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Comment: words fail, but the heart does not

actions in moral terms. Drawing on some of my own previous work on the ways that varying structures of value relations in different value spheres push moral experience in more reproductive or more free (in the sense of open to choice between roughly morally equal options) directions and on Jarrett Zigon's (2007) influential account of the phenomenology of moral breakdown, they explain the moral inarticulacy of the volunteers as grounded in the way that they are caught between two state-supported and widely adopted values (Robbins 2007). One of these is the more recently "hegemonic" value of acting in utilitarian ways, while the other is the older value of acting selflessly for the collective good, which is still prominent but which people view as a holdover from an earlier era of Chinese socialism. Caught between these two values (and the more broadly defined values of individualism and collectivism from which they spring), the volunteers experience an "angst" that is "an expression of the moral breakdown caused by the tensions between individualization and history."

It is at this point in their argument that the authors make their most creative interventions in the anthropology of ethics discussion. The first of these is their claim not only that these volunteers experience moral breakdown as something that happens to them but also that they in fact seek it and, to adopt a key term of Zigon's (2018), come to dwell in it—finding this broken place to be one that produces not just angst but also a chance for what we might call (though the authors do not) creative value work aimed at creating the kinds of ethical lives that they feel driven to pursue. The authors' second novel intervention is to suggest that volunteers who find themselves unable to justify their actions in either utilitarian or collectivist terms ground them by referring precisely to their driven quality. They forgo standard forms of public moral justification, instead framing their actions in terms of an "ethics of the heart" that is governed by emotions that arise "spontaneously" and do not answer to moral demands from outside the person. In doing so, they actively embrace what Jonathan Haidt (2001) would call their state of "moral dumbfounding," just as they embrace the state of moral breakdown itself. I will engage each of these arguments in turn.

The goal of my 2007 article was both to document two kinds of moral experience and to explain the differences between them by means of an argument about two different ways that the relations between values can be culturally structured. In value spheres in which values are clearly ranked in relation to one another, I suggested, people will feel their ethical actions to be mostly reproductive, but in those where the rankings between values are not so clear, they will find themselves compelled to make choices that appear to them to be difficult or conflicted (see also Robbins 2013). I mention this background in order to ask the authors whether they think that they might be documenting a third kind of configuration of values, perhaps related to what they call "fractured governmentality," that leads people to experience value conflict and breakdown but that also allows them the option of coming to embrace that state as desirable. Often, when the authors focus on the angst experienced by the volunteers, the volunteers sound a lot like the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, with whom I worked and whose moral torment, I argued, followed from the fact that they lived with two equally ranked key values that they felt a constant need to choose between. But at other times, the volunteers' embrace of breakdown and their discovery of a language of the heart to allow them to sustain their effort to dwell within that breakdown look different. Another way to put my question, then, is as one about how the authors understand and might explain this difference between our two cases.

I also want to ask several questions about the ethics of the heart. Do the authors want this to count as a full-on theoretical concept that warrants exploration in other locales such that, like utilitarian, deontological, and virtue ethical kinds of ethical justification, we might expect to find it as part of the mix in many different societies? Or is it an ethnographic observation about a particularly Chinese way of understanding actions that cannot be morally accounted for in either the locally important utilitarian or the collectivist terms? If the ethics of the heart is the latter, is it new or currently elaborated in new ways? Referring back to the previous set of questions, is it a symptom of the kind of embraced breakdown in which the volunteers exist, or is it a cause of them coming to embrace it? For what it is worth, I would note that the Urapmin, as Christians who are convinced that the human heart by its nature harbors sinful impulses, would not adopt this particular justification for any action. I wonder what role this impossibility might play in the differences between the two situations. These are not, I hope it is clear, only ethnographic questions. They point to what I consider to be some of the crucial theoretical challenges that this article raises for the anthropology of ethics.

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Words Fail, but the Heart Does Not

"Ethics of the Heart" is a welcome intervention in the anthropological discussion about morality in contemporary China. The concept repositions morality not as a tug-of-war between the individualizing self and its social responsibilities but as an "embodied reflexivity that stirs people to act in violation of habit." Ning and Palmer imbue the heart with ethical agency: when confronted with injustice and suffering, the heart provokes an emotional impulse that compels its bearer to act. While volunteers are unable to articulate and rationalize the personal sacrifices they make—including an extensive time and financial commitment and the heavy emotional costs incurred to their loved ones—using existing moral imperatives, they have no choice but to obey their heart's bidding to help.

