



Failing well

Accommodating vices in an ideal Vedic City

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Since the early 1970s, the small town of Mayapur in West Bengal has been home to a multinational Gaudiya Vaishnava community of International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) devotees, popularly known as the Hare Krishnas. Although the land of Mayapur is understood to be sacred and therefore conducive to spiritual life, devotees often struggle with the practices and prohibitions that are deemed indispensable for their salvation. They are also, however, both prone to and adept at articulating their inability to live up to the ideals of Krishna consciousness, so much so that narrating failure itself becomes a privileged mode of moral self-cultivation. Devotees inhabit the moral system not simply by conforming to a set of Vaishnava ideals but by articulating their failure to do so consistently within Vaishnava moral narratives that account for the aperture between precept and practice. In other words, they inhabit the moral system by failing well. This article contributes to recent debates in the ethical turn that center on the twin problems of identifying and locating ethics. I suggest that beyond a focus on virtue, the anthropology of ethics must also account for how people relate to vices, and how moral systems accommodate the problem of moral failure.

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Despite my struggle over the course of fourteen months in Mayapur to follow ISKCON's (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) philosophy, devotees themselves regularly insisted that *I* was a devotee. I had certainly never felt I was a devotee, nor had I claimed to be, although based as it was on my regular attendance at the temple, my fieldwork could certainly have given that impression. While I considered attending the temple simply to be part of my job as an anthropologist (and at times explained as much), devotees seemed to see things differently. Vallabhi, a middle-aged woman from New Zealand, who had lived in Mayapur for around eight years, complimented me during an interview: "You are a devotee. You have an ideal temperament, you're genuine, you're authentic, you have very *sattvic*



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[pure] qualities. . . . There's something there between you and Krishna. . . . We can see it, we can all see it because we've all been through it." Of course, according to ISKCON's philosophy we are all devotees, aspects, and emanations of Krishna's divine energy. As Vallabhi attested, there was no question that I indeed was a devotee; my realizing it was another matter.

My informants' insistence that I was a devotee was in one sense simply an affirmation of the universal truth of Krishna consciousness, but there was more to these assertions than I had understood in my first few months in the field. On almost all occasions where my being a devotee was discussed, my interlocutor would insist that they, on the other hand, were "trying to be a devotee" or sometimes they would describe themselves as an "aspiring devotee." On occasion, they were, "definitely not a devotee." Despite taking the dramatic step to move to India to pursue Krishna consciousness, nobody, it seemed, was a Vaishnava.¹ Rather, in one way or another, everyone in Mayapur saw themselves as perpetually in the process of becoming Vaishnava. Vallabhi's account was typical:

I can only do what I can do. . . . I have a weak heart, I struggle with my spiritual practices and I'm aware of my weaknesses, so I'm just trying really hard to strengthen myself. . . . I'm full of material desires, I'm full of sensual desires . . . but in spite of that I'm trying to be a good human being, a good devotee . . .

Despite following a strict schedule, rising at 3 a.m., attending the temple, and meditatively chanting for hours every day, Vallabhi only ever seemed capable, or willing, to identify weaknesses in her spiritual life. I had become familiar with such confessional sentiments. This tendency to articulate one's weaknesses (and highlight others' strengths) speaks to the metavirtue of humility in Gaudiya Vaishnavism, upon which all other ideals of piety are predicated. While devotees often identify in others Vaishnava virtues such as temperance, as above, the same Vaishnava moral narratives enjoin devotees to recognize only vices in themselves. In order to be a devotee, one must recognize oneself as "fallen" (quite literally, as "spirit-souls" we have fallen from the spiritual world into the material world). One should be, in ISKCON parlance, "more humble than a blade of grass." Indeed, one of the marks of a good devotee is to understand oneself to be not quite a devotee.

In ISKCON, as with the Catholic nuns in Mexico that Rebecca Lester worked with, "the first stage in the process of religious formation . . . is acknowledging a broken self and articulating that sense of brokenness within a religious framework" (Lester 2005: 95). For ISKCON devotees, however, humility is not a stage they pass through but an affective disposition that they must cultivate over the course of a lifetime. One must be constantly vigilant, and always monitoring one's own actions, thoughts, and desires lest vices such as pride or envy creep in, detrimental as they are to spiritual life. The pervasiveness of this ideal of humility spurs devotees toward "relentless introspection" (Lester 2005), which in turn gives way to incessant self-abnegation, rendering the otherwise straightforward self-identification as

1. Vaishnavism is one of the four major Hindu traditions and although it generally centers on Vishnu, in the case of Gaudiya Vaishnavism (or Bengal Vaishnavism) Krishna is held to be the Supreme Lord.

a “devotee” somewhat problematic—insofar as considering oneself to be a devotee at all is to consider oneself in some sense to be virtuous. The insistence that one is an “aspiring devotee” is at the same time a precondition for, and a product of, the cultivation of humility. Always careful to avoid positive self-assessments, devotees in Mayapur prefer to couch their commitment to Krishna consciousness in self-effacing narratives of becoming.

Although moving one’s life to Mayapur involves dedication—and in most cases, sacrifice—there are many in Mayapur who struggle not only with the highest ideals of Krishna consciousness but also with the basic spiritual practices and prohibitions. There are those, for example, who very rarely attend the temple for morning *arati* (worship). There are many who struggle with meditative chanting on a daily basis. And there are a smaller number who seem incapable of following the most basic prohibitions, as I found out when a devotee joined me for a coffee and a cigarette across the road from the ISKCON complex. While certainly informed by the pervasive ideal of humility, these narratives of becoming were not simply instances of feigned modesty, as I had at first taken them to be, but reflected both the very real difficulties and strict self-assessments that characterize the path of Krishna consciousness. They also point toward an interesting relationship between devotees and the moral system they are striving to inhabit.²

Over the course of my fieldwork in Mayapur, I came to understand that failing to adhere consistently to the ascetic practices and prohibitions of Krishna consciousness does not constitute an aberration of the moral system.³ Rather, given the extreme difficulty, if not impossibility, of spiritual life, failure is at the very heart of what it means to be a devotee. It is an integral feature of the spiritual journey. Indeed, devotees are both prone to and adept at articulating their failure to live up to the expectations of Krishna consciousness. They are well equipped, both practically and theologically, to deal with the fact that in this material world the spiritual journey back to Krishna is not easy, and many of the ideals of Krishna consciousness are essentially unrealizable (in this lifetime, in this physical body). They still, however, find ways to inhabit the moral system. They do so, not simply by conforming to a set of Vaishnava ideals or prohibitions but by articulating their failure to do so within Vaishnava moral narratives that account for the aperture between precept and practice. In other words, they inhabit the moral system by failing well.

