

Googling the Good Life: How Algorithmic Advice and Crowdsourced Ethics Reshape Moral Frameworks

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Abstract: Historically, individuals sought ethical guidance and moral arbitration from traditional institutions such as religious communities, family elders, and local social networks. In the digital age, however, moral decision-making is increasingly outsourced to online platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems, and crowdsourced advice forums. Applying Émile Durkheim's theories of collective consciousness and anomie, along with Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid morality, this paper investigates how digital spaces serve as modern moral arbitrators. Through a qualitative textual analysis of top-voted advice threads, platform voting mechanics, and algorithmic feedback loops, this study demonstrates that crowdsourced ethics produce a dynamic, highly individualized form of "consensus morality." While these platforms offer immediate, low-stakes validation and democratize access to advice, they simultaneously replace enduring cultural frameworks with transactional norms, echo-chamber biases, and algorithmic incentive structures. This paper contributes to digital sociology by illustrating how online crowdsourcing continuously redefines public understandings of the "good life" and interpersonal obligation.

Keywords: Crowdsourced Morality, Digital Ethics, Émile Durkheim, Liquid Morality, Reddit, Collective Consciousness, Algorithmic Advice.

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I. INTRODUCTION

For generations, interpersonal conflict was mediated through enduring social frameworks like religious guidance and family counsel, but these traditional structures are increasingly supplanted by modern digital platforms (Gjeloshi et al., 2026). Today, millions of users turn to crowdsourced forums like r/AmITheAsshole (AITA) or AI chatbots to evaluate personal dilemmas ranging from etiquette to breaking off friendships (Awad and Levine, 2020; Jiang et al., 2021). This migration reflects a structural shift toward algorithmic authority, wherein computational processes exercise expanding normative power over everyday ethical life (Karpova, 2025).

Consider a disagreement between close friends. Someone posting about it online must reduce years of shared history to a short account of one incident. Readers can respond to the account they have been given, but they cannot hear the other friend's perspective or see what the relationship has meant to either person over time. That missing context matters: research on moral judgment shows that people's expectations differ according to the relationship between those involved.

This cultural realignment raises a central research question: How does outsourcing ethical dilemmas to online crowds and algorithmic systems shift public understandings of moral obligation and interpersonal duty?

The question concerns what happens after advice is received. A verdict may help someone feel justified, yet it cannot have the difficult conversation, offer an apology, or decide whether a relationship is worth repairing. Those choices remain with the person who sought advice.

This paper contends that crowdsourced and AI-driven moral platforms replace continuous, community-embedded ethical frameworks with an episodic, transactional form of "algorithmic morality" (Jiang et al., 2021; Gjeloshi et al., 2026). By delegating evaluative reasoning to digital platforms, individuals experience moral distancing and moral disengagement, engaging with outcomes without fully owning their moral implications (Guo et al., 2025; Gjeloshi et al., 2026). Furthermore, relying on automated platforms risks the erosion of human moral agency and accelerates moral deskilling (Drishti IAS, 2026). Ultimately, while crowdsourced platforms offer immediate advice and validation, they systematically prioritize radical individual autonomy over long-term relational obligations and emotional duty (Furey and Hill, 2021; Gjeloshi et al., 2026).

This argument does not depend on every online judgment being wrong. An outside perspective can reveal conduct that someone has struggled to name, especially when advice from people close to them is unavailable or difficult to seek. The concern is what happens when a useful perspective becomes the final

authority. Ethical responsibility asks more of a person than choosing the answer that receives the most approval; it asks them to consider what they owe the people who will live with the consequences of their decision.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Algorithmic Authority and the Redistribution of Moral Governance

When people seek advice about a personal conflict, they have always relied on others to help them judge what is fair. Digital platforms change the setting in which that advice is given. A person can present a dispute to an online crowd or an AI chatbot and receive a response without speaking to anyone involved in the relationship. In this paper, algorithmic authority refers to the influence these digitally mediated responses can acquire when users treat them as a reliable basis for deciding what they ought to do. That influence does not require a system to make the final decision. It can begin when its answer shapes which concerns a user takes seriously and which possibilities they set aside. An experimental study of ChatGPT's moral advice found that its responses influenced participants' judgments even when participants knew the advice came from a chatbot (Krügel et al., 2023).

