consistent. I have described how the self is made consistent but how is the world fixed between people. We must look carefully at how social interactions are made consistent and how inconsistencies are ironed out as misunderstandings, incompetence, or as naïveté. Following the work of Garfinkel, norms provide the reference points or grids out of the plethora of possibility and possible interpretations in order to produce a contingently agreed social (intersubjective) reality and human actors within that reality from which to proceed (Coulter, 1989). Norms, according to practice theory approaches are not regulatory or determinative but are ‘standardised expectancies’ that people ‘discover, create and sustain’ (Heritage, 1984: 109). They provide the reference grid or benchmark to joint action and constitute the material of daily life.

Such standardised expectancies are both moral and ontological in character. As expectancies, they are moral in that they suggest what each person ‘should do’ in given circumstances. Deviations from standardised expectancies draws attention to something going on:

Normative accountability is the ‘grid’ by reference to which whatever is done will become visible and assessable. And, subject to this condition of visible accountability, conduct undertaken for whatever objectives will tend to become designed and shaped responsively to the constraints imposed by this visibility. In this sense, normative accountability can best be viewed as organizing, channelling and, in a sense, ‘domesticating’ the ways in which interests may be realized (Heritage, 1984: 117).

Moreover there is a moral expectation that all actors will 'play by the rules' and jointly create an intersubjective and social world. As Garfinkel (1967) discovered in his breach of trust experiments, moral sanctions were applied not for deviations from norms per se but for the breach of trust. Morality is entwined in the fixing or fastening of the world and self and other in that world. Bauman's 'concern for the other', I suggest is found here in the concern for being responsible for the establishment of trust.

Finally, there are important psychological implications of the world being socially constructed. Giddens (1991) argues that, not only do we live in a social world that is continuously and contingently produced, but that we also have some knowledge of this. Consequently there is an existential fear that its collapse may not be not far away. Giddens (1984; 1991) points out that we have considerable emotional investment in ensuring a consistent and stable world. As he states:

The orderliness of day-to-day life is a miraculous occurrence, but it is not one that stems from any sort of outside intervention; it is brought about as a continuous achievement on the part of everyday actors in an entirely routine way. That orderliness is solid and constant; yet the slightest glance of one person towards another, inflexion of the voice, changing facial expression or gestures of the body may threaten it. (Giddens, 1991; 52)

People speak of the unreality of sudden events such as accidents or events where the world seems to 'turn upside' down and where people recounting what occurred may differ substantially. Outside of the sustained world lies an existential abyss. Such an abyss is staved off by creating a stable framework for ontological security or protective cocoon around the self. The world is made safe and consistent and chaos is held at bay. We thus have the prospect of a neuroticism of the individual failing to look out of the immediate situation and take a deeper or larger view of the situation. Is it the case the Arendt, referring to Eichmann and the banality and small mindedness of evil is actually referring to neuroticism, the production of a neurotic security?

Morality being put to sleep

For Bauman it is factors external to this moral/ontological concern that distort, misdirect and avoid this moral capacity. In some way calculative interest, ideological bias and indifference corrupts such moral concern viewing the other not as a point of engagement with another but variously as an enemy, a resource, a self-interested ally.

He argues that codes and norms¹ 'put to sleep' the conscious. This too is a challenging viewpoint of Bauman's and rests on an ongoing moral struggle or moral deliberation with the Other, with the here and now. Ethical codes take away the moral responsibility of the moral agent. As Bauman (1998: 16, emphasis original) argues "Codes and norms are not the beginning, but the end of moral relationship; and more often than not, the moral self".

Bauman's challenge is for ethics researchers and theorists to identify how such institutions such as business, work and modernity distort this moral impulse, how trust and concern are tuned into fear and loathing, blind indifference and self interest. How people appear impotent in the face of ethic problems. How, our moral conscious is put to sleep and how it might actually be awoken.

¹ By norms, I believe he is referring to Durkheim or Parsons notion of norm as a regulatory force.

Giddens provides I believe two important approaches. The first being the establishment of an ontological security that normalises experience. The second is that of the sequestration of experience. Giddens argues that the orientation of modernity towards control removes moral questions or unsettling events out of the control and experience of the individual. Such sequestration does remove ethical responsibility from the agent. The ethics are ‘taken care of’ by experts, others hidden. The individual is not ‘qualified’, it is another’s problem to deal with. This is what Bauman means by being ‘put to sleep’. In classes as I work through ethical questions in classes, I sometimes wonder that what I am really teaching the students is that they are patently not qualified given the complexities of the problems and their dissatisfaction and obvious limitations in addressing the issues and given that there is no ‘right’ answer ‘any answer’ will suffice, at least for now.

Bauman (1989) speaks of the notion of ‘floating responsibility’ whereby nobody, or at the very least somebody quite distant is responsible for the moral decision. He summarises the ‘sphere of the management of morality’ as follows:

Social production of distance, which either annuls or weakens the pressure of moral responsibility; substitution of technical for moral responsibility, which effectively conceals the moral significance of the action; and the technology of segregation and separation, which promotes indifference to the plight of the Other which otherwise would be subject to moral evaluation and morally motivated response.

The way forward

This paper is simply a beginning and a very small beginning at that. However, the problematisation of morality vis-à-vis society is a first step, a step that takes us past much business ethics texts, codes and principles. We need to focus our research on how ethics are lived and avoided and how and whether society does indeed twist and distort ethical issues. We need to develop a research project on the morality of the everyday.

Such a research project can draw on the work of those who have considered the atrocities of the Holocaust on the role of ordinary people and professionals in the carrying out of those atrocities. In a similar manner we should look at ethical (mal) practices not to identify the rules that were not followed, or to develop new codes but to see how the actors themselves rationalised to themselves and to others their activities. We must also identify how ethical issues are taken away from – sequestered from the worker such that ethical issues are dealt with and answered by some other department whose expertise is seen to be beyond that of the worker. By (re)locating morality in the everyday we may better prepare ourselves and our students for the moral issues and dilemmas that we will face.

How this may be achieved as a research project is, I believe, to follow the field study approaches of the sociology of science where the laboratory findings are made. Our task would be rather to see how ethical matters by workers and managers are discussed and avoided. The study of how nuclear scientists and professionals rationalised and discussed the weapons of mass destruction that they were producing provides as similar approach (cf. Broad, 1985; Cohn 1987).

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