FOUR LECTURES
ON ETHICS
Anthropological Perspectives

MICHAEL LAMBEK, VEENA DAS,
DIDIER FASSIN, and WEBB KEANE

FOUR LECTURES ON ETHICS

Hau
BOOKS

www.haubooks.com

FOUR LECTURES ON ETHICS
ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Masterclass Series

**Michael Lambek, Veena Das,
Didier Fassin, and Webb Keane**

Contents

Contributors

Michael Lambek is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto Scarborough where he holds the Canada Research Chair in the Anthropology of Ethical Life. His latest book is *The Ethical Condition: Essays on Action, Person, and Value* (Chicago 2015). Other books include *The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga, Madagascar* (Palgrave Macmillan 2002), the edited *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language and Action* (Fordham 2010), and the co-edited *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion* (Wiley-Blackwell 2013).

Veena Das is Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Anthropology at the Johns Hopkins University. Her most recent books are *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (2007), *Affliction: Health, Disease, Poverty* (2015), and three co-edited volumes: *The Ground Between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy* (2014), *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World: A Compendium* (2015), and *Politics of the Urban Poor* (forthcoming).

Didier Fassin is James D. Wolfensohn Professor of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. He is the author of *The Empire of Trauma. Inquiry into the Condition of Victim* (with Richard Rechtman, Princeton, 2009), *Humanitarian Reason. A Moral History of the Present* (California, 2011), *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing* (Polity, 2013), *At the Heart of the State. The Moral Life of Institutions* (Pluto, 2015), *Prison Worlds. An Ethnography of the Carceral Condition* (Polity, forthcoming).

Webb Keane is George Herbert Mead Collegiate Professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. His new book, *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories*, will appear in 2015. His books include *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society* (California, 1997); *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (California, 2007) and he served as a co-editor of *Handbook of Material Culture* (Sage, 2006).

Preface

The book you hold is the product of a collaboration among four authors and this is how it happened: Giovanni da Col invited Michael Lambek to write a set of lectures on ethics for the Hᴀᴜ masterclass series in 2014. Michael, in turn, invited Veena Das, Didier Fassin, and Webb Keane to join the project, thinking it would be engaging to have four voices, each of which would bring to the topic of ethics a different tonality and pitch, arising from the way we have individually confronted what matters most to us in our lives and our work. We intend neither to offer a survey of the field nor to develop or propagate a single school of thought. The reasoning, as an astute referee has pointed out, is that we are "close enough to make dialogue readily possible but distinct enough to make it interesting." The book is a result of our joint efforts but each lecture stands on its own like an opera with successive arias in four distinct voices. Think of a "we" that retains the individuality of the "I" rather than merging it into a larger collective. It follows that the reader might read the lectures in any order she pleases.

We were tasked to write lectures. In fact, these have never been publicly delivered and are doubtless each too long to do so comfortably. But they approximate lectures insofar as we have kept a relatively informal and somewhat pedagogical tone. We hope that the perception of resonances between arguments, variations on the same theme, as well points and counterpoints, will invite the reader to explore the text as one might listen to a piece of music that is familiar but still holds the promise of new discoveries.

We are in general agreement that the topic of ethics challenges us as anthropologists both to hone our ethnographic perceptions and to reflect on the overt and hidden disorders as well as new potentials of our times. Why have subjects

of ethics and morality acquired such urgency in both public discourse and in anthropological discussions? None of us aim to take the voice of prophecy in which anthropology is asked to reinvent itself. Yet tectonic shifts in the worlds we inhabit, along with transformations in the boundaries of disciplines, challenge us to think carefully of what is new as well as what has long been present. This volume stems from a conviction that these challenges call for new attention to ethics. On the one hand, anthropology has been reinvigorated by urgent summons to more direct engagement with our contemporary troubles. On the other hand, founded in part on a critique of ethnocentrism, anthropology has also always fostered a critical perspective on the moral certainties that drive efforts—our own and others'—to right wrongs around the world. The question of ethics lies at the heart of this paradox and demands both conceptual reflection and empirical insight. In different ways the essays attend to these issues by asking not how sharp boundaries might be drawn around the concept of ethics (versus, say, morality), nor what the content of ethics may be, but rather how to depict the forms under which politics appears through the lens of ethics, or how the social might be reconfigured in relation to the natural, or how everyday forms of repair might stand up to the horrific. We are more interested in understanding what is at stake around ethical issues in the public sphere as well as in the private lives of individuals, how ethical questions emerge, are debated and resolved—or left unresolved—than in circumscribing or defining what is ethics.

Talk of ethics is everywhere. Protocols for establishing ethical sensibility in the workplace are widespread and rely heavily on standardization and measurement. Laws and codes of ethical practices multiply in the domains of medicine as well as research and determine purified norms and ideals with little consideration for how things actually are. In various parts of the world projects ranging from wars to humanitarian intervention on behalf of their victims are undertaken and justifications offered in terms that make claims to ethical utterances. Even torture, rape, and violence against children can be couched in the language of morality, or worse, experienced as performance of religious, moral, or legal acts. Yet, it is clear that the value of such language has been eroded, for one does not know or trust that the ethical enunciations are tethered to any serious concern for those whose lives are sought to be "improved" through these ethical projects.

