The internet as a moral space: an analysis of the "teachings" of Deboísmo

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Abstract

This paper studies Deboísmo, a "movement" popularized on social networks, which preaches the "doctrine" of "take it easy" and disseminates these teachings using internet's typical language, such as memes and humorous images. Based on the premise that the media plays an important role in articulating ethical dilemmas, the aim of this paper is to understand what are some of the characteristics of the moral precepts being developed and circulating on the internet. In theoretical terms, the article addresses the relationship between media and morality and the characteristics of the contemporary morality. In empirical terms, the research involves the analysis of the aesthetic quality and the moral agency (Chouliaraki, 2008) of the commandments of the deboísmo published on a page named Deboísmo on Facebook (www.fb.com/deboismo).

Keywords

Introduction

The media plays, increasingly, a leading role in the articulation of the moral and ethical[1] dilemmas of contemporary social life. By means of news production, fictional narratives, talk shows and other communication products, the media offers elements (such as texts and images, which articulate rational and affective arguments) for people to reflect on, incorporate, negotiate and even reject, values, norms and ideals about what is good, correct, fair and normal. Such moral values disseminated in the media serve then for individuals to modulate their behaviors, to devise ways of understanding themselves and others, to orient their interactions and experiences, and to develop interpretations of the social world in which they live (CHOULIARAKI, 2008, 2013; SILVERSTONE, 2002; 2007).

With the popularization of the internet, specifically, with the expansion of social network sites, the public can receive information, but also produce, discuss, and comment on opinions of each other. Thus, the role the media plays in the ethical and moral debates has become more and more complex. Since social network sites establish new forms of sociability, based on the dynamics of horizontal, synchronous or asynchronous, non-face-to-face conversation, supported by the creation and maintenance of profiles and personal pages (BOYD, 2008; DEUZE, 2012; RECUERO, 2008, 2012; TURKLE, 2011), the media now provides not only representations and interpretative frameworks for understanding social life and to relate to each other. It also promotes communication platforms where people can effectively debate and engage in ethical and moral conflicts that take different forms and are motivated by innumerable situations on the internet.

One recent phenomena in which ethical and moral debates can be observed on the online environment is the "movement" of Deboismo. The neologism, originated from the Brazilian expression "de boa" (that could be translated as "take it easy" or "keep calm" and indicates a sense of tranquility and understanding), became popular on social network sites, making thousands of users of online platforms to convert to the "movement" ideals. The major agglutination center of the discussion about the Deboismo is on its Facebook page[2], which has more than one million of followers. The page has a sloth with religious garments on its cover and is updated daily with images, videos and texts that talk about Deboismo

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[1] We use the terms as synonyms and in using them we refer to the set of values, conceptions and ideals that govern the customs, practices, and interactions of individuals with each other. This definition is supported by Taylor (2005), who criticizes the narrow definitions of morality, which summarize it as a system of obligations. For the author, we are inextricably immersed in moral configurations, even implicit ones, for they provide a horizon of meaning for our actions and our identities.
[2] Cf. https://www.fb.com/Deboismo.

philosophy with humor. Some of these posts receive thousands of likes, shares and comments, and are widely judged and discussed.

The aim of the present work is to contribute to the understanding of some of the characteristics taken by the moral precepts under developement and circulation nowadays on the internet. Methodologically, we adapted Chourialaki's (2008; 2013), analytical categories of *aesthetic quality* and *moral agency,* designed to interpret the media's ability to morally educate the public, analyzing the teachings of Deboismo presented on its most popular Facebook page. Before discussing the empirical results of the research, we present a brief theoretical discussion about the relationship between media and morality.

Media and Morality

To justify the relevance of studying the media, Silverstone (2002, p. 14) argues that the media has become part of the "general texture of experience". It is no longer possible to think about our daily lives without taking into account the role of the media in producing feelings, evoking affections, building common sense, organizing daily practices and processes, imprinting our perceptions of time and space, and elaborating distinctions and judgments about our own experience. In this way, Silverstone (2002) defends an understanding of the media does not separate it from social life, avoiding schematic interpretations that evaluate the media as external agents that would alter the "natural order" of social relationships. For the author, the media cannot be thought outside of society, because it is fundamentally social: processes, practices and media texts are organizing elements of the ways in which we interpret and act, collectively and individually, in the world.