2. I follow here Joel Robbins’ (2004) use of the term moral system to refer to the combination of a moral code (the rules and regulations) with Michel Foucault’s “ethical system” (how one relates to the moral code). Foucault’s “ethical system” (1994: 263–65) revolves around four basic questions or “components.” First, there is the “ethical substance” or the part of the self or one’s behavior that is concerned with moral conduct. Second, there is the “mode of subjectification” or “the way in which people are invited to recognize their moral obligations” (how people relate to a moral code). Third, there are “self-forming activities” (or “technologies of the self”), “the means by which we can change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects.” Fourth, is the telos, “the kind of being to which we aspire,” or in other words, the goal of all of this ethical work.
3. Asceticism should be understood here in the broad Foucauldian sense of “self-forming activity” (see Laidlaw 1995; Cook 2010).

In this article, I describe how devotees' inability to adhere consistently to the precepts of Krishna consciousness does not lead them to abandon the spiritual path. On the contrary, insofar as Vaishnava ethics subsumes the likelihood—if not inevitability—of failure, narratives of becoming and articulations of weakness come to constitute a particular mode of moral self-cultivation. In becoming Vaishnava, devotees must learn to not only aspire to the virtues but also identify with the vices that Krishna consciousness presents. This article speaks to a debate between two anthropological perspectives on the problem of identifying and locating ethics. I suggest that beyond a focus on virtue (Pandian 2009; Laidlaw 2014a) and “the good” (Robbins 2013), the anthropology of ethics must also account for how people relate to vices, and how moral systems accommodate the problem of moral failure.

From cult to congregation

In 1970, buoyed by ISKCON's unprecedented success in “counterculture” America, and leaving behind forty centers and several thousand disciples in major cities all over the world, ISKCON founder Srila Prabhupada (henceforth Prabhupad) brought his fledgling spiritual movement back home to India. Among his top priorities was to build a temple in Mayapur, as it was here that the ascetic saint (and *avatar* of Krishna) Caitanya Mahaprabhu was born in 1486, and it was from here that Caitanya began his mission of spreading Krishna consciousness.

Mayapur, located in the Nadia district of West Bengal, 130km north of Kolkata, is a small but bustling pilgrimage town, home to various Gaudiya Vaishnava sects, including, most visibly, ISKCON. Mayapur is not far from the Bangladeshi border, and is situated on the bank of the Ganges, 25km from the district capital city of Krishnanagar and just a short ferry ride to the urban center of Nabadwip across the river. Devotees today continue to come to Mayapur from all over the world to live by what they call, following Prabhupad, “Vedic culture.” They are also committed to realizing Prabhupad's prophetic vision for the development of what is sometimes referred to as an “ideal Vedic city,” a sprawling spiritual metropolis within which 50,000 devotees can pursue a life in Krishna consciousness. Prabhupad's vision for Mayapur has been the catalyst for dramatic social, economic, and infrastructural development over the last forty years, which has accelerated markedly since 2009 with the beginning of construction work on what will be one of the largest Hindu temples in the world, the *Temple of Vedic Planetarium* (TOVP). The town of Mayapur—previously no more than a handful of small temples amid expansive agricultural lands—is today dominated by the ISKCON complex within which can be found several temples, schools, restaurants, and guesthouses.

International residents make up a small percentage of the overall population, estimated to be 4,000 (approximately 1,200 of whom are international residents). Numbers, however, fluctuate quite dramatically throughout the year. Around the month of March, when the major *Gaura-Purnima* festival (Caitanya's birthday) takes place, thousands of devotees visit Mayapur from all over the world, some for weeks or months at a time, while during the hot summer months, many international devotees return to their home countries. With rare exception, international devotees live either within the walls of or within a short distance from the ISKCON

complex. Typically, international devotees tend only to stay for fewer than five years, although there are some who have been here since the early 1970s. Reasons for this include lingering commitments back home, visa restraints, or in rare cases, disillusionment. The biggest factor, however, is economics. While some international devotees work for ISKCON, and receive a small stipend, many (predominately men) leave on a regular basis to work back home and support their family in Mayapur. This makes the spiritual path even more difficult than it already is.

The explicit purpose of the ISKCON complex in Mayapur is to allow devotees to immerse themselves in the philosophy of Krishna consciousness. ISKCON's philosophy starts from the basic axiom, "you are not this body." Rather, we are spirit-souls (*jīvas*) who have "fallen" from the spiritual world as a result of our envy of Krishna, the Supreme Lord. Trapped in the material world of illusion (*māyā*), we have forgotten our eternal identity as loving servants of Krishna, and have become entangled in repeated cycles of death and rebirth (*samsara*). It is only by taking up Krishna consciousness, and following the path to "self-realization" (where one identifies as a *jīva* and not with the temporary physical body), that we can hope to escape the cycle and be reunited with Krishna in the next lifetime.

Krishna consciousness involves a range of both prescriptive and prohibitive spiritual practices that include worshipping deities in the temple, meditative chanting, and following the "four regulative principles" (more on which below), all of which are geared toward overcoming *māyā*, transcending the material world and putting Krishna at the center of one's life. Taken together, these practices and prohibitions constitute a strict moral code. How devotees relate to this moral code (what Foucault calls the "mode of subjectivation"), or more broadly, how they inhabit the moral system, have changed significantly over the course of ISKCON's short history.⁴ This is the result of, and has in turn accelerated, ISKCON's institutional transformation over the last forty years.

While Prabhupad's presentation of Krishna consciousness—remaining faithful to its Gaudiya Vaishnava roots—moves within a recognizably Hindu constellation of concepts, the transmission of the philosophy to a Western audience of neophytes (and back again to India), along with ISKCON's subsequent institutional development, has profoundly shaped the moral system that devotees today strive to inhabit. Prabhupad's pedagogical approach to Vaishnava philosophy was developed in the 1960s in the context of a world-rejecting monastic movement that was for the most part grown around young American *brahmacharis* (male celibate monks).⁵ ISKCON, however, has changed dramatically in the last forty years, evolving into a "world-accommodating" (Wallis 1984) congregational movement of lay practitioners. This shift from "cult to congregation" (Rochford 2007) is a direct consequence of an economic downturn in the late 1970s, since when ISKCON has not been able to financially sustain its communalist social structure. With no other choice, devotees were forced to move outside of the walls of the short-lived temple communes

4. As Foucault (1990) argued, ethics and moral codes can, and often do, develop independently of one another (see Robbins 2004: 217).