Unlike certain other anthropologists and some powerful strands in moral theory we refrain from treating ethics as an object or as an isolable domain of theory. Each of us argues against such objectification albeit along different

avenues. We realize, however, that such objectification is itself a part of the milieu we inhabit and are sharply aware of its potential for diminishing the very life that it seeks to improve. We recently laughed together over a *New Yorker* cartoon in which a leering wolf and modest rabbit sit across a table from one another above the caption, "I've never understood—what is the difference between morals and ethics?" We are not sure of the wisdom of trying to make such distinctions, other than for restricted heuristic purposes or as part of the life of institutions, and suspect that it might sometimes be a result of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness; we are mindful of the message of the cartoon that talk about ethics is all too readily hypocritical or self-interested and that making conceptual distinctions has political consequences and can be a form of violence.

At the same time, we acknowledge the fact that making conceptual distinctions and discerning situations, evaluating acts, and making judgments are part of everyday life, whether that concerns ordinary acts or political decisions. Some of us take this ubiquity as intrinsic to the human condition—others see this more in terms of social conventions emphasized in law courts or as a way of talking in situations of heightened intensity. We are agreed, though, that there is no moral or ethical essence to be studied. Ethics can never be pure or absolute. It may be seen for some of us as a dimension of action, for others as part of our life in language, or both. In any case, ethics draws on human affordances, has fuzzy boundaries, is fraught with contingency, and is never free of emotion. Ethics is a part of life as it is lived with others, worked out in interaction and conversation with others rather than transcendent of them, and within a given historical, cultural, and social context. Our respective analyses try to address, acknowledge, and respect complexity, uncertainty, and even ambiguity, to let them reveal themselves, rather than to resist, reduce, conceal, or dissolve them.

In thinking about ethics, we struggle with certain questions that all anthropologists face. For example, how does our knowledge of particular lives inform our understanding of human life in general, and vice versa? How should we represent the complex paths along which our thinking about these matters has matured? How should we situate our own ethical positioning in relation to the issues we analyze? To what extent does our attention to historical context enable or discourage systematic comparison? These questions find expression differently in our respective essays. Rather than offering a conclusion in which we assert our mutual understanding or probe our differences, we deliberately leave the conversation open and look forward to responses from readers.

Research in several disciplines is moving into new frontiers that elude easy dualisms between humanistic and analytical social sciences or contrast the rigor of mathematized models with the empathy and sensitivity of experiential narrative accounts. The four authors in this book are resolutely open to conversations with people (scholars, activists, bureaucrats, men and women of all sorts, as they grapple with everyday life or grave dilemmas) holding up different approaches to such questions as they arise from how we respond to issues that strain our present conceptual resources. If we are to develop concepts that respond to problems both new and long-standing, then anthropology must be open to other disciplines such as philosophy, history, sociology, economics, psychology, law, political science, and environmental studies. At the same time, thinking is not an activity that can remain untouched by the institutional and existential conditions of its own being, while the very act of writing and more generally producing anthropology permanently involve delicate, challenging and often overlooked ethical issues. Hau is a perfect venue for just this kind of endeavor, and we would like to thank Giovanni da Col, Sean Dowdy, and the staff at Hau Books for their attentive work in producing this volume.

In putting together these four lectures on ethics that come close to each other at times and then move away at others, we hope we have provided the reader with a way to think how individual voice best finds its home in a collective of friends among whom it can retain its salience in both agreement and disagreement.

"Neither a Wolf, nor a Rabbit Be"
ML, VD, DF, WK

Living as if it mattered

Michael Lambek

This lecture presents an anthropological invitation to the subject of ethics rather than an introduction to, or overview of, what has become the anthropology of ethics. It unfolds in four movements. In the first, I introduce various broad conceptual, historical, and epistemological questions. In the second, I address the relation of ethics to truth and in the third I compare two public injunctions, concerned respectively with freedom and care, understood as exemplifying distinct values but also pointing to quite different conceptions of ethics itself. In the final section, I turn briefly from values to practice and judgment. A general theme of the lecture concerns what is entailed in abstracting a specifically "ethical" domain or dimension from or within the whole of human life and activity without unduly objectifying it. How is life ethically informed, irrespective of the presence of "ethics" as an explicit object of discourse? The various epistemological and methodological issues may be condensed as simply *how to recognize the ethical?*

