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SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Many classic ethnographies in social anthropology have centred at least in part on descriptions and analyses of diverse forms of moral life. Yet until recently, the theme of ethics in social anthropology has hardly been concerned with, or affected by, questions of the general understanding or comparative analysis of morality, and occasional attempts to set out an intellectual agenda that might place such questions centrally in the discipline (e.g. Worsnop 1932; Firth 1951, 1953; Rand 1955; Erdal and Erdal 1959; Fischel-Haesendorn 1967; Gockema 1972; Wolf 1982; Rocken 1986; Fiske and Mason 1990; Howell 1997) have had limited impact. Attempts by non-anthropologists to draw systematic conclusions for the understanding of ethics from ethnographic data and analyses (MacBeath 1953; Ladd 1957; Hutch 1983; Moody-Adams 1991; J. D. Cook 1999) have been similarly unfruitful. During the last two decades, however, something like a concerted field of inquiry has developed in the anthropology of ethics, with a series of conceptual innovations finally directing ethnographic inquiries, which have in turn informed further debate. Progress has depended on some success in transcending two limitations of vision that have hitherto constrained anthropological engagement with ethics: a tendency to equate ethics or morality with the social, conceived in law-like terms, and a particularistic conception of distinct moralities embodied in plural cultures and societies. Ideas from ethnographically minded philosophers have been helpful in developing this anthropological approach.

Conceptions of the social as an order of reality subordinated to "the individual" came in many forms, but Émile Durkheim's formulation has been exceptionally influential. Durkheim (1893) argued that the power of both morality and "the sacred" to control and constrain human action, manifested in their being simultaneously both obligatory and despicable, derives from the fact that they represent "society," a moral being qualitatively different from the individuals it comprises, and the source of the normative authority that distinguishes them from natural forces. This concept of society is the foundation for both state and religion, which is the vegetation of society symbolically transformed, and

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morality, which is the authority of society manifested in its inscriptive rules of conduct. On the one hand, Durkheim's powerful vision appears to recognize the constitutive importance of morality in social life, as a reality not reducible to material interests, but on the other it simply equates morality with the collective and people following moral rules, like the rest of a social structure, is conceived as the more or less mechanical functioning of a natural causal system. Morality is central, but at the same time almost invisible, because there is nothing true of that is not equally true of society.

Many anthropologists accepted enough of this Durkheimian framework to think that understanding morality was a matter of explaining "why custom binds" (Fortes 1959, 1977), and if such generative powers found Durkheim's own account unsatisfactory, and looked to psychoanalysis, determinism, cognitive science, Marxism, or phenomenology for better answers, they have rarely considered that nothing distinctive about ethical choice, dilemma, judgment, or conduct, anything that sets the ethical apart from the rest of culture, ideology, discourse, and so on, might be central to the understanding of social life.

When anthropologists explained patterns of peasant insurgency and resistance, for instance, in terms of "moral economy" (Scott 1976), the forces of the term "moral" was just that ideas of entitlement that motivate political action are collectivist rather than individual and cross-cultural comparisons of the "morality" of market exchange turned on equating morality with society and the long term, as opposed to the self-interest, the individual, and the short term (Ferry and Blech 1989). For Marston, morality was identified sometimes with a ruling ideology (Blox 1967) and sometimes with problematic insights into the truth behind such ideology (Tessier 1980); in both cases, indistinguishably, with collectively shared ideas that mandate and motivate collective action.