One of Ning and Palmer's most important insights is their situating "embodied ethics" in China against Joel Robbins's and Jarrett Zigon's emphasis on deliberate choice and reflexivity in their depictions of ethical agency. Ning and Palmer ask important and provocative questions: Do we yet have a framework to delineate expressions of ethical agency that are not discursively legible and rationally explicable? Where do we locate ethical agency in situations where ethical choices against normative moral values are made without retrospective assessments? Indeed, contemporary China makes an intriguing case for unpacking the tension between intent and its expressivity. Both Confucian traditions (Seligman et al. 2008) and socialist political imperatives (Kleinman et al. 2011*a*; Steinmüller 2013*a*; Steinmüller and Brandtstädter 2015) often demand intent to be kept personal and even concealed. The case of China, where moral reflexivity is not already encoded in the sociocultural repertoire, challenges Robbins's and Zigon's conceptualizations, which foreground deliberate introspection.

In debunking the necessity of reflexivity in "ethical moments," however, Ning and Palmer's analysis ironically highlights the utmost importance of discursive logic in rendering ethical agency legitimate. Chinese volunteers actively avoid introspective rationalization because they are fearful that any attempt to poke would reveal the selfish and morally untenable nature of sacrificial volunteering. Their inability to rationalize their hearts' desire renders their social engagement a private act, which ultimately prevents civility from becoming publicly legible in China. This rather pessimistic conclusion seems to suggest that rescuing the language to rationalize civic behaviors is an essential antidote to China's moral crisis. Having only inexplicable "faith" is inadequate.

Ning and Palmer assert that the private, inexplicable, and often misunderstood nature of sacrificial volunteering provokes angst and frustration among participants. But I would suggest a different interpretation: in the narratives they present, I read moral clarity and peaceful resignation as these volunteers relinquish control to their hearts' desires. My reading is in part colored by an implicit comparison with Chinese student volunteers I work with, who display a similar tendency to reject what Ning and Palmer call "socialist revolutionary tradition" and "neoliberal utilitarianism" in explaining their participatory motivations (Sum 2017, 2019 [2018]). My younger interlocutors similarly understand that the heart demands no discursive justification, but they have not yet given up their quest for words to quench anxiety and misunderstanding about volunteering. And they blame their restless thoughts for holding them back from true devotion. Ning and Palmer's volunteers, who are seasoned enough to realize that articulation would expose the incoherence and selfishness of their fragmented moral worldviews, would have earned my interlocutors' respect for their ability to accept and live with the moral contradictions of sacrificial volunteering. Their devotion is the ultimate enactment of the ethical self: their denial of the (perhaps human) need to be understood renders their action a true antithesis to superficiality and utilitarian calculation.

My point is that "ethics of the heart" is not morally illegitimate in contemporary China. In pushing their argument that there are only a limited handful of legible moral imperatives available, Ning and Palmer ignore the growing relevance of "the heart" in popular discourse. My interlocutors, for example, aspire to follow their hearts even though they feel doubtful and inadequate at times. The increasingly prevalent effort to diagnose and "unknot" the heart (Yang 2015) also indicates the popular recognition of the heart as a legitimate moral compass to well-being and ethical personhood. In today's "psycho-boom" (Kleinman 2010), many Chinese people yearn for meaning making and ethical freedom vis-à-vis "emotionally driven moral spontaneity." Childlike innocence (as children can presumably follow their hearts with little distraction) is to be nurtured in spite and because of moral breakdown (Pritzker 2016; Xu 2017).

This scholarship in psychological anthropology suggests not only that people turn to the heart as a refuge from their disappointment in existing moral imperatives but also that they actually invest high hopes in the possibility that the heart is the key to resolving China's alleged perennial moral crisis. The logic of the heart might not (yet?) be well articulated in Chinese societies, but its desirability already exists in the popular vocabulary, especially with regard to the pursuit of ideal personhood. Considering recent rebuttals to the individualization thesis, where scholars maintain that familial and relational ethics (Oxfeld 2010; Yan 2017) and religiosity-driven charities (Weller, Huang, and Wu 2018) remain pivotal in spite of Maoist suppression, one wonders whether this article has downplayed the lingering impact of Confucian moralities in China today.

In fact, it may not even be necessary to invent the discourse of the heart anew. The narratives that Ning and Palmer present remind me of Mencius's famous story in which the Confucian master challenges his audience to imagine witnessing a drowning child in a water well: Could you bear not extending a helping hand? Is emotional response to human suffering not innate to all? Volunteers whom Ning and Palmer depict display a similar kind of naive impetuousness, which, some lament, is no longer a normative reaction that goes unquestioned in contemporary Chinese societies. Ethics of the heart is not necessarily civil, but Mencius would certainly argue that it is moral and natural. To recover this innate humanity might be the moral imperative that volunteers are quietly pursuing and cultivating after all: may kindness and compassion blossom in their public expressions again one day.

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First of all, this research challenges the reiterated connection between volunteerism and civil society. Since de Tocqueville, scholars have automatically drawn the link between voluntary