RECOGNIZING THE ETHICAL

To speak about ethics is never straightforward. In the course of this lecture I explore how attending to an ethical dimension might enrich our understanding

of human life as it is actually lived, experienced, and reflected upon. I write as an anthropologist, not an ethicist or reformer, hence without the ambition to discern the best way to live or resolve particular dilemmas. Yet it is difficult to keep my personal views about living ethically distinct from speaking objectively about ethical life. This is a fine line (and in fact, living ethically is itself frequently a matter of distinguishing and walking fine lines). Insofar as the lecture slips into a normative register and begins to sound like a sermon or a self-help tract it has diverged from its purpose, but insofar as it becomes too dry and distant from life it has also betrayed its best instincts. I take this kind of tension, in which, as Aristotle (1976) would put it, the virtuous path is one that manages to avoid falling into opposing vices, to be manifest in the task—and hence the voice—of the teacher or writer but also in the work of the student or reader.[1]

A further point of clarification is that the topic is not "ethics" taken in some objective sense or in the way we commonly hear the word used but in what I prefer to distinguish as the "the ethical." I use this clumsier term to try to shift the subject from a fixed, identifiable body (of facts, rules, reasons, reflections, etc.) to an emergent quality or property of action, better grasped adverbially or adjectivally than by means of a noun. I seek to recognize how our lives are deeply and fundamentally ethically informed (in the ways I will eventually develop the term). I would like to discern and appreciate an ethical dimension of living, much as we could learn more deeply to perceive the beauty or geological foundation of a landscape or enjoy a work of art or music. By living, I mean living with others and over time, everything from minute acts of daily greeting and our tone of voice, the quality of how we engage with others and with the world, through keeping immediate and long-term commitments and callings, and from the language by which we describe our immediate conduct through deliberations as to how to live our life (in the course of living it) to momentous, disruptive, spontaneous, and unique acts of physical or political courage and the concatenation of consequential acts that historians call events.

Finding or forging a straight path into the subject is not easy. There are multiple definitions of ethics, a range of ethical traditions, and a number of different approaches both to conceptualizing the ethical intellectually and to discerning what might be the right and good thing to do practically. I start along several paths and do not always speak consistently. I justify this by suggesting at the

---

1.   Compare here and throughout Weber ([1917] 1946).

outset that any single picture of ethics that claimed consistency and completion would be a distortion of matters that are complex, contingent, and ultimately intangible. Philosophers have been debating the subject for centuries and have yet to come to agreement about their terms.

Consistency, completeness, and certainty are what some people seek when they turn to a body of knowledge called "ethics" for guidance and it may be the presumption of ubiquitous rulebooks, codes, guidelines, and watchdogs that it is the job of ethics to provide for them. Other people think that this is not only unrealistic and unrealizable but subverts our responsibility to meet each new situation and to exercise our imagination and judgment. Ethics in this latter view is (at least in part) a cumulative product of experience and perhaps effort (deliberately cultivated experience); it is not something that can be fully put into words once and for all or passed from teacher to student in the course of a lecture. If the latter is true for becoming an ethical person in a practical sense, it is no less the case for conceiving of ethics from an intellectual perspective (itself a form of practice), as we are doing here. Moreover, insofar as it is not a positivist discipline testing hypotheses, an anthropological inquiry into ethics cannot transcend the questions it asks or the questions it listens to other people asking and answering. It is therefore a conversation rather than a science (but not thereby unscientific), and one that will continuously raise questions rather than stand above them.

Depictions and definitions of ethics exist at various levels of inclusion and abstraction and are often incommensurable to one another. "Incommensurable" is a key term in my vocabulary; when two paradigms or terms are incommensurable this does not mean they are contradictory or cannot be compared but rather that they cannot be measured against each other point-by-point according to a fixed, common grid (Bernstein 1983). Hence insofar as my approach to ethics is incommensurable with others, it does not imply that they are mutually exclusive. To focus on the ordinary, as I generally do, is not to disqualify attention to specifically unethical acts and conditions—violence, injustice, exploitation, expropriation, etc.—or to "hard cases" (Banner 2014), like abortion or assisted suicide.

Elsewhere (Lambek 2010a, 2015b), I have written about how ethical action and discernment are made possible through the establishment of criteria by means of everyday speaking as well as through the performance of ritual acts. That approach is fairly technical; one could call it an analysis of the infraethical (that which makes ethical discernment both possible and necessary rather than

specific judgments themselves). I maintain this position and will advert to it occasionally, but I don't want to simply repeat it here. The present arguments don't depend on it but they are complementary to it. They share the understanding that, at some level, or in some respects, the ethical is immanent to our lives as human beings. Hence ethics is less an object to be proclaimed or to be dissected than a dimension or quality to be discerned and elucidated.

The approach that I take is a hermeneutical one. I treat ethics as a hermeneutic problem, not simply in the sense that we try as anthropologists to interpret other people's worlds but more profoundly that living ethically is itself a hermeneutic process of interpretation and self-interpretation as people make their way in the world, with the human capacities, cultural resources, and historical circumstances given them. What we are addressing is the nature of understanding and self-understanding. Whether coming to understand what matters for each of us as human beings, living and acting among others, or coming to understand how things matter for the subjects of our particular ethnographic enquiries, we cannot resort to an objectivist science. Ethics is a question, in the terms of philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer ([1960] 1985), for truth rather than method.