Durkheim's nephew Marcel Mauss, in his classic 1938 lecture, "The Category of the Person" (1983), provides a Durkheimian counterpoint to Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals (1994/1887). Like Nietzsche, Mauss describes the stages in the emergence of a distinctively modern moral agent. Mauss's is a more benign narrative of the social production of the conscious, responsible individual who is the bearer of rights. In line with the Durkheimian opposition between the moral-collective and the moral-individual, Mauss begins by declaring a disjunction between socially constituted categories of person (personnage), whose history he proposes to reconstruct, and the sense of physical and spiritual individuality of the self (self), which he suggests people have always possessed and, he implies, therefore has no history. Michael Carrithers (1985) rightly insists that this disjunction is invalid and that there is a history to be written of senses of self (see) which is connected with that of the person. He distinguishes personologies, which conceive of persons in an ordered social collectivity, from mythologies, in which selves are conceived in cosmological and spiritual contexts, intersecting as moral agents, and he emphasizes that organized reflection on the self is not a parochial Western concern. Indeed, north India in the fifth century BC, with the development of Buddhism and other organized projects of self-formation, was the site of a decisive step in human thought and practice relating to the self, comparable to that which Mauss identifies, in relation to the person, in Roman law. Mauss misses the significance of these developments, and also those in China, because his narrative is structured by the rules of the morally inviolate legal individual, so the elaborate institutionalized practices for the analysis and refashioning (including the decommissioning) of the self developed there are dismissed as historical dead-ends. But forms of life and techniques of self-fashioning have been widely and pervasively influential, including in Europe, over many hundreds of years. During the last century the moral, institutional, and inter-change of ideas and practices intensified as traditions such as Buddhist vipsana meditation and yoga were reformulated and commodified in globalizing movements (Alter 2004; Stausus 2005; I. Cook forthcoming).

Carrières' proposal for a complement to Mauss's narrative provides the basis for bringing anthropological analysis into dialogue with other accounts of the genealogy of the moral subject, whether Nietzsche's or more recent philosophical-historical and Europe-focused accounts (Taylor 1990; Rose 1990, 1996; Seigel 2005). But has so far been accomplished here, partly because it has been unused for anthropologists, including those who have devoted more or less radically from the Durkheimian understanding of the moral/cultural, to paint on such a broad historical and comparative canvas. Instead, where anthropologists have sought to interpret something like the Durkheimian insistence on the centrality of the moral to a less reductionist way than he did, they have most often declared the irreducible diversity of moral life among what they represent as distinct and separate cultures or societies.