5. Some ISKCON temples also housed *brahmacharinis* (female monks), although the majority of the monks were men.

and find employment in the outside world. Although Prabhupad did not exclusively cater his mission for *brahmacharis*, he did strongly emphasize the virtues of celibate life. He could not, however, have predicted ISKCON's transformation in the years after his death (in 1977).

In the early days of ISKCON, the definition of a devotee was relatively unproblematic. ISKCON presented a strict moral code that had to be followed. Devotees had to adhere to the four regulative principles, chant on a daily basis, and attend the temple at various times throughout the day for *arati*, beginning at 4:30 a.m. Rituals or ritualized settings were the lifeblood of spiritual life. Devotees also busied themselves throughout the day with *seva* (devotional service), such as distributing Prabhupad's translations, of the Bhagavad Gita, for example. This was all quite straightforward, as ISKCON operated for the most part through the "total institutional" setting of an ashram (Daner 1976). If a devotee could not adhere to the moral code, they would inevitably be asked to leave.

Whereas in these early days the overwhelming majority of devotees were *brahmacharis*, ISKCON today is almost completely comprised of *grihasthas* (lay devotees) who typically live and work independently of the institution. This demographic shift, a direct result of ISKCON's economic fortunes, has had significant consequences not only for the institution ISKCON has become but also for the ideals of self-cultivation by which devotees today understand and practice Krishna consciousness. In Weberian terms, today's devotees have exchanged "world-rejecting asceticism" for "inner-worldly asceticism" (Weber 1978). Where renunciation was the defining ethic of the early institution, the goal for today's lay devotees is not so much to renounce the world; it is to engage in it in a certain (Krishna conscious) way. No longer sheltered from *māyā*, lay devotees today have no choice but to pursue spiritual life in the world, in all its messiness. This, of course, leads to new obstacles, but also new opportunities.

In order to pursue spiritual life in a lay setting, devotees must learn to experience themselves (as *jīvas*) and the world around them (as *māyā*) as evidence of the truth of Krishna consciousness. As Joanna Cook notes in the case of Buddhist monasticism, devotees must "reinterpret subjective experiences and responses in ways that are consonant with religious principles" (2010: 7). While Cook's ethnography looks particularly at ascetic self-discipline in a monastic setting, in the case of a lay community the mundane flow of everyday life becomes what Cheryl Mattingly (2014) describes as a "moral laboratory," wherein moral selves are worked on, and moral frameworks made meaningful. In Mayapur, this involves learning to detect the spiritual significance of anything and everything one does, however mundane. It requires that devotees cultivate the capacity to mine latent pedagogical potential in everyday activities, be it raising a family, relating with others, or performing routine daily chores. To be Krishna conscious in the world is to be constantly vigilant, always attuned to opportunities for spiritual advancement, and ever mindful of the detrimental influence of *māyā*.

Today, Krishna consciousness is in this sense a kind of Aristotelian *phronesis*.⁶ It is both an ontological perspective and a moral disposition, similar to what the Jains

6. *Phronesis* is often glossed as "practical wisdom" or "reason" but is translated by Michael Lambek (2000: 309) as "moral practice or judgment").

refer to as *samyak darshan*, the “right view” (Laidlaw 2010), or what Theravada Buddhists call *satisampajanna*, “mindfulness and awareness of the way things are.”⁷ It is a way of perceiving and being in the world. To be so attuned is a virtue that is both moral and epistemic. To be able to find the meaningful in the mundane is central to what it means to be a devotee today.

Given the recalibration over the last several decades of what it means to be a devotee, Prabhupad’s teachings, while still foundational, do not determine how one should understand and practice Krishna consciousness in a lay setting. Outside of the shelter of the ashram, as an institution and as individuals, ISKCON and its devotees are coming up against challenges, and Prabhupad’s monastic-leaning pedagogy can only partially inform recourse to those challenges. Simply put, devotees must find new ways of becoming Vaishnava. For lay devotees’ relationship with the ideals of Krishna consciousness, this involves both conformity and compromise.

Little compromises with *māyā*

Devotees come to Mayapur to work on their spiritual life (*sādhana*), to cultivate Vaishnava virtues, and to rid themselves of vices (*anarthas*). Krishna consciousness offers devotees a series of highly systematic frameworks around which, in a lay setting, one assembles one’s *sādhana*. Although frameworks such as “the nine stages of *bhakti*-yoga” (that includes faith, steadiness, attachment, and love, as outlined by Caitanya) represent an archetypal spiritual trajectory, in practice they do not delineate a clear linear progression as much as they offer devotees a vocabulary with which to evaluate the trials and tribulations of their own spiritual journey. Devotees are also presented with the “nine processes of devotional service,” which include, for example, chanting, worshipping the deities, and praying. Depending on a range of factors including one’s professional life or family situation, lay devotees typically assemble their *sādhana* according to their own self-assessment, focusing on some processes of devotional service, at times at the expense of others. While there are innumerable ways one can be a devotee, the basic foundation of *sādhana* is the “four regulative principles.”

The four regulative principles are as follows: no meat eating, no gambling, no intoxication, and no illicit sex. Although widely adhered to, the regulative principles are malleable at times in the context of a lay community. Devotees often find the first two rules quite easy to follow. Many had been vegetarian or vegan before becoming involved with ISKCON. The prohibition against gambling seemed the least challenging for devotees and was rarely the subject of conversation. The other two rules tend to be treated a little more idiosyncratically. “No illicit sex” refers to any sexual activity that is not within marriage and for procreative purposes, but as I soon understood, there are a variety of ways to interpret this rule and some are more liberal than others.