Toward an anthropological approach

Ethics comes into play in understanding the human condition at its broadest and most universal scale and also at its most intimate personal or interpersonal one, as well as with respect to social and cultural contexts between these. As human beings—"thrown into the world," as existentialists say (Heidegger [1927] 1996); and under circumstances not of our own choosing, as Marxists say (Marx [1852] 1969)—we make our way according to the possibilities offered us but with the need to realize direction and value in what we do. An inquiry into ethics thus has at least two tasks. On a theoretical or analytical level it asks, where do meaningful engagement and value come from? How are they constituted, produced, realized, acquired, anchored, justified, defended, and maintained? How does the world become or remain a (relatively) meaningful or safe place, where specific goals, acts, and consequences can be discerned and adhered or responded to, rather than a (fully) random, chaotic, or malevolent one? How are meaning and value lost, recovered, or renewed in the face of violence, indignity, contradiction, or impasse? But even in times of peace and prosperity, how is one avenue chosen and pursued rather than any of the alternatives? How do

particular things come to matter to us or to matter in particular ways? How does such mattering shape our self-understanding and how does it shape and how is it shaped by social action?[2]

At a more empirical level an anthropological inquiry asks, according to which values, by which means, to what ends, and with what deviations or lapses do people try, and in fact, *do*, make their way? How do we come to commit to some values, means, and ends rather than to others and how is it that we keep or renege on our commitments? What role or force do they place in action, both in ordinary life, day-to-day, and in heroic or disruptive endeavors? What happens when values, means, and ends are inaccessible, become hollow, don't fit well together, or even directly clash? How are they (inevitably) compromised, and how do people live with compromise and with the recognition of limits or strive to transcend them?

How can anthropologists do justice to the living of human lives? How can we provide analyses and interpretations of the *art of living* (Nehamas 1998) equivalent in acuity and depth to our best work on (what we have called) social structure and culture or, for that matter, to the work of our best artists and writers? If the primary question of ethics is how to live (or to understand and acknowledge how we *do* live), the questions for anthropologists include how best to discover, describe, and understand how people ask and answer those questions, how things come to matter to them, how they do in fact live and acknowledge that living, and how the living of discrete lives resonate with one another and with the ideas, words, and practices available for living them (at certain times, places, and class positions), as well as the particular challenges, constraints and hindrances to them. We can ask these questions with respect to face-to-face communities and across broad spans of space, time, and tradition.

Anthropologists move between inquiring how human beings variously and practically address the existential question of how to live, the epistemological question of how we (human beings) know how to live, the practical question of how we do live, and the methodological question of how we (anthropologists) come to know how other people come to know how to live, understand the living of their lives, and in fact, simply, and not always self-consciously, live them.

---

2. I don't wish to overplay the centrality of meaning and certainly not to equate it with rational calculation. Meaning is often implicit and it shifts with context, much as our outlook may shift according to absorption, mood, and context. Thanks to Naisargi Dave for these reminders.

Moreover, insofar as both our discipline and our species condition is a social one, it concerns lives lived with others. As Hannah Arendt insisted (1998), it is a fact of the human condition that it is plural; ethics is intrinsically interpersonal (both other and self directed) and, as thinkers as far back as Aristotle have understood, and as Didier Fassin describes in his lecture, inextricable from politics.

If there is an ethical turn in anthropology it is one that is developing frameworks for seeing the ethical dimension in life, letting it emerge from the whole hurly-burly, as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1967) might have put it,[3] and for signaling the place of the ethical in ethnographic interpretation and social analysis. It is to recognize the ethical as a salient dimension of human activity and of human being in the world.

Broadly speaking, this includes (but is not limited to) ideas about and orientations toward how to live the best life possible and over the long run and how to do the best we can with the life we have today, under circumstances that, again (because it bears repeating), as Marx famously said, are not of our choosing. Such orientations may be explicit or tacit, receptive, quiescent, resigned, or complacent, assert that we live in the best of all possible worlds or the best world possible for us now, or attuned to redemption or salvation, manifestly activist and critical, seeking transcendence, reform, or revolution. What matters to us may be living according to how we conceive tradition or embrace novelty, and more likely, to achieving a balance between them. It may be supporting the status quo or challenging it.

When the ethical is phrased in this way, an anthropological approach requires an appreciation of the kinds of worlds in which people do live, as established through what we have variously called culture, social structure, ontology, cosmology, world view, religion, the state, biopolitics, et cetera, but here understood not as static structures (as they too often have been) but as dynamic orientations for acting in the world, much as Max Weber ([1930] 1992) understood what he called the Protestant ethic. As Weber further noted (1993), such orientations must be grasped with respect to the variety of status positions they start from, including such matters as class, hierarchy, gender, well-being and suffering, justice and injustice, fortune and misfortune. This requires close attention to the kinds of social identifications, interpellations, circumstances, and constraints under which people live, including specific and possibly colliding regimes of power and, today, the ubiquitous presence and effects of the capitalist

---

3.　See also Wittgenstein (forthcoming); Das (2013).

market and technological mediations, as well as the repertoire of idioms and practices available with which to understand and address their circumstances.