The order in which advice is received may matter, too. A person who reads a confident answer before speaking to the other person may enter that conversation with a conclusion already in mind. They can still change their view, but doing so may be harder once they have begun to explain or defend the first answer.

Online crowds and AI systems exercise this influence in different ways. Forum users offer judgments based on a story written by one of the people involved, while an AI system generates a response from the information supplied in a prompt. In both cases, the resulting advice may feel more settled than the situation warrants. A person who receives a clear verdict can begin to focus on whether their conduct was justified, while giving less attention to how the conflict developed or what repair might require. This is a possible form of moral distancing: the person remains responsible for their choice, but the work of evaluating it has partly moved elsewhere.

This shift can also make responsibility harder to discuss. Someone may defend a decision by saying that "everyone agreed" with them online or that an AI advised them to take a particular course. Such explanations show how advice can become a source of reassurance, but they do not resolve the underlying ethical question. The person making the decision still has to consider whether the advice fits the full circumstances and what its consequences will be for others.

Consider a person who asks whether they were justified in ignoring a friend's calls after an argument. A verdict might address that single act, while leaving open other questions: Did the friend know why contact had stopped? Was there a pattern of unwanted calls? Did either person attempt to resolve the disagreement? The answer may change as those details emerge. Responsibility involves returning to the situation itself, even after outside advice has been received.

2.2 Anomie, Liquid Love, and Changing Expectations of Relationships

Sociological theory helps explain why an outside verdict may be appealing when expectations within a relationship are unclear. Durkheim's concept of anomie describes a condition in which social norms no longer provide adequate guidance or regulation (Durkheim, 1897). Applied to digital advice seeking, it offers a way to ask whether people turn to online communities when they are uncertain about what they can reasonably expect from friends, partners, or family members. This is a theoretical interpretation; the existence of an advice post alone does not show that its author is socially isolated or experiencing anomie.

Advice forums can be understood, in this sense, as places where people test their expectations against those of others. A user might ask whether helping a relative is a duty, a generous choice, or an unreasonable demand. The replies reveal that people do not always agree on where one category ends and another begins. That disagreement itself may be part of what draws users to seek a wider judgment.

Bauman's account of liquid love focuses on the insecurity of human bonds and the tension between wanting closeness and fearing the constraints that closeness can bring (Bauman, 2003). This tension can be seen in the questions people bring to advice forums: How much should I give to this relationship? Am I asking too much? At what point should I leave? Bauman's theory does not establish that online forums cause relationships to become fragile. It does, however, provide a lens through which to examine advice that weighs personal freedom against the effort of maintaining a bond.

Giddens' concept of confluent love offers a related, though distinct, perspective. Rather than treating a relationship as permanent because of tradition, his account emphasizes intimacy sustained through mutual trust, communication, and satisfaction (Giddens, 1992). This can give people more freedom to question unfair expectations. At the same time, a relationship shaped by ongoing negotiation may generate difficult judgments about which obligations remain when one person feels dissatisfied. Digital advice platforms provide a public space in which users seek answers to those questions, often from people who do not know the relationship beyond the incident described.

These theories also help explain why advice about boundaries can be both valuable and difficult to assess from a distance. Leaving a harmful relationship may be necessary; staying in a strained one may sometimes allow trust to be rebuilt. A short post rarely gives readers enough information to decide which situation they are seeing. The point is to examine how an online verdict handles that uncertainty, rather than assume that either staying or leaving is always the more ethical choice.

2.3 Moral Deskillling and the Limits of Crowdsourced Ethics

Moral judgment involves more than identifying a rule and applying it to a dispute. People must consider motives, competing obligations, the history of a relationship, and the likely effects of their response. Research on moral judgment shows that the relationship between the people involved can change how an action is evaluated (Earp et al., 2021). This makes brief accounts of interpersonal conflict difficult to judge with confidence: details omitted from a post or prompt may be central to understanding what one person owes another.