In a more recent book, Silverstone (2007) develops his reflections to defend the importance of understanding (and therefore, criticizing and regulating) the media universe as a moral space. For the author, some of the main ethical challenges of the contemporary world unfold in an ambivalent way in the media, and they involve respect for human dignity and the ways in which we deal with alterity:

> The media are complex, contradictory, contested practices – but they are practices, not disembodied processes. And as such they are the product of human thought, judgment and action. And as such they are the principal means of connection (and disconnection), of symbolic inclusion (and exclusion), indeed of communication (and miscommunication) between human beings, without which, even with their distortion, social life is inconceivable (SILVERSTONE, 2007, p. 162-163).

For Silverstone (2007), the media is not a common moral space, because its work is mainly related to the strengthening and relativization of borders (national, political and identity) that guide moral debates in other spheres. The moral strength of the media resides in its classificatory practices in terms of the "me" and the "other":

> The continuous inscription of difference in any and every media text or discourse: from the crude stereotypes of otherness to the subtle and not-so-subtle discriminations of dramatic characterization, narrative construction, political commentary, internet chat rooms and talk radio (SILVERSTONE, 2007: 19).

With this view, the author privileges the media representations and is concerned with demonstrating the social relevance of the apparent banality contained in the media texts. Incorporating the theoretical perspective presented by Silverstone, Chourialaki (2008, 2013) develops a more empirical approach to the ways in which the media morally educates the public. For the author, the media has an ethical character in the way that they present situations - in news, entertainment, advertising, etc. - in which the suffering of the other at a distant place is presented to the public, who is then invited to act. Chourialaki (2008, 2013) argues that the media offers a broad spectrum of public engagement in relation to the other, which goes through forms of voyeurism, passivity and indifference, and is capable of fostering practical or discursive actions in order to alleviate other's misfortunes. Chourialaki states:

> It is this pedagogic function of mediation that renders contemporary media texts an effective form of moral education. […] media spectacles moralize their audiences by habituation, by systematically promoting ethical values and cultivating dispositions to action. (CHOURIALAKI, 2008: 832).

The debate about Deboismo on Facebook articulates this pedagogical function even more explicitly than other media products, since it presents itself as the diffusion of a lifestyle, a philosophy or a religion in which (a good) relationship with the other is fundamental. However, due to its dissemination on social network sites, discussions about Deboismo have certain characteristics that escape the typical scope of media representations discussed by Silverstone (2002, 2007) and Chourialaki (2008, 2013). Aiming on reflecting about these singular characteristics we present and discuss the teachings of Deboismo on Facebook.

Deboismo on Facebook

A search for the term Deboísmo on Facebook shows hundreds of pages and profiles on the subject, of the most varied types and number of followers. We chose the most popular page about Deboismo on Facebook[3] as the central focus of our analysis. The data on the page was obtained in April and May 2016, in an analysis of the posts occurring in that period, and postings that had been made in the past. The page Deboísmo was created on June 27, 2015, by two youngsters from Goiás, a university student and his girlfriend[4]. In April 2016, the page had almost 700 thousand followers and reaches today one million and one hundred thousand people. According to the classification options made possible by Facebook, the page was nominated[5] as a "Religious Institution". An information that was accompanied by the title of the page, found on the its cover image, composed by an illustration of a sloth in religious clothes.

All Facebook pages have a number of options to describe itself. In the "overview" section of the Deboísmo page, there was a map, locating the origin of the page in Goiás State and a link to an online store where products such as T-shirts and coffee mugs with the theme of Deboismo were sold. In the "General Information" section, there was a description of the page: "Deboismo is a way of life. Being *de boa* does not mean to be inert to the world, it means being thoughtful. With calm and patience, the world will become a better place." The mission of the page was also made explicit: "Make people a little more 'de boa'." In the contextual menu, there were also links to the photo and video albums originally published in the timeline of the page. In addition, users could rate it, leaving comments visible to other users.

The page highlights, however, are the posts made in the timeline, consisting of original content, content shared from other pages and content submitted by the page followers. During April and May 2016, the page was updated 3 to 8 times a day, and some of its publications were actually republications of old posts. The publications contained mostly humorous images, memes, motivational messages and promotional posts for products from the online store.

Among these publications, some posts intended specifically to disseminate the teachings of Deboismo. In one post (Figure 1), which was republished several times, ten teachings were listed alongside a stylized image of a sloth, which makes reference to various religions (e.g., Hinduism, presenting the sloth with three eyes,

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[3] https://www.fb.com/Deboismo.
[4] Cf. http://oglobo.globo.com/society/tecnologia/conheca-deboismo-nova-filosofia-de-boas-da-internet-17392121. Accessed on 03/30/2017.
[5] Since the information obtained in the data collection period no longer corresponds to the current situation of the page, which has been modified even by transformations in the Facebook layout itself, we chose to describe the page in the past, in order to avoid anachronisms.

and Christianity, by placing a halo, characteristic of Christian iconography, behind the head of the sloth).

