HIGHLAND REFLEXIVE PRESS

HRP-RN-004

Moral Covering of Desire

Disowned Agency, Interruption, and the Regulation of Interaction

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PUBLIC RESEARCH RELEASE

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FOUNDING PREPRINT · DECEMBER 29, 2025

Big Spring, Texas · Reader Edition 2026

Moral Covering of Desire (MCD):

Disowned Agency, Interruption, and the Regulation of Interaction

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Highland Reflexive Press

Independent Research

Abstract

Contemporary sociological theories of morality and power typically conceptualize moral language as either normative guidance or retrospective justification. This paper introduces Moral Covering of Desire (MCD) as a middle-range social mechanism through which morality functions prospectively as a technology of regulation. Under conditions of MCD, actors participate in and benefit from desire while systematically refusing declarative authorship of intent. Moral abstraction, conditional authority, and interruption operate together to preserve asymmetrical outcomes while deferring responsibility. Integrating the concepts of Reflexive Intelligence and Reflexive Authorship, the paper specifies MCD as a failure mode of reflexive systems—one in which reflexive capacity persists in the absence of authorship. The analysis explains why communicative repair often fails under moralized conditions and reframes non-participation as a structurally intelligible response to agency refusal. The framework is portable across intimate, organizational, and institutional contexts.

Keywords: morality; agency; power; reflexivity; accountability; interaction

I. Introduction

Moral language occupies a privileged position in sociological accounts of interaction and power. It is commonly treated as a normative compass guiding behavior or as a retrospective justification that renders actions intelligible after the fact. In both formulations, morality appears secondary to action—interpreting, constraining, or legitimizing what has already occurred. What

remains under-theorized is a different possibility: that moral language can function prospectively as a regulatory mechanism, shaping interactional outcomes while obscuring authorship and deferring responsibility.

This paper introduces Moral Covering of Desire (MCD) to name and theorize this mechanism. MCD describes a configuration in which desire is enacted and outcomes are realized, yet declarative authorship of intent is systematically refused. Rather than issuing explicit commands or denials, actors shift interactional focus toward abstract moral principles, conditional authority, and temporal control. Accountability does not collapse; it fails to stabilize.

The persistence of this pattern raises a theoretical puzzle. Why do dialogue, clarification, and moral alignment often intensify rather than resolve asymmetrical control? Why does increased reflexivity—ethical awareness, anticipation of critique, moral reasoning—sometimes coincide with diminished responsibility? Existing theories address fragments of this phenomenon but stop short of specifying the structural conditions under which morality itself becomes a regulatory technology.

The contribution of this paper is conceptual. It specifies Moral Covering of Desire as a middle-range mechanism integrating disowned agency, moral abstraction, conditional authority, and interruption. Situated within the broader canon of Reflexive Intelligence, the analysis introduces Reflexive Authorship as a necessary condition for accountability and theorizes MCD as a failure mode of reflexive systems.

II. Reflexive Intelligence and the Limits of Reflexivity

Reflexive Intelligence refers to the capacity of actors or systems to observe, describe, and adjust their own states, actions, and effects. In sociological theory, reflexivity is often treated as inherently corrective: increased awareness is assumed to generate better alignment between values and behavior. Organizations that audit themselves, individuals who engage in moral self-scrutiny, and systems that anticipate critique are commonly viewed as more accountable.

However, reflexive capacity alone does not guarantee responsibility. Systems may accurately diagnose their own dysfunctions while remaining incapable of assigning authorship. They may articulate ethical commitments while deflecting ownership of desire and consequence. Reflexivity, in this sense, is compatible with control.

This observation points to a missing analytic distinction. Reflexive Intelligence describes knowing; it does not specify who stands behind what is known. Without a mechanism that anchors responsibility to a declarative subject, reflexivity risks becoming self-referential—capable of critique yet structurally inert.

III. Reflexive Authorship as a Condition of Accountability

To address this gap, this paper introduces Reflexive Authorship as distinct from reflexive capacity. Reflexive Authorship refers to the public declaration of intent through which desire is owned and responsibility can be assigned. It is not a moral virtue or psychological disposition, but a structural condition of accountability.

