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12 Seminar, B1/2

17 May 2024

### Performative Morality

Generation Z is no stranger to apathy and procrastination. With the modern, de-stigmatized, near-constant exposure to social media, it becomes easier and easier to distract oneself from things that matter. The forefront of one's mind becomes the newest fashion trends, the songs that are the highest on the charts, and the content of the next algorithm-recommended video that pops up.

In the midst of this preoccupied state, humanity loses sight of its power. It presumes that someone else will take care of the problems that plague the world, and its members reject their responsibility to act. The practice of morality becomes performative, disfiguring itself in an attempt to collect likes or gain sympathy as opposed to creating positive change in the world. Rather than serving the holder's morality, it exists as a means of appeal to others, begging for others to like us, to accept us or just to notice. This Performative Morality inevitably leads to the death of individuality as we sacrifice what we want, need, or feel for the validation of others.

Morality and individuality are intrinsically connected; individuality, or selfhood, is merely a representation of a person's morality. Individuality is the

combination of the internal and external self; basically, how a person perceives themselves and how others perceive them. Morality perfectly encapsulates both of these principles. As defined by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, morality is “codes of conduct... accepted by an individual for her own behaviour” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *Morality*). The terms “accepted” and “behaviour” account for the internal and external portrayals of selfhood, respectively.

“Accepted” refers to the internal self. This is because no one can accept anything for another person. An author could write the most genuine lines of prose ever written, but they would hold no weight to a person who didn’t comprehend their words and couldn’t accept their meaning. One’s acceptance of their morality dictates their internal monologue.

“Behaviour” refers to the external self. This half of the definition is much more self-explanatory, seeing as your behaviour is all that other people have to understand you by. A person’s behaviour is always motivated by their morality, either as they choose to honour or betray it with each action. In this way, the internal and external self are governed by one’s morality.

Although the bond between acceptance and behaviour is ingrained into our concepts, there can be a disconnect between the two. People taint this connection in the process of performing their morality. Something performative is “made or done for show (as to bolster one's own image or make a positive impression on others)” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary,

*Performative*). Performative Morality, then, would be any action that is done without intention to serve one's own morality. Usually, this applies to three different cases: the Unspoken Morality, the Performed Authentic Morality, and the outright Performative Morality.

Now, it may be claimed that morality left unspoken, then, would not qualify as Performative Morality, similar to a lie of omission not being a deception. This claim could not be farther from the truth. If one claims to hold an opinion but does nothing to support it, they are inherently performing. If nothing is going to come of it, then in truth, their behaviour is not motivated by the statement. By definition, then, it cannot truly be a part of their morality, it is just for show. In Thoreau's essay *Civil Disobedience*, he writes anecdotes about how one shouldn't support what they don't believe in, from the perspective of pre-Civil War America. Back then, people were facing the Unspoken Morality issue in terms of slavery and civil rights. They would claim they were anti-slavery, but wouldn't put any action to their intention. "There are thousands who are *in opinion* opposed to slavery and the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing," (Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 5) thereby engaging in Performative Morality.

Choosing silence, whether it be to preserve someone else's comfort or to avoid one's own discomfort, is an outright betrayal of one's moral code. For

whatever purpose they sought to fulfil, they directly contradicted their morality by not doing anything to serve it. In some cases, they would rather act against their beliefs in an attempt to save themselves from judgement than act in accordance with them to preserve their moral integrity. This is a textbook example of Performative Morality and in direct contradiction to the actions of those who forgo safety for righteous action.

It may also be argued that even if the actions of those who stayed silent weren't Authentically Moral, the change they were arguing for still came eventually. The harm in this statement, though, is the word "eventually". The beauty of democracy in America is that it "refine[s] and enlarge[s] the public's views," in such a way that everyone in the nation has the opportunity to have their voice heard (Madison, *Federalist No. 10*).

Rather than taking this opportunity, though, the people at the time killed their individuality, and democracy suffered for it. Had the silent majority spoken up and given action to their intention, civil rights could've come decades earlier than they did. Unspoken Morality in cases like this comes with an inherent risk of inaction. It has the risk to delay progress, sometimes to the point of halting progress entirely. As C.S. Lewis writes in *The Screwtape Letters*, "The more often he feels without acting, the less he will ever be able to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel" (Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*).

So then, in order to utilise Authentic Morality, humanity takes on the responsibility to act. This responsibility is not to act in support of EVERY just cause, but to support those that they believe in. “A man has not *everything* to do, but *something*” (Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 8). Serving one’s Authentic Morality doesn’t mean becoming the man at the forefront of the movement, it simply means being one of the men in the movement that his morality authentically aligns with.

It’s important to recognize, though, that although action is important, it isn’t everything. Intention is imperative to Authentic Morality. The second most seen archetype of Performative Morality is the Performed Authentic Morality, and an example of it can be seen in the Black Lives Matter movement. The Black Lives Matter movement was a protest in the United States against police brutality, mostly in relation to that which minorities faced, but most heavily, those against black people.

An alarmingly ever-present consistency between modern instances of Performative Morality is social media presence, and this manifested in the case of the Black Lives Matter movement as a phenomenon called “Blackout Tuesday”. On June 2nd, 2020, hundreds of people set off to support the movement by “posting solemn messages featuring stark black backgrounds” (Willingham, *Why Posting...*). The intention was to block out all other posts for the day so that the government would have to pay attention to the people’s message, and, for the most part, it worked.