The rule most often broken (that people could admit to at least) is the prohibition of intoxicants of any kind. While drugs or alcohol did not seem to represent a problem, there are some who struggled with less potent substances like caffeine. At

7. This is Charles Hallisey’s (2010: 144) translation, which also connotes moral prudence.

a Muslim wedding down the road from the ISKCON complex, I accidentally came across a friend of mine, Adideva, enjoying a quick coffee from a Nescafé machine for guests. Somewhat startled and shaking off his embarrassment, he assured me with a cheeky smile that this was his “little compromise with *māyā*.” To drink tea or coffee was not common but certainly not shocking, and behind closed doors such a minor infraction would be considered to be a personal choice. There were some, however, whose “little compromises with *māyā*” might be a little harder to justify. Another friend, Balrama, who was fond of an occasional cigarette, and had difficulty containing his sexual desires, used to tell me how he and other friends, when back home in Australia, would toast to Krishna before every round of tequila. “Krishna is my best friend times ten million. . . . He wants me to be happy,” he would tell me, while regaling me with tales of sexual conquest. This was certainly an exceptional case, and some of Balrama’s close friends commented to me that they did not understand how he could dovetail his spiritual and hedonistic pursuits in this way.

Although foundational to spiritual life, the four regulative principles are interpreted, negotiated, or at times simply disregarded. How devotees interpret their spiritual path, starting with the four regulative principles, can be very particular to the individual, and is based significantly on their own ongoing self-assessment and capacity for spiritual commitment. How one pursues the path of Krishna consciousness today does not necessarily depend on strict adherence to a moral code, as was more so the case in the early days of the movement. Devotees do not always conform to Krishna conscious ideals, and in some cases they depart from them quite strikingly. In a lay setting, Krishna consciousness appears as an ethics by which devotees assemble their own *sādhana*, and cultivate themselves in multifarious ways as ethical subjects.

This *bricoleur* approach to *sādhana* does not pertain just to the four regulative principles but also to the basic practices that are deemed indispensable for one’s salvation. Chanting the Hare Krishna *mahamantra* is one of—if not the most—central practice of Krishna consciousness. An initiated devotee must chant a minimum of sixteen rounds every day; 108 *mahamantras* comprise a “round”: *Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare*. Chanting focuses the mind on Krishna and helps the devotee transcend the world of *māyā*. Chanting “good rounds” requires that the devotee focus intensely on the sound of the sacred syllables. To “hear attentively,” as devotees describe it, is not only to listen intently but also to cultivate the moral capacity to be affected by the *mahamantra*, as Joanna Cook (2010) describes in the case of Theravada Buddhist meditative practices (see also Hirschkind 2006). Alongside the four regulative principles and other core ascetic practices, devotees understand chanting to be the most effective means of overcoming *māyā* and attaining salvation. In the context of a lay community, however, it is practiced in numerous ways.

For an experienced devotee, chanting the prescribed minimum of sixteen rounds takes around two hours. When possible, devotees prefer to chant their rounds in the early morning, as it is felt to be an auspicious start to the day. During the morning program in the temple, a couple of hours are set aside for devotees to chant in front of the deities. Some sit still, while others pace, with their

right hand in a bead bag, mouthing the sacred syllables.⁸ As not everyone makes it to the early morning program at the temple, it is not uncommon for devotees to chant throughout the day. At any given time one finds devotees catching up on their rounds, whether sitting under a tree or pacing around the grounds. Even in social settings, devotees will often have their hand in their bead bag, muttering the *mahamantra* between pleasantries. Although central to the path of Krishna consciousness, chanting what are referred to as “good” or “attentive” rounds is often spoken of as a constant battle.⁹

Devotees commit to and struggle with chanting in various ways. At times, sitting in the temple during the morning program, devotees looked to be completely absorbed, with eyes closed, smiling, and head tilted toward the sky. At other times, devotees appeared to be completely distracted, and seemed to be merely going through the motions (particularly when trying to chant in social situations). This was reflected in conversations I had with devotees. While at times devotees described their experiences of chanting in terms of revelation or transcendence, for the most part they conveyed sentiments of frustration, and on occasion, failure. For some, chanting is their favorite part of the day. For others, it is a chore. And for very few, chanting is almost impossible. Vaibhava, an otherwise deeply committed French devotee in his fifties—over thirty years in the movement—was deeply skeptical of how devotees practice chanting and had himself given up on chanting the daily prescribed minimum:

I refuse to chant sixteen rounds . . . because I find myself incapable of doing it to the standard that is expected. To chant sixteen rounds means to hear a fair number of them. . . . OK not sixteen, maybe you hear let's say half . . . even ISKCON devotees will admit not near that . . . and the truth is that they will hear one round maybe. . . . So if I hear one round out of the sixteen, then the rest of the time is mental exercise . . . then I have no part in this nonsense. . . . I don't have two hours to waste every day . . . not enough is actually meditation . . . I have failed in the performance of meditation. . . . Instead of lamenting and being depressed about it, I find out of the processes of devotional life [something] that really suits me.¹⁰ That is serving! I really can put my teeth into this . . . so I do it eight hours a day!

Devotees often reflect on both the quality and the quantity of their rounds. While it is rare to consider oneself, at least this damningly, to have “failed in the performance of meditation,” Vaibhava was confident that reading Prabhupad's books, worshipping deities at home, and performing *seva* (devotional service) would more than

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8. A bead bag is a small cloth bag within which devotees keep their personal chanting beads. Similar to rosary beads, these are 108 tulasi beads that devotees use to keep count of the number of *mahamantras* they have chanted.
 9. Gregory Simon (2009) describes a similar situation in the context of Islamic prayer practices in West Sumatra. *Khusuak* (or “total, sincere concentration on God”), though necessary for prayer to be effective, is desired but often felt to be lacking.
 10. Vaibhava is referring here to the “nine processes of devotional service, which include, for example, deity worship, praying, chanting, and *seva* (devotional service).

compensate for his failure in this regard. In other words, there were plenty of other paths to piety. Although Vaibhava's outright refusal to chant sixteen rounds daily (he still tries to do some chanting when he can) would have constituted grounds for eviction from the ashram in the early years, in the context of a lay community, it is up to him to assess his own capacity, and assemble his *sādhana* accordingly. And while he was very much aware that he had rejected what Prabhupad had taught is the universal process by which anyone can go back to Krishna, he was relatively untroubled by his failure to master meditative chanting. That he had routinely failed to the point where he has now seemingly given up did not seem a cause for despair. Rather, it was an opportunity for him to demonstrate to me the truth of the oft-quoted maxim, "Prabhupad built a house the whole world could live in" (in other words, there is more than one way of being a devotee). Rather than chanting consistently, then, he worships deities at home, and busies himself in *seva*, in his case producing and editing short documentaries on devotional topics.