Agency is commonly theorized as the capacity to act within constraints. This paper distinguishes action from authorship. Outcomes may occur, and benefits may accrue, without any actor publicly claiming intent. When authorship is displaced—attributed to circumstance, collective norms, or abstract principles—responsibility cannot stabilize.

Reflexive Authorship thus functions as a technical precondition. Without it, communicative repair lacks an object: there is no author to address, no intention to contest, and no site at which accountability can attach.

IV. Moral Covering of Desire: Mechanism Specification

Moral Covering of Desire names the mechanism that emerges when reflexive intelligence persists in the absence of reflexive authorship. Under MCD conditions, actors experience and benefit from desire while refusing declarative ownership of intent. Moral language operates prospectively to regulate interactional outcomes and preserve asymmetry.

The mechanism consists of four mutually reinforcing elements.

Disowned Agency

Actors participate in actions and outcomes while withholding authorship. Participation does not entail ownership. Responsibility becomes diffuse and unlocatable.

Moral Abstraction

Interactional focus shifts from specific intentions to generalized moral principles. Moral alignment substitutes for accountability, foreclosing inquiry into authorship.

Conditional Authority

Authority appears visible and consequential yet lacks sovereign ownership. Responsibility may be centralized while autonomy remains contingent.

Interruption

Interruption functions as temporal governance, regulating when interaction proceeds, pauses, or terminates. Moments at which authorship might emerge are strategically disrupted.

Together, these elements form a self-stabilizing loop in which morality intensifies alongside control while responsibility remains deferred.

V. Why Communicative Repair Fails

Conventional accounts attribute communicative breakdowns to misunderstanding, misalignment, or affective deficit. MCD reframes this diagnosis. Repair fails not because communication is insufficient, but because authorship has been structurally removed.

When moral abstraction preempts intent declaration, further dialogue cannot anchor responsibility. Clarification proliferates without consequence. Empathy circulates without ownership. Interruption governs the temporal conditions under which agency might appear.

This analysis reframes non-participation—silence, withdrawal, refusal—as structurally intelligible responses rather than ethical shortcomings. In contexts governed by MCD, continued engagement often reproduces asymmetry.

VI. Analytic Vignette (Illustrative)

Consider a recurring interaction in which outcomes consistently align with one actor’s interests, yet no explicit claims of desire are made. Moral language intensifies at moments when intent might be clarified. Authority is exercised indirectly, and interruptions recur when interactional momentum diffuses.

The analytic value of this vignette lies not in its specificity but in its ordinariness. It renders visible how moral covering organizes desire, redistributes agency, and stabilizes control without overt domination.

VII. MCD as a Failure Mode of Reflexive Authorship

Within the broader canon of Reflexive Intelligence, Moral Covering of Desire specifies a failure mode rather than an alternative moral theory. Reflexive capacity remains intact; authorship is disowned. Morality does not disappear—it is repurposed.

In this configuration, reflexivity facilitates rather than corrects asymmetry. Actors anticipate critique, deploy ethical discourse, and regulate interactional time, all while avoiding declarative ownership of desire. Accountability fails not through denial but through deferral.

VIII. Implications for Sociological Theory

By theorizing morality as regulation, agency as authorship, and interruption as temporal governance, this paper extends existing accounts of power and interaction. It cautions against treating dialogue and reflexivity as universal remedies and calls for analytic attention to the conditions under which responsibility becomes possible.

The framework invites comparative research across intimate, organizational, and institutional contexts, including reflexive technologies and governance systems where ethical discourse proliferates alongside accountability gaps.

IX. Conclusion

This paper has introduced Moral Covering of Desire as a middle-range mechanism through which morality operates prospectively to regulate interaction while deferring responsibility. By integrating Reflexive Intelligence and Reflexive Authorship, the analysis explains why accountability can fail even under conditions of high reflexivity and moral alignment.

The argument advanced here is not for better morality or deeper empathy, but for authorship. Without authorship, reflexive intelligence risks becoming ethically inert—capable of observation and critique, yet structurally incapable of responsibility. Moral Covering of Desire names this condition and clarifies the limits of moralized interaction in producing accountability.

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Thought, given form.

EDITION

HRP–RN–004 · Public research release. Founding preprint · December 29, 2025.

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PUBLISHER

Highland Reflexive Press · Independent institution · Big Spring, Texas.

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