Speaking of orientations, world-views, political programs, values, and so on risks keeping us in the realm of the ideal or the abstract. We need to pay close attention to *the actual conduct* of life in the world—how people address one another and respond to address, how they interact and care for (or disregard) one another, how they take action and respond to it, day by day and moment by moment, how they juggle between multiple and possibly incommensurable or competing goals, values, commitments, and relationships or shift between diverse means to articulate them, and how they think about themselves and others. Central to this is attention to *the language of conduct*—how people name distinct kinds of acts and their relations to them (by way of acknowledgment, justification, apology, etc.).

Anthropology should bring to life what philosopher Charles Taylor described as three critical elements of moral thinking, namely, "our sense of respect for and obligations to others . . . our understandings of what makes a full life . . . [and] the range of notions concerned with dignity . . . [i.e.,] the characteristics by which we think of ourselves as commanding (or failing to command) the respect of those around us" (1989: 15). Additionally, an anthropological approach requires attention to the *tonality* of life, to the manner in which things are uttered or done, to their resonance, and to the heterogeneity and alternation of tone and manner over time and within a given social field.[4] This includes attention to the unspoken, to tact and irony, to impasse, misjudgment, recuperation, and failure, to playfulness and seriousness, and more generally to how things are meant and received, to the risks of taking action, and to the stakes we have in living and speaking with others.

The scope here is very wide. To attend fully to these matters would be, on the one side, to reproduce the kind of holism characteristic of ethnography in its structure-functional and processual phases (including what Gregory Bateson [1958] called ethos and eidos, respectively the emotional tone and intellectual character of a social group), while simultaneously recognizing heterogeneity, repertoire, and change; and on the other side, to write with the highly focused attention and sensibility characteristic of our greatest novelists and poets (or philosophers as different in literary style as John Austin and Stanley Cavell). It

---

4.   I have been inspired by the brilliant dissertations of Anna Kruglova and Marco Motta, nearing completion at Toronto and Lausanne, respectively.

would include asking such questions as, "how is autonomy achieved, obligation assumed, respect given and received, accountability acknowledged, dignity enabled, apology made, forgiveness accepted, adversity met, a full life lived?"

Conversely, how and why is human flourishing curtailed or undermined? How do we refuse obligation, treat each other with disrespect, and suffer indignity? How do we damage each other? Following thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche (1967), how is conventional morality a form of concealment? And so, while being open to understanding a range of different ideas and practices, we must not give up a hermeneutics of suspicion. We need to think critically, to recognize the difference between moral scruples and petty moralizing, to see how an objectified "ethics" can readily serve to critique but also to reinforce hierarchy and injustice. Although it is not my subject here, we should also attend to the sorts of questions inspired by the earlier writings of Michel Foucault (1980), asking what kind of work the appeal to "ethics" is doing in institutionalized forms like professional codes and review boards (to which our own research is subject) or in fields like bioethics—in sum, what is the relation here of knowledge and power? Does an appeal to ethics limit or heighten the work of subjection—or simply conceal it?

Anthropologists must find the right balance between critique and understanding, a balance that, like ethical judgment itself, shifts with circumstance. A fine moral sensibility is necessary, yet this is best achieved with modesty about our own abilities and claims, the limits of our positionality, understanding, and justification for critique. The literature at present is replete with important enactments of critique with respect to forms of racism, sexism, colonialism, militarism, exploitation, environmental destruction, and so forth. But these become complacent if they do not fully acknowledge their own contingent position, at times their ethnocentrism or anachronism. What I am suggesting is that attending anthropologically to the ethical in human life requires the same sort of work that cultivating a critical and ethical disposition does.

The present moment

Today there is much talk about ethics. We hear the topic raised with respect to military interventions and political and financial corruption. We worry about justice, equity, and recognition. We are concerned about environmental ethics, bioethics, and corporate ethics. As citizens, we may join Amnesty International or any number of progressive groups. As practicing researchers and teachers,

we are faced directly with the demands of the audit culture. And for reflective scholars, the subject of ethics has become increasingly salient. Philosophers have always taken ethics as their subject matter; in recent decades there has been an ethical turn in literary studies and subsequently in anthropology. When I began to write explicitly about ethics I thought I was being idiosyncratic and original—only to quickly discover a host of other anthropologists heading in the same direction. They include the luminary fellow authors of these lectures but also many others. Ethics has recently been the explicit subject of outstanding books by anthropologists James Faubion (2011), James Laidlaw (2014a), and Cheryl Mattingly (2014) and of collections by Didier Fassin (2012), Monica Heintz (2009), and myself (Lambek 2010b), as well as a central theme of excellent ethnographic work on such diverse topics as the tension between "riches and renunciation" for Jains by Laidlaw (1995), religious conversion in Papua New Guinea by Joel Robbins (2004), volunteerism in neoliberal Italy by Andrea Muehlebach (2012), queer recognition in India by Naisargi Dave (2012), and Pentecostal anticipation in Ghana by Girish Daswani (2015).[5]

What are we all talking about when we talk about ethics? What has "ethics" come to signify? I leave that as an open question. And I leave untouched the question of whether we should be put off by and skeptical of this volubility. (After all, I am complicit.) I offer a very quick, partial, and deliberately provocative response to the question, why does ethics matter now?