Vaibhava had concluded that chanting sixteen rounds was not working for him, but this did not mean he could not subscribe to ISKCON's philosophy. It did not mean he could not be a devotee. It just meant he had to do it his way. His inability to chant properly did not shake his faith in the philosophy of Krishna consciousness, nor did it lead him to abandon his spiritual journey. Rather, and somewhat counterintuitively, it served as evidence of the truth of Krishna consciousness. The spiritual path is not meant to be easy, and devotees should expect to be in a constant battle with *māyā*, one they will not always be winning. And significantly, as I will describe below, it is often in such instances of failure that the truth of Krishna consciousness seems to resonate with devotees most profoundly.

Not only did Vaibhava find in Prabhupad's teachings more than one way of being a devotee (that allowed him to disregard others), but he also found a framework within which he could make sense of his inability to chant the *mahamantra* to the standard that is expected. As is the case when devotees pick and choose their little compromises with *māyā*, failure to consistently live up to the dictates of Krishna consciousness is somewhat expected. Moreover, insofar as such failures are subsumed within wider moral narratives that account for the aperture between precept and practice, devotees are well equipped to manage their inability to always conform to the expectations of spiritual life. Krishna consciousness as it appears today, in other words, does not just present devotees with a range of ideals to strive for, but equips devotees with moral narratives that account for failure along the way. Such narratives do not only frame ritual or ritualized practices like chanting or deity worship, but in the context of a lay community, they are appropriated to interpret everyday experience.

The everydayness of intense ethical reflection

During my time in Mayapur, I spent countless hours with devotees discussing their (and my own) struggles with spiritual life. Common themes were the difficulty of getting up early in the morning to attend the temple program or being unable to consistently chant "attentive rounds," for example. For many in Mayapur, and particularly those that come and go for work, balancing spiritual life with family or



other commitments was spoken of as a difficult balancing act. Such struggles are central to what it means to be Krishna conscious today, while living “in the world.” Although the spiritual path is highly individual insofar as it is based to a large extent on one’s own ongoing self-examination, devotees do not embark on the spiritual journey alone. Aside from an often close relationship with a *guru* (who may or may not live in Mayapur) or more senior devotees, devotees share their struggles and self-assessments in classroom or group contexts as well as in casual conversation. They ask for and offer each other advice and share scriptural resources, exchanging *slokas* (verses) from the Bhagavad Gita, for example. And they do so by mobilizing a particular Vaishnava moral vocabulary that allows them to manage the inevitability of failing consistently to live up to the ideals of Krishna consciousness.

One evening, I accompanied two friends, Sabuj and Acintya, to Gauranga Pizzeria, a rooftop restaurant that opens for three months every year during the busy *Gaura Purnima* festival period. I had met Sabuj and Acintya (both in their late twenties) at a course in the Mayapur Academy that ran for several weeks, catering for the most part to nonresident devotees. Sabuj is of South Asian descent from London. By profession he is an IT specialist, but when I met him in Mayapur, he had taken five months out of his career to come to explore his spiritual life and in his words, “improve his *sādhana*.” Four years after joining ISKCON, Sabuj considered himself a strict devotee. While in Mayapur, he followed a strict schedule, rising for morning *arati* almost every day at 3:30 a.m. Acintya, from Florida, had been a devotee a little longer than Sabuj, and although serious about his *sādhana*, took a more light-hearted approach to Krishna consciousness. Occasions like dinner at the pizzeria were a welcome break from the intensity of the temple or classroom settings that I often found myself in during fieldwork. While topics of conversation often included spiritual life, this was one of a few spaces where *sādhana* might be briefly set aside for more mundane chat, about football or politics, for example. The topic of Krishna consciousness, however, was never far away.

Before ordering food, Acintya had a brief but friendly exchange with the waitress, who was also from America. “How are you?” she asked. With a big smile, Acintya replied, “Much better now that you’re here!” He continued, “You’re my favorite waitress.” As she turned and left after some more pleasantries, Sabuj immediately whispered loudly to his friend, “Acintya! You can’t say that! You can’t flirt with a devotee like that!” He continued, “maybe she really likes you and you have disturbed her [from her Krishna consciousness]!” Unsure of his tone, Acintya laughed it off and insisted that he was not flirting but just being friendly. Sabuj, however, was quite serious and continued to point out how Acintya had just acted in a way that was “not very Vaishnava.” (One should not distract another devotee from remembering Krishna at all times). Although Sabuj and Acintya were close friends, this incident made for a tense evening, and led to several days of estrangement, leaving me somewhere awkwardly in the middle.

It was not until a few days later that the three of us met up again at the pizzeria, at which point Sabuj had changed his mind. After some reflection, Sabuj had what he called a “realization” (a theologically loaded concept in ISKCON). First, he explained, even if it had been the case that Acintya had ulterior motives, it was not Sabuj’s role to judge him. Acintya was a couple of years longer in ISKCON, and so was to be offered respect as a senior, even though they were close friends and more

like equals. In any case, while rigorous self-assessment is the norm, judging others is to be cautiously avoided. Sabuj conceded that maybe he had failed to grasp the cultural difference (often perceived between American and British ISKCON) and assumed Acintya was flirting, whereas he was likely just being friendly. Sabuj concluded that he was in the wrong as he had failed to see the Vaishnava in Acintya, and read the situation from a “material perspective,” assuming the worst of his friend and fellow devotee. For his part, Acintya remained relatively untroubled by what he did not consider to be a major incident.

For Sabuj, the tone had shifted from condemnation to self-abnegation. He insisted that it was his own pride and ignorance that had led to his criticism of Acintya. The problem was now not whether or not Acintya had indeed acted in a “not very Vaishnava” way but how Sabuj had responded. In his own behavior, Sabuj identified the vices of someone who was proud and judgmental, not the virtues of someone who was humble and tolerant. He had committed, in his words, “Vaishnava *aparadh*” (an offence against a Vaishnava) and regardless of Acintya’s guilt, it was not his role to criticize another devotee. Sabuj’s apology and analysis of this event lasted for the hour or so we were at the restaurant, and was the topic of many conversations we would have afterward. These conversations always came back to the idea of having to “get rid of *anarthas*” (vices).