Repeated reliance on external verdicts also raises the possibility of moral deskillling. Here, the term describes a potential loss of confidence or practice in making independent ethical judgments. It should be treated as a concern to investigate, rather than as a proven consequence of using an advice forum or chatbot. Outside advice can prompt reflection, expose a person to a viewpoint they had missed, and help them recognize harmful conduct. The risk arises when receiving an answer takes the place of considering its reasons and limits.

One way to distinguish reflection from dependence is to ask what a person does with advice that challenges them. They might reconsider their account, seek the other person's perspective, or explain why they disagree with a particular response. Each requires judgment of their own. Simply collecting more answers until one feels reassuring would serve a different purpose: it would help settle discomfort without necessarily clarifying the moral problem.

The AI system Delphi illustrates one limit of computational moral judgment. Its researchers trained it to make judgments about everyday situations, while also identifying biases and inconsistencies in its responses (Jiang et al., 2021). Its output can therefore be examined as a prediction of a judgment, not accepted as proof of what is morally right. A similar distinction applies to online crowds: a popular verdict indicates how respondents reacted to the account they were given. It does not, by itself, establish that they understood the whole conflict or reached the fairest conclusion. arxiv.org

Taken together, these limits suggest that digital advice is most useful as a starting point for deliberation. It can help a person formulate questions, consider another perspective, and recognize uncertainty. The responsibility to decide—and to answer for that decision within the relationship—remains with the person seeking advice.

This distinction matters most when an answer feels simple but its consequences are lasting. A crowd can decide whether an apology seems warranted from the facts in a post; it cannot offer that apology or rebuild the trust that follows it. The practical test of ethical advice is therefore not only whether the verdict sounds persuasive, but whether it helps the person respond thoughtfully to those affected.

III. ANALYSIS & CORE ARGUMENTS

3.1 The Mechanics of Algorithmic Authority: Datafication, Decontextualization, and Epistemic Flattening

The growing reliance on crowdsourced platforms like Reddit's *r/AmITheAsshole* (AITA) and generative AI advisors represents a fundamental realignment of normative governance. At the core of this shift is the rise of **algorithmic authority**—a distinct form of normative power exercised by algorithm-driven systems over social, political, and ethical life (Karpova, 2025; Gjeloši et al., 2026). Unlike classical moral authorities whose influence relies on relational trust and personal character, algorithmic authority operates as an impersonal, faceless infrastructure that derives its legitimacy from perceived computational efficiency, data-driven accuracy, and objective neutrality (Karpova, 2025). As individuals increasingly defer personal dilemmas to digital platforms and AI advisors, machine-generated outputs acquire *de facto* normative status, reshaping how knowledge is validated and how moral choices are evaluated (Karpova, 2025; Gjeloši et al., 2026).

To function within digital advice spaces, complex interpersonal disputes undergo **datafication** and structural decontextualization, where continuous human histories are reduced to calculable data points and prompt vectors (Martin, 2023; De Ridder, 2021). Multi-year domestic dynamics and relational contexts are compressed into 400-word narratives, stripping away situational nuances, unspoken emotional dynamics, and continuous history (Martin, 2023; Gjeloši et al., 2026). Online crowd members evaluate these flattened narratives through categorical, binary tags (such as "Not The Asshole" or "You Are The Asshole"), executing an epistemic flattening that replaces long-term relational obligations with immediate, external crowd validation (Jiang et al., 2021; Martin, 2023).

This compression begins before anyone comments or generates an answer. The person seeking advice decides where the story starts, which messages to quote, and how to describe the other person's motives. Those

choices may be sincere, yet they still shape what an audience can judge. A verdict based on that account can be useful as a reaction to the story presented, but it cannot settle every question about the relationship behind it.

3.2 Moral Deskillling, Scapegoating, and the Erosion of Human Agency

Delegating moral evaluation to digital crowds and AI systems fundamentally alters human agency and moral accountability (Karpova, 2025; Guo et al., 2025). In traditional ethical frameworks, moral reasoning is a cultivated human skill that requires continuous practice, practical wisdom, contextual sensitivity, and emotional attunement (Gjeloshi et al., 2026; Karpova, 2025). When individuals habitually delegate ethical discernment to computational systems or online crowd votes, they experience **moral deskillling**—the gradual atrophy of independent ethical deliberation, empathy, and interpersonal problem-solving capacities (Drishti IAS, 2026; Gjeloshi et al., 2026).