Why ethics matters to anthropology must be connected to why it matters at large. Ethical concerns have no doubt been raised in every generation but they are currently particularly acute. We could call them a kind of postmodern, postsecular, or late-capitalist symptom. Baldly put, we know that the majority of people in the world are suffering (from malnutrition, lack of work, exploitative labor conditions, dislocation, immobility, imprisonment, warfare, disease, etc.). Capitalism is intrinsically amoral and its means and effects often directly immoral. As it moves to ever further class polarization and political insecurity, its eventual demise threatens not to offer a utopian socialist future but to strangle us all. Anthropologists describe people struggling to live well in situations

---

5.   Other ethnographic explorations of the ethical include Das (2007); Hirschkind (2006); Kleinman (2006); Kwon (2008); Lambek (2002); Mahmood (2005); Parish (1994); Rogers (2009); Stafford (2013); Weiss (2014). Helpful distinctions among anthropological approaches can be found in Thomas Csordas (2013) and Cheryl Mattingly (2012), as well as the symposium on James Laidlaw's book in *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* (2014).

where temporal horizons have become radically distorted, where they have too little or too much time to reflect on their acts and lives.[6] The voluble middle classes are consumed with anxiety—about being better off than the suffering masses, but equally about imminent social decline and personal downward mobility as jobs become scarcer, violence spreads, financial institutions and pension funds collapse, and hunger and disease rise in consequence of global warming and environmental pollution—anxious even when, like many Americans, they are on antianxiety medication (which is something else to be worried about . . .). Doomsday scenarios are everywhere, as are denials and quick-fix avenues to salvation. Neoliberal institutions and policies place more responsibility on the shoulders of citizens, especially the poor, and the rich retreat to gated communities (including fenced states) and privatized medical care. Accountability for structural failure is readily placed on immigrants or racialized segments of the population. Intimacy, once the refuge from a heartless world, is now turned inside out on the Internet. Perhaps most saliently, the middle classes no longer have a sure sense of how to make a good life or of what that could consist. As Gadamer put it already some time ago ([1960] 1985: xiv), "we are living in a state of constant overstimulation of our historical consciousness."

"Enough!" you say—and indeed the rise of ethical discourse is a part of that response against despair, queasiness, and cynicism.[7] Even when they are misguided or have paradoxical effects, efforts at mobilization, activism, and humanitarianism are evidence of a human will to good or will to matter, arising to counter prejudice, injustice, self-interest, and aggression. It is surely a positive fact that most people do continue to seek the good or justify their actions and that anthropologists find both virtue and the seeking after it in all kinds of places and forms, irrespective of circumstance. Moreover, even as the capacities for goodness and justice are blocked or unfulfilled, our acts remain subject to

---

6.   See the several doctoral dissertations in progress at the Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto by Anna Kruglova on the sense that "anything can happen" in Russia; Letha Victor on insecurity and spiritual pollution in northern Uganda; Arie Molema on reconciling residential schooling in Canada; Vivian Solano on stasis among Saharawi in North Africa; Jacob Nerenberg on threat in Irian Jaya; Behzad Sarmadi on investment in Dubai; among others.

7.   For an older discussion, between James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, see http://www.brainpickings.org/2015/03/19/a-rap-on-race-margaret-mead-and-james-baldwin/?utm_content=buffer4df23&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer. Thanks to Donna Young for the indication.

ethical judgment, by ourselves and by others. Ethics is not simply a reflex or index of privilege. We all hold ourselves accountable.

There are also reasons specific to anthropology that bring longstanding concerns with the ethical to the surface as explicit subjects of discussion. These include the ever-deepening realization of the historical nature of everything we talk about, the decisive shift away from seeing societies and cultures as discrete entities or essences to understanding them as continuously changing products of historical forces and actions. This brings a shift of emphasis from structure to practice and especially to more nuanced considerations of human action than those that can be comprehended by what Clifford Geertz (1973a) called strain theory and interest theory alone. Foucault himself came to broaden his extremely influential expositions of the salience of subjection with attention to ethical self-formation (1997). Greater appreciation for the work of philosophers concerned with matters ranging from practice to language to passion and receptivity have nuanced our understanding of action and person and heightened attention to the broader phenomenological picture of being in the world.[8]

On locating the ethical

By contrast to historical questions, the epistemological issues may seem simple enough. Yet they cause sufficient commotion in their own small pond. At the beginning of my essay in *Ordinary ethics* (2010) I posed what I thought was an innocent question, namely where is the ethical located. Michael Lempert (2013) responded by asking whether I thought it might be found as easily as *looking under a stone*. Lempert has his own interesting ideas concerning the emergence of ethics in discourse (as a linguistic anthropologist, that is naturally where he would look). But he missed the point that I was speaking metaphorically and that I was asking a heuristic rather than an empirical question (Lambek 2015a).