Thus, when Edward Said described societies as "moral systems" (1963), he meant not, as Durkheim laid, that the content of morality varies in predictable ways with different social structures, but rather that it is understood by all such social forces. The anthropologist cannot explain the choices and actions people make the ambition must be to render them intelligible by translating the categories and concepts in which they are made, always in more or less explicit contrast with "the West" or "us." Many fine ethnographic studies in this interpretive manner have characterized local societies by their dominant moral values and concepts (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 1956; Lienhardt 1951; Campbell 1954; Behrend 1970; James 1985; Howey 1997), but whenever attempts have been made to generalize in this vein beyond "local moralities" to regions or cultural areas—wih honor and shame in the Mediterranean (Murphy 1963) or hierarchy and purity and pollution in South Asia (Dumont 1980)—problems have been exposed which cast doubt on the original method (Herskovitz 1953). The assumptions of holism and internal homogeneity, and indeed the very concept of plural "cultures" as natural units existing in the world, awaiting description and comparison, have come increasingly to be rejected in anthropology (for just one influential line of arguments, see Strathern 1991).
Yet expressions of cultural and moral “relativisms,” which plausibly only make sense when they are used as the basis for arguments about the need for more inclusive assumptions, have played a role in the history of ethnography. Edward Westermarck’s monumental two-volume study on The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas (1896) puts forward a simple argument: moral relations are rooted in natural emotions, but the content of our moral ideas is arbitrary and accepted largely without reflection. A comparative study that demonstrates this will lead us to question and revise those opinions. The followers of Franz Boas developed the idea of cultures that employ their socially approved habits as distinctive moral philosophy (Benedict 1935), and anthropologists’ sympathetic portraits of radically “other” moralities were designed as support for moral reform at home (Mead 1934), a rhetorical form later called “cultural critique” (Marcus and Fischer 1986). This was partly in reaction to evolutionary views correlating stages in the development of technology or socioeconomic forms with advances in moral development (Marx 1911; Fritz-Haene 1967), and such views do continue to be advanced (Hallpike 2004). The contradiction involved in seeking to advance non-relative truths and claims by means of assertions of relativism is however caused strain. Many Schopen-Hughes’s (1987) notes are only unusually forthright in asserting that the primary of anthropologists’ ethical responsibilities should lead them to reject cultural relativism (1999), but also that in order to meet the challenge of engaging ethically defensible practices (the example being commercial traffic in human semen), anthropologists must introduce with our own cultural relativism (2000: 197). Relativism being thought of as a sort of anthropologists’ union card and not a strict intellectual engagement with ethics. In much of the above the object of the study, the term has been conceived of as “local moralities” distinctive moral worlds embodied in and therefore compatible with sociocultural entities. Recent writings under the rubric of this approach to the anthropology of ethics have begun, in contrast, from the conviction that when people pursue, or act, in the light of, sociocultural conceptions of human excellence or the good, certain distinctive things (including reflexive thought) may be going on: that these processes are pervasive and constitutive in human social life, that such diversity as they give rise to may not coincide with what are thought of as societies or cultures, and that future conceptions of society and culture may not readily capture them. To acknowledge and accommodate the prevalence of ethical choice, dilemmas, judgment, and conduct, some fairly thorough thinking may be required of some central concepts in moral theory, such as structure, culture, and agency. Many, though not all, of the authors in this field have been influenced by virtue ethics (including Aristotle, especially as interpreted by Alasdair MacIntyre) and/or by the later writings of Michael Foucault. Michael Lambek (2002, 2003, 2006), for instance, has insisted on what he calls the “absolutism” of the ethical: the pervasive influence of reflexive thinking for the good and cultivation of good dispositions, such dispositions being embodied, but at the same time more than mere habit, and requiring the
In his later writings on the “genealogy of ethics,” Foucault (1985, 1986, 2000, 2005) explicitly repudiated the idea, with which he had come to be associated, of power as systematic domination, “that leaves no room for freedom.” Except at the limits, power relations are always to some extent reciprocal and create possibilities for action on both sides. Indeed, it is only possible properly to speak of power relations because as subjects are free (2000: 392). Thus under the single term “so-called” (i.e., self-evident), Foucault included both intrusive processes whereby certain kinds of social subjects are formed in power relations, and processes of self-constitution and self-formation. This has implications for how one might study systems of morals. Foucault distinguished morality or moral codes—rules that might be imposed, followed, or resisted—from ethics, which are projects for making oneself into a certain kind of person. He argued that from classical antiquity through the rise of Christianity not much changed in the content of prescriptive moral codes (so he rejects the idea that the ancients were “more relaxed” about sex, for example), but ethics, the ways people were enjoined to work on and fashion themselves, changed profoundly; from an aesthetics of existence—a desire to cultivate a culture of qualities so as to achieve a restrained excellence, in particular in wielding power over others—as a hermeneutics of the subject—a searching, interpretive investigation of one’s actions, thoughts, intentions, and desires (1985, 1986, 2005).

Foucault’s delineation of the ethical is not the only one that is of interest to contemporary anthropologists, and nor is his distinction between ethics and morality. Bernard Williams (1985) used the same vocabulary to make an equally useful but different distinction. For him, ethics is any answer to the question, “What ought one to do?” and morality is one particular subset of such answers: those ethical theories (predominantly Kantianism, but also, though he did not mention it, Derrida’s theory) that place particular stress on notions of obligation, duty, and sentiments of blame (see also Skorupski 1985). So whereas for Foucault “ethics” describes an aspect of morality, for Williams morality is a special case of the broader category of ethics. Both Foucault and Williams were indebted to Nietzsche (1994:1987) in making these different distinctions, and in both cases part of the motivation lay in writing, as Nietzsche did, to liberate themselves and their readers from the parochialism of equating one kind of value system—in Nietzsche’s case specifically self-denying asceticism—with ethics as such. Both distinctions are likely to be of enduring usefulness in an anthropology of ethics that extends beyond the Western traditions to which Foucault and Williams largely confined their attention (Lash and Lury 2000), and just because they are different, cross-cutting distinctions, neither should easily simplify into merely technical jargon, but perhaps in the end different vocabularies will be needed to make these important distinctions.