Figure 1 – Teachings of Deboismo

Ironically, in spite of the multiple references to religiosity present in the ideology of deboismo, the ten teachings were in fact a simple translation of a code of conduct described by Richard Dawkins in the book "The God delusion," published in 2006. Dawkins, besides being a renowned British biologist, is also an ardent promoter of atheism. Such a contradiction did not go unnoticed by the followers of the page, who immediately questioned the use of Dawkins' ideas and especially the original, more explicitly atheistic, teachings. The page continued to republish the teachings during the period of observation. However, it replaced the latter teaching, "Be skeptical," for "Share the teachings of Deboismo and make your environment more peaceful. Be the change you want to see in the world".[6]

Apart from this post, there were more messages regarding the ten teachings of Deboismo in the archives of the page. The publications were made in the first few months of the page's existence and use the typical meme format: a background image and a black-shaded white font in the upper and lower portions of the image, or only in the lower part of the image (as in the example of Figure 2).

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[6] Although it is important to record the origin of the teachings, the fact that they are translations of Dawkins' thinking does not invalidate their analysis, since in recontextualizing the original text within the Deboist ideology and linking it to images far from the proposal of Dawkins, the teachings gain new meanings, not necessarily related to atheism promoted by the British scientist.

Ten of these posts formed our *corpus* of analysis. They were interpreted with two analytical categories developed by Chouliaraki (2008, 2013): aesthetic quality and moral agency. These categories were elaborated by the author to analyze the ways in which media acts as an instance of moral education of spectators of television journalistic productions about the suffering of people in distant places.

By aesthetic quality, the author refers to the ways in which "talk and image are combined on screen so as to represent distant suffering as an immediate reality for the spectator." (CHOULIARAKI, 2008: 839). By moral agency, the author refers to the way the news invite the spectator to act, that is, how the journalistic texts propose to the spectators that they engage with the suffering presented in the news.

Even though the objects to which such categories of analysis have been created are different from the object of the present research, it is possible to adapt it to meet the objectives of the present study. This happens because, although the author approaches the humanitarian dramas expressed by television journalism, the motivation is very similar to the one of the present research. The author also seeks to understand how the media acts as a place for moral negotiation, with the premise that:

> Media representations are, in this sense, conditions of possibility for public action and it is these conditions that we need to analyse so as to understand just how media texts may contribute to promoting an ethics of care and responsibility, or indifference and apathy towards distant others (CHOULIARAKI, 2008: 832).

As already discussed, the relationship with the other is also the central focus of Deboismo. Questioning the aesthetic quality of publications on the page of Deboism means that instead of analyzing the verbal and visual characteristics of the television medium, we will ask if and how the text and image create an "immediate reality" for the follower of the movement's page. With relation to moral agency, it means to problematize how the publications of the page create a position to the page's followers and how the page invites them to take action to become "de boa" (to keep calm or take it easy).
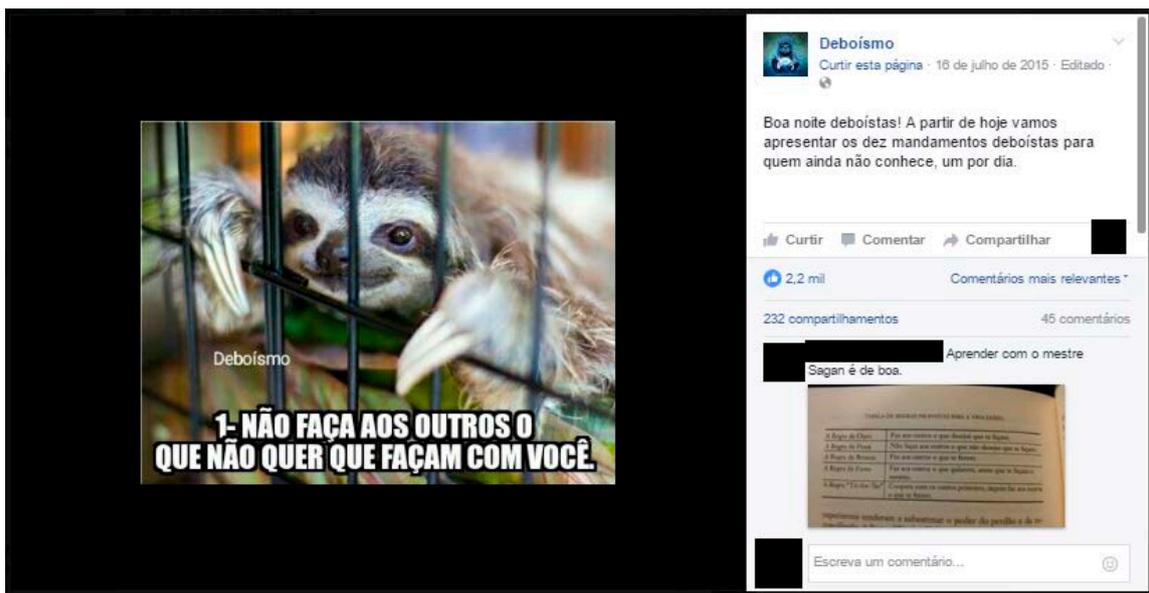
Figure 2 - Example of posting on the teachings of Deboismo
"1 - Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you".