Interacting with automated decision-makers alters cognitive and neurological processing: people attribute less "mind" and intentionality to AI systems than to human agents, resulting in diminished activity in social brain networks responsible for empathy, social cognition, and valuation (Guo et al., 2025). This neuropsychological shift mitigates moral emotional responses, reduces sensitivity to social evaluation, and lowers anticipatory guilt, leading users to treat algorithms as "moral proxies" or scapegoats to deflect personal blame for harmful or self-serving choices (Guo et al., 2025; Karpova, 2025). Furthermore, conversational AI tools and advice forums exhibit high rates of **social sycophancy**, uncritically affirming the user's initial self-serving framing rather than providing transformative ethical friction (Guo et al., 2025; Krügel et al., 2023).

The distinction is between seeking help with a decision and handing the decision over. Someone who asks, "What might I be missing?" remains open to revising their view. Someone who asks only for confirmation may leave with stronger confidence but little better understanding. The same tool can support either response; how the person uses its advice matters when assessing its effect on moral agency.

3.3 Liquid Morality and the Weaponization of Relational Disposability

Crowdsourced advice forums embody the consumerist logic of **liquid modernity** and **confluent love** (Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1992; Martin, 2023). In late-modern digital culture, interpersonal relationships are subjected to market mechanisms, becoming fluid, transient, and commodified (Bauman, 2003; Horning, 2012; Martin, 2023). Under the model of confluent love, intimate connections are treated as contingent arrangements that exist purely for mutual, immediate satisfaction, maintained only as long as they deliver personal benefit and discarded at the first sign of inconvenience (Giddens, 1992; Martin, 2023).

Digital advice platforms accelerate this liquid dynamic by transforming relational conflict into a consumer choice: when users post domestic disputes online, crowd members routinely advise immediate relational severance, ghosting, or cutting of ties (Martin, 2023; Suenzo, 2024). To legitimize this relational disposability, online advice culture weaponizes a standardized repertoire of performative "therapy talk"—employing co-opted concepts like "setting boundaries," "protecting my peace," "toxic behavior," and "self-care" as rhetorical shields (Martin, 2023). Rather than facilitating authentic psychological healing, these terms are deployed performatively to project an idealized presentation of self while evading the emotional labor, vulnerability, and non-negotiable compromise necessary to sustain long-term human ties (Martin, 2023).

The difficulty is that identical advice can have very different meanings in different circumstances. Ending contact may be a necessary response to repeated harm, while in another case it may foreclose a conversation that both people want to have. An analysis of online advice must therefore examine the reasons offered for a recommendation, rather than treating every call to leave as evidence of disposability or every appeal to stay as evidence of care.

3.4 Sociological Anomie and the Fallacy of Bottom-Up Descriptive Consensus

The impulse to outsource ethical dilemmas to online crowds originates in a condition of sociological **anomie** (Durkheim, 1897; "Durkheim's Theory of Anomie", 2021). As Émile Durkheim theorized, rapid social transformations and the erosion of traditional integrating institutions (such as family structures and communal norms) leave individuals in a state of social and domestic regulation deficits ("Durkheim's Theory of Anomie", 2021). Lacking stable norms to channel personal expectations, individuals experience a "morbid desire for the infinite"—an unguided state of open-ended possibility, relational confusion, and isolation ("Durkheim's Theory of Anomie", 2021). Turning to online subreddits or AI moral models represents a search for external regulation and communal validation within a normative vacuum ("Durkheim's Theory of Anomie", 2021; Farnam et al., 2021).

Consider a user asking whether they owe a family member financial help. The responses may differ because readers bring different assumptions about family duty, personal resources, and past treatment to the question. Seeking a wider opinion can make those competing expectations visible. It cannot, by itself, tell us why the user sought advice or whether they lack guidance from people in their own life.