A further distinction between ethics and morality is proposed by Jurvet Zigon (2002, 2005:162-6). Zigon characterizes morality as normally settling the form of unconscious habit, such that our conduct is neither thought out beforehand nor
2005; Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2005; Murray 2007; J. Cook forthcoming) anthropologists have described techniques of the self in diverse forms of ethical life: Mongol's living under usslaw repression (Robbins 2005, 2007); the Uyghur people in Xinjiang, recently converted to Pentecostal Christianity, coping with the moral torment of two mutually contradictory moral codes which they experience as simultaneously applicable to them (Robbins 2005, 2007); and colonizers engaged in the reflective cultivation of distinctive kinds of subjectivity, by practicing and as means to achieving distinctive forms of detachment and engagement (Danton and Calison 2007; Conard forthcoming). And Paulson (2001c) has persuasively argued that while kinship systems always involve some degree of subjection, with relationships and status appearing as given or naturalized in various ways, they are never this exclusively, and kinship relations are typically also media and means of self-cultivation. Indeed, the apparent relative sensibilities of kinship may appeal all the more forcibly the more the self, as in liberal societie or cosmopolitan situations, is not merely able but positively obliged to "make something of itself."

Such ethical projects exist only because as prevalent modes of domination leave room for some reflective practice of freedom. While Foucault maintained that the ubiquity of power indicated that we are always to some extent enslaved (2000: 167), we are certainly not all equally free. He proposed an image for the possibility, however remote, of the space for ethics being wholly et协guished. A slave who lived under total domination, so that his or her every act could be only as someone else's agent, would have no ethics (2000: 286). While this is not incompatible with Lauchli's stress on the "ubiquity" of ethical judgment, it is useful as an ethnographic approach to the scope and resources people have, in particular contexts, to engage in projects of self-constitution and to exercise ethical judgment. But the notion of degrees of freedom or of scope for choice, while indispensable, is in itself insufficient and even hazardous. It is too easy to think of liberal societies as affording just more freedom of choice than their predecessors or alternatives. As Asad points out, discussing the reconceptualization of law and ethics in colonial Egypt, many new legal regulations were introduced (state regulation of age of marriage, restrictions on polygamy, registration of marriage and divorce, etc.) and some social relations (such as those with children) became subject to new forms of anxiety and administrative regulations (2009: 216). The liberal notion of "private life" is not just an increase in a homogenized "room for choice," but a new kind of ethical space, one in which we are not just permitted but enjoined and even legally obliged to exercise freedom and self-government (see also Row 1999). Anthropology as descriptive of freedom connotes not only in degrees but also in qualitatively different, historically constituted forms (Laidlaw 2002).

Two ethnographic studies have discerned sophisticated ethical projects of self-constitution in apparently authoritarian societies of religious "fundamentalists.

These are respectively Paulson's (2001c) study of a follower of the Brueck Davidian sect, conducted in the aftermath of the Waco massacre, and the separately published but collaboratively produced studies by Mahmood (2005) and Hirschkind (2006) of Islamic reformist revitalism in Cairo. Both draw substantially on Foucault's writings on ethics; Mahmood and Hirschkind also on Machiavelli on tradition. Thus for similar, these studies also pose interesting questions for each other. Paulson (2001) following Foucault: 200c 298-9), makes a convincing case for pedagogy as the foundational ethical project and that, although all such relationships begin with subordination and proceed through consent, he offers as a criterion for ethically pedagogical relationships that their trajectory be one in which the pupil is led towards autonomy from the teacher. His understanding of the engagement his principal interlocutor has had with Brueck Davidian millenialism as constituting ethics turns substantially on his estimation of the achievement of autonomy, in spirit of acceptable subordination (Paulson 2001c).