The aesthetic quality of the teachings of Deboismo

The first analytical category in which the posts about the teachings of deboismo were interpreted is the aesthetic quality. For Chouliaraki (2008, 2013), the aesthetic quality refers to the way in which text and image are used for the construction of an immediate reality, capable of producing an affection in the viewer. The author exemplifies some types of aesthetic quality when discussing three strategies: 1) the resource to the spectacle, which amplifies the potential of texts and images to surpass their real references and operate in the field of simulation, turning the public away from an immediate reality and stimulating sensorial aspects of media production; 2) sentimentalism, which uses text and image to enhance the emotions that can be sharpen for a portrayed situation; 3) Pamphleteering, which uses texts and images to give more factual information about a particular situation of other people, and how we should act to help.

The aesthetic quality of the posts in which the teachings of Deboismo are disseminated is not easily defined in any of the examples cited, even though it presents elements of both the spectacular and the sentimental strategy. The texts are only a transcription of the original texts of the teachings (although two of them have been reduced from their respective images). Such texts are imperatives of conduct that act more on sustaining the moral agency of the posts than on their aesthetic quality. The images have as central focus the sloth, a major icon of Deboismo. In each of the teachings, the sloth appears in a different situation. In

one post the sloth has reading glasses and a book between his legs; in another, it is dressed as Freddy Krueger, a terror character. In a third publication, the sloth wears mirrored sunglasses, in front of a splendid blue sky.

The strategy of employing the sloth in all posts can be understood as a spectacular artifice in the sense that posts are allowed to be experienced as typical memes, made to be humorous and shared on Facebook profiles, without necessarily relating to any immediate reality. Verbal language commands a certain type of behavior, but the image does not construct a situation in which the choice to take the promoted attitude is dramatized or emphasized in some way.

There are exceptions, however. The first teaching, "Do not do to others what you do not want them do to you" is illustrated with the image of the sloth in a cage, full of sadness (figure 2). The fourth teaching, which is related to the need to forgive, is a parody of Edward Hopper's famous painting "Nighthawks," which shows the front of a New York restaurant at night. In the parody used to illustrate the teaching, a sloth appears with arms opened, some chairs are on floor and the window glasses of the restaurant are shattered, implying that the sloth threw the chairs against the restaurant.

These dramatizations, however, have little capacity to insert the spectator into an effectively possible reality. Even if they present situations in which the need to follow the teachings is dramatized (the spectator does not want to be trapped and sad as the sloth, or must forgive him for breaking the glass), its aesthetic investment bets on previous experience of page users with the language of memes, habitually populated with sometimes anthropomorphic animals, sometimes in unexpected conditions. Therefore, the images operate more in the dimension of the simulation than in the construction of an immediate reality, in which the spectator can put him or herself in the other's place or at least sympathize with the situation of the other.

Moreover, by using the sloth in the teachings, the posts confer on discourse of deboismo a self-referential aspect, which turns to its own symbolic terrain rather than dialogue with everyday experiences of page followers on which such imperatives of conduct could be put in practice. So the spectacular logic takes place, because it is emphasized the very condition of meme of the post, regardless of its content. Sensory stimulations and humorous tone overrides any attempt to promote any attitude towards the other or the world.