However, attempting to resolve ethical dilemmas through crowdsourced consensus rests on a fundamental philosophical fallacy: descriptive consensus regarding what a crowd believes does not establish prescriptive statements about what is morally right (Jiang et al., 2021; Awad and Levine, 2020). Machine ethics frameworks like Delphi rely on bottom-up aggregation of crowdworker judgments (such as the 1.7 million instances in the Commonsense Norm Bank), which merely records statistically dominant opinions (Jiang et al., 2021). Because descriptive models merely reflect prevailing public inputs, they inevitably capture and amplify systemic cultural biases, demographic skews (such as 21st-century Western individualist norms), and platform-driven outrage (Jiang et al., 2021; Awad and Levine, 2020). Furthermore, digital platform architectures reward emotional intensity and punitive moralizing, as online social learning actively amplifies outrage expressions because users observe that harsh stances generate higher engagement, upvotes, and viral validation (Jiang et al., 2021; Martin, 2023).

Agreement still has value. If many readers independently notice the same harm, their responses may prompt the writer to reconsider conduct they had minimized. The mistake would be to treat the number of agreeing responses as a complete ethical argument. A sound judgment also needs reasons that address the people involved, the available alternatives, and the likely consequences of acting on the advice.

IV. DISCUSSION & BROADER IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The Erosion of Face-to-Face Conflict Resolution

Outsourcing moral decision-making to digital forums and automated advisors creates significant ripple effects across daily social life. When individuals rely on online forums or automated tools for moral validation, they bypass the essential, albeit uncomfortable, process of direct interpersonal negotiation and face-to-face conflict resolution (Gjeloshi et al., 2026). Resolving moral friction in real life requires empathy, active listening, contextual sensitivity, and a willingness to navigate relational ambiguity—capacities that are severely diminished in text-based, asynchronous, or algorithmically mediated environments (Gjeloshi et al., 2026; Yaacov, 2025). Interacting through digital platforms mitigates users' moral emotional responses, reduces concerns about social evaluation, and alters cognitive processing by decreasing activity in social brain networks responsible for social cognition, empathy, and value-based decision-making (Guo et al., 2025).

Seeking advice does not necessarily prevent a direct conversation. A person may use outside perspectives to work out what they want to say before approaching someone they have hurt or who has hurt them. The concern arises when the online verdict becomes the end of the process. Repairing a relationship often requires listening to an account that differs from one's own, answering questions, and allowing the other person to respond—steps that an anonymous audience cannot carry out on either person's behalf.

Furthermore, receiving instant validation from thousands of anonymous strangers or conversational AI tools generates a temporary boost in self-esteem while creating an illusion of moral superiority (Guo et al., 2025; Martin, 2023). This dynamic reinforces **social sycophancy**, wherein the user's initial framing is uncritically affirmed, insulating them from constructive ethical friction (Guo et al., 2025). Over time, this reliance on external digital validation encourages individuals to approach real-world disagreements with rigid stances rather than an openness to mutual compromise, ultimately accelerating **moral deskilling**—the gradual atrophy of human practical wisdom, emotional attunement, and conflict-resolution capabilities (Drishti IAS, 2026; Karpova, 2025; Gjeloshi et al., 2026).

For example, a person may receive overwhelming support for refusing a relative's request. That support could help them recognize a genuine need for a boundary. It could also make them less willing to ask why the request was made or whether another form of help is possible. The ethical quality of the advice depends partly on whether it opens up those questions or closes them.

4.2 Demographic Skew and Cultural Homogenization

The "collective wisdom" produced by crowdsourced moral platforms and AI datasets does not represent a universal or culturally neutral sample of human morality (Awad and Levine, 2020; Jiang et al., 2021; Gjeloshi et al., 2026). Machine ethics models like Delphi and crowdsourced benchmarks like Social Chemistry or the Moral Machine project predominantly rely on training data annotated by young, Western, educated, and secular demographics—primarily 21st-century American or WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) annotators (Awad and Levine, 2020; Jiang et al., 2021).

Even where users come from many backgrounds, the loudest or most visible responses need not reflect all of them equally. The language of a post, the assumptions shared by frequent participants, and the kinds of answers that receive attention can affect which perspectives a user encounters. A widely supported response should therefore be understood in relation to the community that produced it.