It has of course been stated that the Black Lives Matter movement brought forth a lot of positive change, and that Blackout Tuesday was not exempt from this. It is undeniable that Performative Morality *can* have positive effects. No matter how much change it brings, though, action that comes from this moral betrayal (where they may be either serving their desire, leaving an impression on others, or attempting to fit with others' morality), will always be less valuable than action from Authentic Morality. While Blackout Tuesday had its positive effects, like spreading awareness of police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement as a whole, it also had its indisputable consequences.

Most of the consequences that the movement faced had to do with long-term engagement in the movement. So many people posted to the hashtag that valuable sources and information became buried under hundreds of black squares. Some people, in an attempt to “bolster their reputation” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *Performative*), would only post the square despite not being knowledgeable about, or, in extreme circumstances, even supportive of the movement at all. There were some instances where people's support would stop at the square, even when they could have influenced the movement much more. The performative aspects of Blackout Tuesday far outweighed the authentic ones.

Although these aspects did expose more people to the movement in the short term, they eventually led to frustration and confusion. People who

could have been valuable assets to the movement couldn't find relevant information about it, and, in due time, Blackout Tuesday damaged the Black Lives Matter movement more than it helped it. Performative Morality managed to kill people's individuality by robbing them of the chance to make an impact in unique, impressionable ways. Instead, people either got stuck on doing the same thing as everyone else or putting no further effort into supporting the movement.

It can be seen that a select few will abandon their morals rather than face the repercussions for what they believe, as people capitulated to the Blackout Tuesday act to avoid the scorn of their peers. As Thoreau states, "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also prison" (Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, 9). A truly moral person, one of Authentic Morality, is both *able* and *willing* to suffer for their beliefs. They don't hide behind the safety of another man's moral code. A person of Authentic Morality would serve their morality unwaveringly despite repercussions, and would, in fact, willingly accept those consequences as a fair trade for their authenticity. Serving someone else's morality, even if it meant the difference between prison and freedom, would be incomprehensible. As morality becomes more and more performative in this way, rather than it being a personal code of conduct, it becomes society's code of conduct. Morality, in this situation, becomes ethics, and with the loss of that morality comes the loss of individuality and democracy along with it.

The last true example of Performative Morality is when a person acts outside of their morals to look better to others, this example has been discussed at length in the preceding paragraphs. There is, however, a rare case of Authentic Morality that often gets confused with this sort of Performative Morality, called Weaponized Morality. Weaponized Morality, or morality held with the intention of “confusing the enemy”, is both a strong resource and a necessary evil. As was discussed in the last paragraph, the truly moral person is both *able* and *willing* to suffer for their beliefs. Admittedly, though, even if this clause is the best for one’s moral code, it’s not always best for society.

During World War II, Jewish internment camps were littered throughout nazi territory. One young Anne Frank has been immortalised through her diary entries documenting her time hiding from nazi forces. Despite her young and untimely death, her prolonged life would not have been possible had it not been for the people who helped her family (Frances, *The Diary of Anne Frank*).

In some actions, the helpers could’ve been misconstrued as conducting Performative Morality, like telling other people and strangers that they agreed with the nazi agenda. This action, though, was not performative in the slightest. The *intention* of their action was to support the safety of the people living in The Secret Annexe. All things considered, they were ultimately serving their Authentic Morality. Intention is, in the end, the determining

factor of whether or not an action is performative. Intention without action, like in the *Civil Disobedience* example, is still performative.

Although the loss of individuality is scary enough on its own, the implications this reality has for the future of society and democracy make it even more real. As Eleanor Roosevelt says, “The choices we make are ultimately our responsibility,” (*You Learn by Living*) and if things continue the way they are, that reality is one of suffering and injustice . The overwhelming pattern of morphing one’s morality for an audience applies to the voting populus, but, even more disastrously, can be seen taking effect in positions of power in the United States government. An infamous example right now is the Willow Project. Before the 2020 elections, the Biden Harris administration was running on a platform of cutting down environmental strain and carbon footprint. In 2023, though, “The Biden Administration... announced its approval of ConnocoPhillips’s Willow Project, ignoring pleas from millions who called for the Alaska oil-drilling plan to be halted due to concerns about climate change” (EarthJustice, *Earthjustice Reacts...*). The administration approved a drilling project that inherently contradicted one of the main reasons they were in power in the first place. They have since neglected to provide a reasonable explanation for this action, and not only does the environment suffer for it, but the foundation of the trust their administration was built on does as well.

This is exactly the danger of Performative Morality: it's a slippery slope. Once something like this happens, and it's let slide, there's nothing stopping an even larger betrayal from happening and a cover-up ensuing. While it undermines the structure of government, it also manages to undermine social growth and change in the same foul swoop. It has become expected that leaders won't conform to the promises they make to their citizens, and people stop pushing for change because they don't understand the point of putting in effort when nothing is expected to come of it. The *only* way to avoid this appalling outcome and earn back democratic integrity is by embracing Authentic Morality and the communication of it.

Performative Morality is killing individuality. The negativity of that statement is well-established, but there is still a silver lining that can be found in all of this: the greatness that Authentic Morality fosters. The willing communication of new ideas and concepts is where change comes from. As George Bernard said, "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in adapting the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man" (Shaw, *Man and Superman*). If no one had ever suggested that things should change or could change, they never would have. The greatest minds are the ones who recognize their free will. History remembers the people who aren't afraid to take charge, who aren't afraid to do something, who get back up after they fall. While the threats of Performative Morality are dire ones that can't be ignored, especially

in the sense of degrading individual voices and causes, there is a positive force to be found in all of this: authenticity. "It matters not how strait the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul" (Henley, *Invictus*).

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