Everybody has *anarthas*. Everybody is imperfect, as I was often told. If nothing else, this is the most degraded age of *Kali Yuga* and we should not expect to find “pure devotees” on this “hellish” planet.¹¹ The question then is not whether or not one has *anarthas* (we all do), but how you go about identifying and ridding yourself of them. When confronted with *anarthas*, devotees would often critically assess their weaknesses. (And in doing so they were, of course, also enacting the virtuous ideal of humility, insisting in one way or another that they were “fallen.”) What I was yet to understand was that these narratives—that included the identification and overt explication of one’s understanding of the practical applicability of Krishna consciousness—are themselves a mode of moral self-cultivation. In other words, narrating one’s experience of and struggles with Krishna consciousness is itself a moral imperative that has pedagogical import for both the speaker and listener. And importantly, it was in instances of failure that such narratives appeared particularly salient.

Sabuj’s original condemnation of Acintya was just one aspect of this episode. More significant was Sabuj’s response to realizing his mistake and his subsequent articulation of his understanding of the incident. In couching his reinterpretation of events in terms of *anarthas* and Vaishnava *aparadh*, Sabuj effectively restaged the scene within a moral narrative that borrowed from Vaishnava theology an evaluative vocabulary with which he could make sense of his mistake. In one sense, Sabuj was simply doing what devotees are supposed to do: trying to understand the world and his actions through a Krishna conscious lens. He was bringing a particular ontological perspective to bear on an everyday event. At the same time, insofar as

11. Kali Yuga is the last of the four stages of the cosmic cycle (after *Satya Yuga*, *Treta Yuga*, and *Dvapara Yuga*). This concept often arises in ethical discourse in South Asia, as this *yuga* is characterized by moral depravity and a lack of piety and thus potentially serves as an explanatory framework for all that is wrong with the world (Parish 1994).



Krishna consciousness is also a moral disposition, in evoking Vaishnava theological categories, Sabuj was also being a good devotee, albeit not in the conventional sense of “being good.”

In taking the opportunity to reframe the incident as evidence of the truth of Krishna consciousness (we all have *anarthas*), Sabuj was able to cast himself in the role of the “fallen” devotee. And he was able to do so in this case not because he had adhered to the virtues of Krishna consciousness but because he could articulate his inability to do so within a moral narrative that accommodated the inevitability of failure. In his reinterpretation of events, Sabuj could cast himself in the role of a devotee by identifying in his behavior vices such as pride and arrogance, rather than by identifying in himself virtues such as humility or tolerance (although they were implicit in his reinterpretation). Simply put, it was through *failing well* that Sabuj was able to inhabit the moral system.

Such intense ethical reflection speaks directly to a central debate in the ethical turn that coheres around the twin problems of identifying and locating ethics. That we have until recently had little to call upon in the social sciences to begin to address these problems is often traced back to Émile Durkheim’s treatment of morality as a social fact, which, it has been argued, rendered dormant the themes of ethics and morality for the best part of a century. It has by now been widely acknowledged that Durkheim’s fundamental mistake was to conflate morality with society (Zigon 2007; Laidlaw 2002; Robbins 2004). In doing so, rather than explaining anything *about* morality, he essentially explained it away. Anthropologists today are left to contend with these basic questions: what counts as ethics and where is it to be found?

There are broadly speaking two prominent approaches. First, the “ordinary ethics” approach locates ethics in the everyday (Lambek 2010; Das 2007). Ethics, thus conceived, need not necessitate distanced reflective judgment (that is not to say it necessarily precludes it), but pervades the mundane, sometimes in unconscious ways. In Michael Lambek’s words, “the ‘ordinary’ implies an ethics that is relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself” (2010: 2). He continues, “the ordinary is intrinsically ethical and ethics intrinsically ordinary” (Lambek 2010: 2).

However, not everyone is in agreement with the ordinary ethics approach (see Lempert 2013, 2015). Jarrett Zigon (2008) in particular has been a staunch critic, arguing that insofar as ordinary ethics (as he understands it) rests on the claim that ethics is everywhere, it essentially does away with the problems of either identifying what counts as ethics or locating where ethics might be found. Ordinary ethics, then—or what Zigon labels “Aristotelian Kantianism”—in “dissolving the ethical into the social” (Lambek 2010), makes the mistake of reproducing the very Durkheimian misassumptions that it claims to resolve (Zigon 2007). In its place, Zigon has proposed his own framework.

For the most part, anthropologists have followed a basic distinction between ethics and morality, as put forward by Bernard Williams. Ethics, for Williams (1985), is what falls under the broad question of “how one ought to live?” or in Foucault’s terms, ethics denotes one’s “relation to oneself” (1994: 266). In this formulation, ethics subsumes morality, which more narrowly refers to the following (or

disregarding) of rules and regulations (that can be understood broadly speaking as Kantian ethics). Zigon (2008), however, understands ethics to constitute a rupture of morality, which itself is conceived as a mundane unreflective disposition. While the goal of ethics in Zigon's formulation is to return to the comfort of the unreflective disposition (that he calls morality), ethics is to be found in moments of "moral breakdown" where people are forced to reflect explicitly on the rightness or wrongness of their actions. Insofar as ethics is located in temporal instances of explicit reflection, and therefore requires a certain distance from everyday experience, the "ordinary" for Zigon is where ethics is not.

While Zigon's "moral breakdown" has proven generative, it becomes problematic when mobilized as a prescriptive framework. At first glance, it seems to provide a structural narrative within which instances of ethical reflection, like Sabuj's above, can be accommodated. Zigon's approach, however, is founded on the false premise that the goal of ethics is to return to the comfort of an unreflective disposition (morality). As James Laidlaw (2014a: 125) has argued, and as this article attests, that *the goal* of ethics is to return to an unreflective disposition cannot be a premise of the anthropology of ethics; rather, it is an open ethnographic question. Indeed, such an unreflective disposition, by definition, is the very opposite of Krishna consciousness, the goal of which is to make devotees vigilant subjects, always and everywhere attuned to opportunities for spiritual progress. Ethics in Mayapur, in this sense, is rather "ordinary" insofar as Krishna consciousness is a moral disposition that one must cultivate in everything one does, however mundane. Alongside everyday practice, this also includes a more explicit performative dimension (see Lambek 2010) whereby the articulation of one's moral assessment is itself an important moral imperative. Where Lambek's formulation posits that "the ordinary is intrinsically ethical and ethics intrinsically ordinary," the aim of Krishna consciousness is to render the ordinary *explicitly* ethical, and the ethical *explicitly* ordinary.