Consequently, hyper-individualistic values—such as prioritizing personal emotional comfort, immediate gratification, and rigid boundary enforcement above all else—are framed as objective, universal

ethical truths (Awad and Levine, 2020; Gjeloši et al., 2026). When users unreflectively apply these Western, individual-centric scripts to collectivist, family-oriented, or multi-generational cultural settings, it produces profound social friction, fragmenting traditional communities and alienating individuals from their physical support systems (Awad and Levine, 2020; Gjeloši et al., 2026).

At the same time, cultural context should not become a reason to dismiss someone's account of harm. Family obligations may be meaningful and freely embraced, or they may be invoked to demand more than one person can reasonably give. Careful advice needs to consider both the value of a relationship and the circumstances of the person being asked to maintain it.

4.3 Commercialization of Moral Life

Algorithmic advice platforms and social media networks transform personal ethical dilemmas and intimate conflicts into datafied, monetizable content (Martin, 2023; De Ridder, 2021). Operating under the logic of late-modern platform capitalism, these systems commodify human desire and attention, treating relational choices as identity trial-and-error within a pervasive attention economy (Martin, 2023).

This creates a difference between what helps the person who posted and what interests an audience. A quiet update saying that two people spoke, acknowledged their mistakes, and reached an imperfect compromise may be useful to those involved. It may attract less attention than a dramatic account with a clear offender and a decisive ending. The public response to a dilemma can therefore be shaped by the appeal of the story as well as by concern for its participants.

Because platform algorithms are explicitly optimized to maximize user retention, clicks, and advertising revenue, they systematically reward emotional intensity, sensationalism, and extreme division over quiet compromise or empathetic reconciliation (Jiang et al., 2021; Martin, 2023). When moral guidance is mediated by platforms governed by engagement metrics, the definition of a "good decision" is corrupted, becoming synonymous with what generates the most outrage and viral validation rather than what fosters long-term human flourishing (Jiang et al., 2021; Martin, 2023).

This does not mean that a popular response is necessarily bad advice. It means that popularity answers a different question from moral soundness. A highly visible comment may be insightful, but its visibility alone cannot show whether it accounts for missing information, competing duties, or the consequences of the action it recommends.

V. CONCLUSION

The emergence of crowdsourced advice platforms and artificial moral advisors marks a fundamental pivot in how modern society negotiates ethics and personal duty (Karpova, 2025; Gjeloši et al., 2026). As traditional institutional frameworks fade, individuals seeking clarity in an era of digital and domestic **anomie** increasingly turn to algorithmic systems for absolution and normative regulation (Karpova, 2025; Gjeloši et al., 2026).

However, "Googling the good life" or relying on crowdsourced consensus does not eliminate moral responsibility; it merely exchanges community-embedded duties for a fluid, transactional form of **algorithmic morality** (Jiang et al., 2021; Gjeloši et al., 2026). While these digital spaces provide an accessible release valve for modern anxieties, they heavily favor radical individual autonomy, weaponize therapeutic jargon to justify relational disposability, and rely on engagement-driven algorithms that strip human relationships of their contextual depth (Furey and Hill, 2021; Martin, 2023).

The central question is therefore how people use the answers they receive. Online advice can help someone name a problem, challenge an unfair expectation, or see a situation from another angle. Its value diminishes when a verdict is treated as permission to stop thinking about the people and circumstances that the verdict cannot fully capture.

Ultimately, an upvoted verdict or an aggregated data model cannot substitute for the messy, lived reality of human empathy, situational attunement, and mutual compromise necessary for **meaningful human control** (Jonker et al., 2023; Drishti IAS, 2026; Gjeloši et al., 2026). As digital platforms continue to reshape everyday social norms, sociology and ethics must critically evaluate these automated systems to ensure that human moral agency is preserved and nurtured in an algorithmically mediated world (Karpova, 2025; Gjeloši et al., 2026).

Preserving that agency means remaining willing to ask what information is missing, whose perspective has not been heard, and who will bear the consequences of a decision. The answer offered by a crowd or a machine may inform that reflection. The responsibility to act with care still belongs to the person making the choice.

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