However, the use of the sloth also comes close to the sentimentalist strategy in some publications. In them, the sloth appears as deserving of affection or as a strategy to highlight important values for the ideology of deboismo, such as love, tenderness and respect for nature. The third teaching, "Treat other human beings,

other creatures and the world in general with love, honesty, truthfulness and respect," is presented with an image in which a sloth and a woman are hugging each other kindly. The seventh teaching, "Put all your convictions to the test; always compare your ideas with the facts, and always be agreeable to change your mind", shows a sloth with eyes closed and showing the tongue, in a playful expression.

In both cases, the images seek to excite the viewer, triggering feelings of affection and protection in relation to the animal. The images do not offer practical alternatives, they only invoke affect in an abstract way. This sentimentalism not attached to the effective actions, is, in fact, the basis of Deboismo. The notion of "keep calm" or "take it easy" as the page preaches, is often translated as a state of mind or a subjective condition rather than a set of actions and positions in relation to the other. The "kind" images of the sloth have the function of producing this subjective condition. In these cases, the teachings of deboismo are aesthetically similar to a very common type of page on social network sites that are dedicated exclusively to provide motivational content and messages of positivity without an explicitly moral characteristic. The greatest deal of these messages can be resumed in this idea: "feel good about yourself".

These publications can be interpreted as a contemporary expression of the "painless ethics" described by Lipovetsky (1994, 2007). According to the French philosopher, the moral commitments currently assumed by individuals lost their imperative character, associated with duty, to become circumstantial. The preoccupation with good has not disappeared, but it is now organized according to mostly individual and subjective interests: "In place of the severe commandments of morality, we have psychologism and the euphoria of well-being", says Lipovetsky (1994: 62).

The moral agency of the teachings of Deboismo

The second category in which the messages were interpreted is that of moral agency. Chouliaraki (2008) defines moral agency as the way the media texts position the viewer and invite him to take a practical or discursive action. The author also exemplifies the moral agency with three typical positions, offered to spectators by the media texts: the voyeur viewer, who is released from any moral obligation; the philanthropic spectator, who is the target for the emotional politics, but is not persuaded to act; and the protester spectator, whose moral position involves a call to the practical action, even if it is restricted. The author also notes

how aesthetic quality and moral agency are linked, and responsible for substantiating the moral agency.

In the case of the posts about the teachings of Deboismo, however, there is a certain apparent contradiction between the aesthetic quality and the moral agency. According to Chouliaraki (2008, p. 846), media texts act in a moral education dimension not "through explicit instruction as to what is right or wrong, but rather through exemplary stories as to what matters in a particular situation and how to act appropriately in it." The posts about Deboismo operate inversely. They are explicit verbal instructions on how to act, but that trigger aesthetic strategies (images, meme format etc) that reduce the moral content of their instructions, since they lack exemplary stories in which the practical application can be showed. More specifically, the guidelines remain at an abstract level, which make the orders optional. It is symptomatic that the post about the fourth teaching of Deboismo is preceded by the following text: "Good evening! Continuing the series of the ten teachings of Deboismo (teachings, not orders, since imposing rules is not a way to be "de boa"), today we present the fourth"[7]

The fact that the teachings are transplanted ideas from another context also needs to be put in consideration. If on Dawkins' book the norms described by the author were presented as an alternative for Christian morality, on the Deboismo page the ideas lose their philosophical amplitude. They are not no longer the consequence of a certain kind of atheist thinking that needs rules to organize human relationships. They become the very substance of "lifestyle philosophy". So to Deboismo page followers, the teachings are not presented as impositions, but as general and elective guidance with very few specificities.

Here, again, the teachings of Deboismo are showed in consonance with Lipovetsky's thesis (1994 and 2007) about the weakening of the morality commitments, without the disappearance of ethical projects. The teachings of Deboismo position the viewer as a voyeur, who can experience the memes of the page without joining enduring causes that require sacrifices, or appeal to emotion to summon the viewer to assume the condition of "take it easy".

According to Lipovetsky (1994, 2007), the moral relativizations of the last decades did not result in the erasure of ethical discourses and projects. However, they have transformed the way people engage in such projects. For the French philosopher, we live in a historical moment in which ethics became optional and not conflicted. The contemporary world, and especially the commodity market, offer us a series of "conscious", "sustainable" and "voluntary" choices so that we can

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[7]https://www.facebook.com/Deboismo/photos/a.779185485513588.1073741829.774696909295779/78 4891131609690/?type=3&theater. Accessed on 30/03/2017.

practice good only as long as it does not cause discomfort to us. Therefore, ethics enters the logic of individualism and begins to be guided not from collective interests, but also as a kind of private pleasure. It marks the emergence of what Zizek (2003) called, more caustically, "shamed hedonism," in which collective welfare is attached to individual needs and choices.