For devotees in Mayapur, the questions of what counts as ethics or where ethics might be found are fundamentally familiar questions of how one should go about trying to be Krishna conscious in a changing world, beyond the confines of the ashram. In order to be Krishna conscious in the world, devotees, as we have seen, must recognize themselves as always and everywhere being surrounded by opportunities for spiritual advancement, or in Webb Keane's (2015) terminology "ethical affordances."¹² They must learn to detect the ethical potentiality in everything they do. And insofar as Krishna consciousness is at once an ontological perspective and a moral disposition, there is nothing that cannot potentially count as ethical. In other words, ethical potentiality inheres in everything and is everywhere. This is not to simply suggest that ethics *is* everywhere. As Zigon (2014) points out, such a claim (that he mistakenly attributes to the ordinary ethics approach) would only serve to undermine the important contributions that have allowed the anthropology of ethics to escape the Durkheimian paradigm. This should not, however,

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12. Webb Keane uses the term "ethical affordance" to make a case for the potentiality of ethics, defining it as "any aspect of people's experience and perceptions that they might they might draw on in the process of making ethical evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not" (2015: 27).



preclude the distinct claim that everything is *potentially* ethical or that ethics is *potentially* everywhere.

Beyond the structural challenge of identifying what counts as ethics or locating where ethics might be found, devotees' efforts to follow the path of Krishna consciousness also shed light on two related, but often overlooked, dimensions of ethical life: how people relate to vices, and how moral systems accommodate the problem of moral failure.

Failing well

Paulo Heywood (2015) has noted that it has become somewhat of a truism within the anthropology of ethics to suggest that “people are not always faithful to the moral codes they espouse.”¹³ Rather, strict adherence is just one of the many relationships one can have with a moral code. This observation can be traced back to Laidlaw's work on Jain merchants in Jaipur. In *Riches and renunciation*, Laidlaw (1995) looks at how affluent lay Jains aspire to the strict and effectively unrealizable religious values of renunciation. As a lot of these Jains are wealthy gem traders, such values are strikingly discordant with the lives they actually live. Based on the ethnographic puzzle of how people pursue apparently antagonistic ethical imperatives, Laidlaw sets out to describe “how people can live by, without in an obvious sense conforming to, ethical and religious values; and how they can live by contradictory and conflicting values” (1995: 12). He gives an account of what he calls “ethical complexity” (see also Faubion 2011), within which ideals—however unrealizable—nevertheless retain motivational force. Conformity (to a moral code), Laidlaw argues, is just one of many ways one can inhabit a moral system, as I describe here. As Laidlaw insists, this is not particular to Jainism.

Where *Riches and renunciation* gives an account of one ethical tradition, Joel Robbins' *Becoming sinners* (2004), based on fieldwork with the Papua New Guinean Urapmin, describes how people live with two “contradictory cultural logics” at the same time. Framed as a process of “cultural adoption,” Robbins demonstrates how in abandoning one moral system and striving to live by another, the Urapmin are caught between two sets of moral imperatives that often come into conflict. He details how in the context of rapid cultural change the Urapmin enthusiastically adopted millennial Christianity (curiously, despite a lack of direct missionary contact). Although they still live what he terms “largely traditional lives in material terms,” they have almost completely abandoned previously held conceptions of personhood and virtue in the pursuit of conversion to Christianity. Such a dramatic shift, however, has not been as smooth as it has been quick.

Robbins focuses on the Christian notion of the will, explaining that while the suppression of the will is understood to be a fundamental Christian virtue, imposing the will remains central to the creation and maintenance of traditional social

13. In an article on LGBT activism in Bologna that centers on the relationship between freedom and moral codes, with reference to the Italian concept of *doppia morale* (double morality), Paulo Heywood (2015: 201) shows that people can relate to a moral code “in such a way as to allow for the possibility of its betrayal under certain circumstances.”

relations (as in when a woman must choose a man to be her husband, for example). In order to live within the traditional Urapmin social structure, it is understood (and at times celebrated) that one must be a willful agent. However, in order to be a good Christian one must renounce the will entirely. In Christian ethics, the individual alone is the unit of salvation, an “essentially non-social moral being” Robbins notes (2004: 293), citing Louis Dumont—an essentially non-social moral being that is nevertheless embedded in social relations.

Insofar as the Christian life is impossible to live for the Urapmin, Robbins argues, one way or another they must contend with the inevitability of failure, resulting in what he describes as “moral torment.” Although the very notion of moral torment might seem to suggest dysfunction, Robbins’ ethnography is not an account of how a moral system has failed. Rather, it is a description of how people fail within a moral system. Even though Urapmin efforts are indeed destined to fail, they remain determinedly committed to Christian moral precepts. And despite the apparent contradictions at the heart of their endeavors, they can still inhabit the moral system. In part, this is because moral weakness itself is integral to what it means to be a Christian. As Robbins notes, it is one of the “ingenious design features” of Christianity “that they make the ever-renewed conviction of sinfulness an important condition of salvational success” (2004: 252). The Urapmin do not inhabit the moral system by being “good Christians” but instead by failing to be good Christians within particular Christian moral narratives of sinfulness. It is not through virtue or moral success that the Urapmin inhabit the moral system but through sinfulness and moral weakness.

Both *Becoming sinners* and *Riches and renunciation* draw our attention to the fact that beyond normative accounts of ethics that cohere around ideals, virtues, and exemplars, moral systems also comprise conflict, contradiction, and failure. Similar accounts of inconsistency have emerged from the anthropology of Islam (Marsden 2005; Simon 2009; Schielke 2009). From both a systematic as well as a subjective perspective, such features as conflict, contradiction, or failure are not to be understood as deviations from an otherwise coherent moral system—indeed as Laidlaw (1995) points out, logical coherence is not always there to be found.

While such accounts challenge the “illusion of wholeness” (Ewing 1990), I want to go further here to suggest that in Mayapur not only is failure not an aberration of the moral system but insofar as it is constitutive of what it means to be a devotee, if responded to appropriately, it becomes a privileged mode of moral self-cultivation. In other words, in Mayapur, failing well represents an expedient means of inhabiting the moral system.