The importance placed on autonomy in this general argument needs to be clarified and qualified. There are many institutionalised ethical projects whose basis is some kind of normative ideal of autonomy—structural ideals of purity, earning of worldly ties and affections, and so on, some of which are realisable only with death (Laidlaw 2005) but nothing of the kind is necessarily intended here. In myriad social contexts, autonomy may be much more usually is achieved through and in spite of relations with others (an exceptional study is Etzioni 1971; 1974). For a student to attain autonomy through a pedagogical relationship does not imply or require ending that relationship, or ending relations of dependence on others. In addition, as virtue ethics, following Arisotole, 'have emphasized, periods of intense dependence, including in childhood, sickness, and old age, are a normal part of the human condition. So it is a mistake to build accounts of ethics on the image of a young adult in perfect health (Husserl 1979; MacIntyre 1999). Nevertheless, it is equally true that these periods of dependence are developmentally connected to ideals of autonomy, and Paulson's criterion for genuine pedagogy has at least prima facie plausibility. Yet Mahmood and Hirschkind both emphasize that the projects they describe, although they begin with reflective decisions on the part of those who join these movements, are directed towards making submission to them, embedded disposition, a pro-subjective and pre-conscious "instinct." For many (women especially) success in pursuing these projects will preclude rather than enable their ever joining or being peers of the teachers. If this is so, does their notion include the realization of precisely that practice of freedom which was its precondition? So does this show, as Mahmood and Hirschkind might claim, that Paulson's (and Foucault's) criterion is ethnocentric? Or should we query Mahmood and Hirschkind's claim that the end as well as the beginning of these projects is properly speaking ethical?
what Evans calls a dualist ontology, an intrinsically anti-ethicist, but pervasive feature of Western culture, which he identifies with the legacy of Greek science. Anthropology can transcend this by being itself an ethicist enterprise, which, following Levi-Strauss (1958/1991), Evans underlines as openness to the other. This theme is developed most particularly through a reading of the meaning of sacrifice in Judeo-Christian, and certain African religious traditions. Thus anthropology, like ethics, is engaging with and taking the perspective of the other: a self-transforming engagement that does not involve a return to how one was (an Exodus rather than an Odyssey) and a sacrifice, instead as it involves a "self-destruction on behalf of the other." Evans concludes with the admiral thought that "the endeavor to learn about another culture needs to be founded, directly and knowingly, on the endeavor to learn from that culture" (2008: 384), although this ambition is not one that anthropology can claim exclusively (Kuperman 1999). And there may be ways of achieving something of this kind, without depending on the problematical concept of "another culture," and without the despite itself necessarily dualist ascetic self-abasement before the other.

For instance, Williams (1999) uses reflection on Greek ideas of responsibility and agency, as embodied in epic and tragedy, to alert us to the fact that our reflective thought, practical judgment, and experience are richer and more subtle than some of our own philosophical theories about responsibility and agency would indicate. Williams employs a genealogical method — in which the form of life studied is not conceived as exclusive of, and contrasted with, the ethical horizon of the analyst (and reader), but as a means by which to reflect upon and enhance it. This may be contrasted with that deployed in a classic paper by Kenneth Reid (1995) on the concept of the person among the Gahiku-Gamo of Papua New Guinea. Reid's is in many ways an insightful portrait of moral life, but is structured as a contrast between "them" and "us"; his ethics being characterised as "moral universalism," as exemplified by Christianity. Among "them" obligations are recognised, but only "distributively," by which Reid means that obligations only arise, as it were, relationship by relationship. Since there is no notion of the "invariant ethical value" of each individual, and no obligations that bind simply in virtue of this, there is "no moral universalism" and this means, Reid continues, that there is no notion of obligation that is properly speaking moral. Of course, what Reid is comparing Gahiku-Gamo practice to is not "our" practice but a descriptively poor and prescriptively disabling brand of moral theory that would require us to regard our obligations to our closest family and friends as no greater than those to people we have never met, and would hold that our preference for the former is simply an absence of morality. We could equally well deploy Reid's perspectival description of Gahiku-Gamo life, in the manner of Williams, to highlight ways in which our reflexive practice resembles theirs, and how we conduct ourselves in ways that are more complex and sophisticated than some of our theories tell us we do or should. That would be one non-relativist way to learn from as well as about "others." Placing ourselves in a genuinely pedagogical relationship to the ethnography would lead, as Faustian suggests pedagogical relationships in general should, to overcoming the heuristic opposition between self and other, making the study of other forms of ethical life itself a form of self-education.

See also Ethical thought in China (Chapter 1); Ethical thought in India (Chapter 2); Aristotle (Chapter 4); The Arabo-Islamic tradition (Chapter 6); Kant (Chapter 14); Nietzsche (Chapter 16); Freedom and responsibility (Chapter 17); Realism (Chapter 19); Virtue ethics (Chapter 24).

References


Further reading


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