The issue concerning both of us is whether ethics is a "thing" at all, with a precise location in social space such that we can identify it and subject it to direct inspection. Is ethics a discrete object? How we go about studying or writing about it depends on what we think it is, how we recognize it, and how we know when we have found it. Anthropologists who talk about ethics do

---

8.   An exemplar of the phenomenological approach is Michael D. Jackson (among his many fine works, 1995, 1996, 2007, 2012). See also Desjarlais (2003); Throop (2010); Hollan and Throop (2011); Cassaniti and Hickman (2014).

not agree on these matters. Some would say that in order to speak about ethics we have to define and isolate it and that, moreover, for the members of any given society to raise ethical issues or reflect on ethical problems they need to be able to distinguish it as well, to be, as it were, self-conscious about when a given matter at hand is properly an ethical one rather than something else, or whether they are addressing it from a specifically ethical perspective rather than from a perspective of some other kind. For some thinkers it is wrong on methodological grounds to identify the moral with the social as, they say, Émile Durkheim did, because that leaves us no discrete and explicit object of inquiry (Laidlaw 2014a). Other thinkers suggest it is dangerous to do so, insofar as the ethical is identified with the normative or obligatory, or even with social control, thereby leaving no room for internal debate or critique. Hence they imply that the methodological question is itself an ethical or political one.

My view is different. Of course I acknowledge that there are plenty of empirical manifestations of ethics, explicit and readily graspable by some kind of methodological technique. But I think that at heart ethics is not a discrete phenomenon and that it would distort the subject to define it on the basis of methodological considerations. In contrast to Lempert, and even to James Laidlaw (2014b), I think the ethical is immanent. It is not immanent to humans as purely biological beings (assuming the biological could be fully differentiated from the cultural aspect of our being, which it cannot). We are not programmed to be good or to distinguish good from bad according to universal criteria. But ethical discrimination is immanent to human speech and action, to interaction and intersubjectivity, to the social. And it is immanent to the existential condition of human thrownness, to our life in the world. Immanent, in sum, to the human "condition" rather than to human "nature."

I certainly do *not* mean by this that ethics is to be equated with the obligatory or the normative. That there is an ethical dimension immanent to the social is not at all the same as to argue that we are determined by nature or by law; it is to say, rather, that the criteria that enable us to distinguish situations, problems, and specific kinds of persons, relations, conditions, acts, and even intentions, and to exercise our judgment with respect to them (to think and act for ourselves) are socially and linguistically embedded. We can act and discern action only by means of discrete criteria; that is the human condition. Criteria are both necessary for and intrinsic to speech and action. *Which* criteria are relevant or made relevant to which situation is part of the work of culture, the work of social interaction, and the work of ethics itself. This work may take place by means

of, or with reference to, transcendent entities like divinities and scripture; to assert that ethics is immanent is not to deny the place of transcendent ideals and forces. But the *objectified* appearance of ethics—in rules, precepts, codes, values, and justifications, in religion, philosophy, and anthropological description and analysis—is secondary, emerging from and speaking to this common ground. It is as if these objectified forms describe only the periodic condensation of the air we breathe.

Some thinkers have tried to clarify the picture by distinguishing ethics from morality, such that one of these is closely identified with social norms, rules, and obligations while the other is the ability to act free of them. One problem with dividing up the field is that different thinkers use the terms in different and at times almost directly opposite senses. Useful distinctions are found in the work of individual philosophers, like Bernard Williams (1985, as interestingly developed in Webb Keane's lecture) but they do not always translate well to other depictions. In the worst-case scenario we end up with two objects, artificially reified and separated from one another by a given author. In other words, the risk of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, or what William James ([1909] 1979) tellingly called vicious abstractionism, is heightened here. To understand ethics as immanent is to move in the opposite direction. In what follows, I use the words "ethical" and "moral" interchangeably, preferring the former simply because it is older (of Greek as opposed to Latin provenance), but adopting the latter where it has a common usage, for example, as mediated through French thought.

It is a corollary of what I have been saying that how we talk about the ethical, how we describe it, and what we think it is, are all inextricably connected to our theoretical and pretheoretical assumptions and predilections and our methodological practices. We are *not* all talking about exactly the same thing when we talk about ethics. This might leave the conversation in some confusion, but it is not necessarily a bad thing (except insofar as we make our criticisms of one another on the mistaken assumption that we *are* talking about the same thing).