Beyond the confines of the ashram, lay devotees find themselves in a precarious ethical situation of having to strive for essentially unrealizable ideals. This is particularly the case in Mayapur where devotees are presented with two antagonistic ideals: one soteriological and the other social. While Krishna consciousness enjoins devotees to transcend the material world, they must at the same time engage in an ambitious project of social and urban development, in contributing to, or simply living in this fledgling “spiritual city.” As a result, consistent failure to live up to the ideals of Krishna consciousness is inevitable. It is not, then, a question of whether or not one fails, but *how* one fails.

Devotees often frame their commitment to Krishna consciousness in self-effacing narratives of becoming. As is required by Vaishnava ethics, in order to be a devotee, devotees must learn to view themselves as “aspiring devotees” or in some cases “definitely not devotees.” Indeed, understanding oneself to be fallen is the first step on the spiritual path. (It is only by understanding oneself to be underserving of Krishna’s divine grace that one can hope one day to become deserving of Krishna’s divine grace.) While magnanimous in their praise for others, devotees in Mayapur only ever seemed capable of identifying weaknesses in themselves. I was never left with the impression, however, that devotees experienced what could be described as “moral torment,” as Robbins describes in the case of the Urapmin. While devotees’ efforts are, like those of the Urapmin, “destined to fail” (in this lifetime), narratives of moral failure are almost always accompanied by articulations of hope rather than despair, and resilience rather than remorse. Once Sabuj had realized that he was in the wrong, for example, once he had unearthed his *anarthas*, he seemed if anything quite upbeat, almost excited even. Consistent failure to live up to ideals of Krishna consciousness was rarely met with dejection but rather, as Laidlaw describes of Jains in Jaipur, an “acceptance of [devotees’] own imperfectionability” (2014b: 498). Such resilience is largely attributable to the fact that the likelihood of failure itself is subsumed within Vaishnava moral narratives that account for the aperture between precept and practice. Everybody has *anarthas*, but what is important is how one goes about identifying and ridding oneself of them. For devotees, articulating one’s own weaknesses is not simply a lamentation of the inability to be a good devotee but is itself a means of becoming a good devotee.

Of course, there are different kinds of failure, not all of which constitute “failing well.” Vaibhava was able to confidently present his practical failure to adhere to the demands of Krishna consciousness (and chanting in particular) as evidence of the truth of the maxim that “Prabhupad built a house the whole world could live in.” He found in devotional service another path to piety. Adideva’s sneaky coffee was not so serious an offense. His framing of the incident as a “little compromise with *māyā*,” although more playful than apologetic, nevertheless served to justify his lapse (to himself as much as to me). Balrama’s tequila shots and sexual conquests, however, were understood to simply constitute failure on his part. His logic that Krishna was his best friend and wanted him to be happy found little support in Vaishnava philosophy, and was met with little understanding among even his closest friends. He rarely attempted to present his indiscretions within a Vaishnava moral vocabulary, such as *anarthas* or *aparadh*, for example. He was not, like Sabuj, identifying and articulating his weaknesses so as to address them, nor was he striving to inhabit the moral system. Rather, he was simply disregarding it.

Conclusion

Krishna consciousness is a strategy, not a solution. Its strength is not just that it presents devotees with a range of ideals in pursuit of which they can live a good life. Of equal importance, it provides devotees with robust moral narratives that accommodate the inevitability of failure along the way. Devotees’ becoming Vaishnava does not depend exclusively on their capacity to conform consistently to the

strict ascetic practices and prohibitions of Krishna consciousness; it also depends on their ability to manage their failure and to do so within the moral narratives that ISKCON presents them with.

This article has sought to demonstrate that the extent to which people can inhabit a moral system is not simply a measure of their success in imbibing its virtues, nor is it a measure of their ability to consistently conform to its moral code. Rather, the extent to which people are able to inhabit a moral system is a measure of how successful they are in mobilizing its resources in evaluative appraisals of their own striving. Simply put, one can inhabit a moral system by recognizing in oneself not just the virtues but also the vices it presents.

Given its embeddedness in the Western philosophical tradition, it may not be surprising that the anthropology of ethics has inherited an orientation that privileges virtue. Within the ethical turn, in other words, anthropologists have most typically set out to describe the various ways people strive for virtue in their attempt to live a good life. In focusing on how people relate to virtues, however, the anthropology of ethics has paid less attention to how people relate to vices. Insofar as virtues are but one aspect of a moral system, in failing to account for the complex role that vices play in ethical life, the anthropology of ethics has developed a critical blind spot. If, as Heywood has noted, it is a truism to suggest that people are not always faithful to the moral codes they espouse, it becomes a task of the anthropology of ethics to describe the various ways people inhabit a moral system beyond simply being, or striving to be, virtuous.

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Bien échouer: Devenir Vaishnava dans une ville védique idéale

Depuis les années 70, la petite ville de Mayapur au Bengale occidental est le siège d'une communauté multinationale Gaudiya Vaishnava, fidèles à l' "International Society for Krishna Consciousness" (ISKCON), aussi connue sous le nom d'Hare Krishna. Bien que le territoire de Mayapur soit considéré comme sacré et donc propice à la vie spirituelle, les fidèles ont souvent du mal à suivre toutes les pratiques et prohibitions qui sont indispensables à leur salut. Mais ils sont aussi compétents et adeptes de la tâche consistant à exprimer leur incapacité à atteindre les idéaux de la conscience de Krishna, si bien que raconter l'échec devient en soi un mode privilégié d'auto-cultivation morale. Les fidèles évoluent dans un système moral non seulement en suivant un ensemble d'idéaux Vaishnava, mais aussi en exprimant leur échec à les suivre en permanence, à l'aide de récits moraux Vaishnava qui tiennent compte de l'écart entre précepte et pratique. En d'autres termes, ils demeurent dans un système moral en échouant convenablement. Cet article veut contribuer à des débats récents liés au tournant éthique, qui ont trait aux problèmes jumeaux de l'identification et de la localisation des enjeux éthiques. Je suggère qu'au-delà de son intérêt pour la notion de vertu, l'anthropologie de l'éthique doit également prendre en compte comment les individus conçoivent les vices, et comment les systèmes moraux s'accommodent des problèmes d'échec moral.

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