To demonstrate the argument, let us take the fifth teaching, which proposes: "Live life with a feeling of joy and wonder" (Figure 3). The posting brings the text at its bottom, while the image shows an illustration of vivid colors with three sloths with open arms, each one a color. Unlike other thoughts of Deboismo, the teaching in question does not suggest verbally a way of dealing with the other, but a relationship to oneself and one's own life, marked by positivity. How does the message position the reader and invite him or her to take action? The text brings an explicit order, but the practical dimension of the convocation is placed in the background in the name of the experience of the individual in relation to himself, and not to the other.

Figure 3 - Fifth teaching of deboismo
"5 - Live life with a feeling of joy and wonder".

From the categories proposed by Chouliaraki (2008), what is important here, and in almost all other teachings, is more what the author calls "politics of emotion", than a true call to action. The viewer is asked to assume the position of someone who experiences a sensation rather than takes action. Yet, attitude and feeling are the same. The experience of emotion is an action for itself. Illustrating the teachings explicitly normative in their textual dimension with images that

distance them from an immediate reality or appeal to sentimentality, the teachings of deboismo liberate the spectator from the necessity to take an action. It is only needed to accept the "de boa" condition, enjoy, comment and share the publication.

It is important to note that we do not advocate any depreciation of emotions in the name of reason, but rather we aim to identify how the celebration of emotion in deboismo contradicts the call to action in relation to the other. As Ahmed (2014) notes, emotions also take a cultural form, allowing the creation of judgments and values, as they drive people to take certain kind of actions. The point is to note that the emotions on which deboismo finds its base do not turn to the other, but for the followers of the movement themselves, in a self-referential turn. What do emotions do, to use Ahmed's expression (2014), is to help legitimate a type of position that values social rules guided by the "non-harm principle" (VAZ, 2008), in which the personal search for well-being cannot be object of sanction unless it causes harm to the other. Although such a configuration apparently promotes tolerance, the respect for the other and the conviviality with difference are restricted to ensure that every individual has the right to self-realization. Consequently, the tolerance promoted by deboismo can easily become mere indifference.

Final remarks

The proposal to question the morality dimension of a Facebook page like that of Deboismo may seem disconcerting in its own banality. However, one million and a hundred thousand people feel affected in some way by this page, enough to follow it and receive their messages daily. When Silverstone (2002) chooses a rather dubious American talk show to open its arguments to answer why study the media, his choice is not at all careless. Studying the media means, for the author, understanding that it is precisely the perplexing banality of much of the media that makes it an object worthy of study. For this, it is also through the flow of media messages - which we perceive with divided attention and which we take not totally seriously - that fills the "texture of the everyday" and becomes an inevitable part of our lives. That way, we develop judgments and classifications, we attribute values, and we sense and interpret events. Deboismo is part of this flow.

From the analytical categories developed by Chourialaki (2008, 2013), it was possible to identify some ways in which the messages from the page Deboísmo operate their "moral education". Inspired by online aesthetics and a curious marriage between religion and secularity, the teachings of Deboismo point to an ethical project that turns to emotion, to humor, to the sensitive. It frees the reader

from strong obligations, to relativize orders that, although explicit, are presented only as elective teachings. Being "de boa", consequently, can be interpreted much more as a condition of the individual in relation to him or herself than to the other. The absence of exemplary stories or practical applications of the teachings makes Deboismo an invitation to the mere sense of feeling good.

Taylor (2005, 2007) and MacIntyre (2007) suggest that in contemporary times the moral horizons are fragmented. The moral sources that allows us to think about the worthy ways of living are individualized, rather than being object of collective deliberation. In this way, we lose the ability to think and share the social good in a communal way. Our value judgments are only expressions of our personal inclinations. Therefore, there is no way to reach a consensus. This is a possible explanation for the fierce debates (or "tretas" in Portuguese[8]), for which Deboismo presents itself as an antidote, and why the slogan "take it easy" seems so attractive.

The teachings of Deboismo, at first, seem to go against the logic of moral disarticulation. They make explicit rules of conduct relatively clear and place the relationship with the other as the basic element of its "philosophy." However, its articulation through the language of the internet and its weak commitment to create immediate realities in order to provoke practical attitudes also point to the individualization of moral sources. Identifying how the page followers discuss the traits observed here about the ethics of Deboismo could be an interesting development to continue to reflect on the ways the internet, and especially the social network sites, operate as "moral spaces".

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