Part IV
Self and Morality

Introduction

The following part is dedicated to alternative conceptions of will as suggested by concepts of relational responsibility and moral realism. Although philosophical in their outlook, the contributions are neither preoccupied with the well-discussed indeterminism/determinism nor the freedom/coercion antagonisms, but offer novel insights into the role of values and morality. In so doing, they adhere to a concept of free will compatible with neuro-cognitive findings, albeit in different ways. While Kenneth J. Gergen adopts a constructivist view by way of viewing agency and determinism as culturally evolved attributions, ultimately designed to coordinate our actions, Tillmann Vierkant advances a realist notion of autonomous action determined by a self that is far more than a subject: as an ideal type, the self encompasses a relationship between an organism and its natural and social environment. It is thereby able to accord its actions to the demands of inner and outer circumstances. Neither account dispenses with the concept of voluntary action. By contrast, both accounts insist on norms and values, such as responsibility for one’s actions as discursive or evaluative resources guiding social practices enacted by individuals or groups.

In the framework of the argument advanced in this volume, agency, autonomy, and responsibility emerge in practices of attribution. The very capacity to attribute agency, autonomy, and responsibility (individually or collectively) is seen as social capital embedded in self-technologies (such as self-help, see Maasen, Sutter and Duttweiler, Chapter 1 in this volume), in which it exerts highly governmental functions. Namely, it is on the basis of such practices that a social capital named ‘governing oneself and others’ has emerged. Moreover, the emergence of this capital
forces us to rethink acceptable modes of producing ‘the social,’ ‘rational discourse,’ and ‘morality’ in a highly individualized, if not fragmented world fraught with uncertainties.

In this situation, a ‘postmodern ethics’ seems to be called for. To be sure, a postmodern ethics would not be about a situation where ‘anything goes,’ but rather about acknowledging a world without recourse to a fixed set of guiding codes or principles. As Patrick Bracken and colleagues point out, ‘postmodern thinkers would hold that by focusing on the responsibility to act, traditional ethics has had to “fix or close down parameters of thought and to ignore or homogenize at least some dimensions of specificity or difference among actors. To act in this sense means inevitably closing off sources of possible insight and treating people as alike for the purpose of making consistent and defensible decisions about alternative courses of action. The modern thinker associates the commitment to this sense of responsibility with self-justification either in the sense of moral-uprightness or pragmatic effectiveness” (White)’ (Bracken, Giller and Summerfield, 1997, p. 436). Postmodern ethics, however, is based on ongoing dialogue, with others as well as with oneself.

It is within this type of morality that modern governmental technologies operate, be they self-help books, or participatory, mediating, or therapeutic practices: they all contribute to a morality consistent with the demands of neoliberal society. This morality is neither about avoiding moral wrongdoing so as to keep up an empty husk of ‘shoulds’ and ‘oughts’, nor is this morality fully characterized by exercising the virtues (justice, fortitude, prudence, and temperance). Rather, this is a morality of decision, commitment, responsibility, and an ethics of autonomous selfhood – all of which, as one may argue on the basis of the following two chapters, rest on our (culturally evolved and always negotiated) capacity to engage in reasoned interaction with others as well as with oneself. By doing so, we create the social and normative reality aspired to as well as the agents and their agencies, hence, the subjects constructing this very social and normative reality. The theoretical strength of the concept of governmentality lies precisely in the fact that it construes neoliberalism as a political project endeavoring to create a social reality that it suggests already exists.

Especially with regard to self-oriented technologies, it is commonly lamented that now ‘we have selves whose absolute detachment from webs of interlocution brings about an incommensurability that makes moral discourse incoherent. We have a world of sole authors with their stories, whose basis is, perhaps a “feeling good” that is entirely private and cannot be fully and rationally explained to any other person. There is no shared understanding of what the Good is. There is only the agony
of fragmentation’ (Greenberg, 1994, p. 205). Although this line of critique does have its grain of truth, it fails to consider that self-technologies are social practices: whichever way we work on ourselves, even if in allegedly more serious ways (e.g., psychoanalytically or by ZEN-meditation), all interventions into one’s self rely on techniques that ultimately do have their disciplining effects on ourselves as well as on our perspective toward the world around us – family, organizations, and so on. The analysis of governmental technologies reminds us that sociality ultimately rests on both a political and an ethical economy of the body. We can decipher a neoliberal governmentality in which not only the individual body, but also collective bodies and institutions (public administrations, universities, etc), corporations, and states have to be ‘flexible,’ ‘autonomous,’ and ‘responsible,’ requiring us and others to engage in pertinent activities.

In this perspective, the analytics of government focus on the systematization and ‘rationalization’ of a pragmatics of governance. The term rationality refers to specific socio-historical practices; it refers to specific and empirically observable social practices that can be analyzed with respect to ‘how forms of rationality inscribe themselves in practices or systems of practices, and what role they play within them, because it’s true that “practices” don’t exist without a certain regime of rationality’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 79). Practices of excessively attributing agency, autonomy, and responsibility are part of the neoliberal rationality of government, as are notions of individuals who determine themselves by way of achieving an ideal relationship between their organism and their social and natural environment.

Within this rationality, ethics and morality adhere to the demands of audit society: where, earlier, ‘discipline sought to fabricate individuals whose capacities and forms of conduct were indelibly and permanently inscribed into the soul – in home, school, or factory – today control is continuous and integral to all activities and practices of existence.’ As Nikolas Rose observes: ‘we are required to be flexible, to be in continuous training, lifelong learning, perpetual assessment, continual incitement to buy, to improve oneself, constant monitoring of health, and never-ending risk management. In these circuits, the active citizen must engage in a constant work of modulation, adjustment, improvement, thereby responding to the changing requirements of the practices of his or her mode of everyday life’ (Rose, p. 97 in this volume). This amounts to saying no less than the flip side of late-modern or postmodern ethics reveals an ethics of control, regardless of whether they are conjointly created (Gergen, Chapter 8) or explicitly in line with our self-model (Vierkant, Chapter 9). In this perspective, a relational ontology and reason-responsive self appear as most constitutive ingredients of the neoliberal moral economy.
References