In the course of this lecture I am making the following assumptions. First, as already noted, in many contexts of speaking the subject is better described as the *ethical* than as ethics, thereby indicating a less substantive or objectified and more adjectival or adverbial appreciation. Going a step further, what I am after is what I call ethical life. The subject is the way that life—the human life world (or worlds)—is ethically suffused. Conversely, the location of the ethical (as raised earlier) is within human life itself, not separated in some discrete compartment,

but manifest in living, in talk and action. I do not mean by this that speech and action are always right or good but rather that they are constituted with respect to criteria and subject to discernment concerning their rightness or goodness, much as talk is subject to judgment concerning its grammar or semantic coherence. Our talk and actions matter to us—and so do the judgments we make about the world and about our conduct in it. Hence the ethical is an intrinsic dimension of human activity and human life worlds, as grammar is an intrinsic dimension of language.[9] To grasp at another metaphor, any picture of human living or life worlds that omits the ethical does not amputate a part so much as it stops the flow of neurological impulse within the whole. Such a picture is like body without mind,[10] or, if you prefer the metaphor, soulless.

There is a story that when asked what structuralism was, Claude Lévi-Strauss replied "good anthropology." It is in this spirit that I understand the turn to ethics; attending to ethical life makes good anthropology; good anthropology recognizes the ethical dimension of human activity. Recognizing an ethical dimension is not the same as delineating a specific subfield or module, or artificially extracting an object called "ethics" from the whole that is human life. Attention to the ethical dimension enriches all anthropological description and theory. Good anthropology takes into account human concerns for discernment, dignity, and value; any full interpretation of human action and cultural practices must do so.[11] Of course, such recognition does not mean accepting peoples' acts and statements at face value, agreeing with them, or assuming that what they are doing is always good, just, or defensible in its own terms.

Insofar, then, as there is an ethical turn in anthropology, it is not simply that "ethics" has become an explicit subject of inquiry, comparison, debate, or worry. It is rather that "ethics" serves as a cover term for acknowledging and exploring the richness and complexity of living, of human being in an imperfect world, and the challenges raised or encountered, acknowledged or renounced. In a word, ethics concerns existence.

---

9.   I do not take this to contradict my earlier assertion that capitalism is inherently amoral. Capitalism is never a complete life world and the acts and conditions it generates are subject to ethical evaluation, if only to note their own ethical disregard. I also do not deny that the ethical could be a feature of certain animal worlds.

10. I have in mind Clifford Geertz's depiction of the inconceivability or unworkability of the anatomical individual without culture (1973b).

11. To give but a single illustration and to indicate that "good anthropology" is not necessarily "new anthropology," consider Michelle Rosaldo (1980).

ETHICS AND TRUTH

Persons, as social beings, are constituted through their relations with others. This is partly an intersubjective process, beginning with the mother-infant bond, but it is mediated by what society objectifies as the identities people are given (names and statuses), tasks expected of them (roles), positions they are given to occupy (offices), and programs they come to identify with (callings), as well as the structures of relations in which statuses, roles, offices, and callings are manifest, the everyday activities and conversations through which people engage with others, and the myriad ways in which the world invites our response. In all these respects people are called upon and answer their calls. (As Jacques Derrida [2008] has pointed out, even to ignore a call is a sort of response.) Such interpellation[12] entails engagement in commitments in the public, social world no less than the private, inner one. These are commitments to other people, to immediate tasks, long-term projects, and specific gender, religious, ethnic, or national identifications. They include the commitments we make to one another in marriage or in witnessing a marriage, but also in our relations to others as parents, offspring, siblings, neighbors, friends, lovers, fellow workers, citizens, or human beings, and to oneself. How people recognize and respond to the calls made upon them,[13] and how they keep the commitments they make or those that are made for them, in their name, is of major concern. It is of concern to others—can they trust and rely upon the person who holds the office or made the commitment? But it is also of enormous importance to the self—how do I initiate and keep commitments, balance consistency with openness to novel experience, give to others and hold myself open to receive while leaving something for and as myself, do what is right, be a good person, live a good life?

The human condition is challenging. We are challenged with alternatives. We are challenged with disruptions and impasses. We are challenged with incommensurable and competing commitments and claims upon us, with risks and enticements. How, as Derrida asks, can I know that a specific call was meant for *me*? How do we have the wherewithal to proceed with assurance?

---

12. I use the term "interpellation" more broadly than Louis Althusser (1971) and understand a dialectical process such that the subject is both constituted through and responsive to successive interpellations. For a much earlier iteration see George Herbert Mead ([1934] 1962).

13. On responsivity see Bernhard Waldenfels (2011) and for a beautiful exemplification, Thomas Wentzer (2014).

Central questions here are how, within given traditions, knowledge is legitimated, enabling people to discern what is certain and true (or, phrased the other way, limiting uncertainty and skepticism), or motivating them to live zestfully, with acceptable means adequate to valued goals. *How are discrete persons, paths, positions, and moves defined or placed under definitive description? How can I know what is the right thing to do under the circumstances or that I have done it?* A related set of questions concern *what is the relation of the good or the right to the actual, the possible, and the necessary? How do we come to terms with the world as it is or as we find it and how can we be sure that the way we do so is correct, or at least that our way is sufficient, good enough, or worth the effort?* In sum, *what is the relation between the good, the right, or the valuable and the true?* By "true" I refer not to simple correspondence with reality but rather the ground of what constitutes "reality" and anchors our certainty in it.[14]

We often compare versions of the good (values) or the right (virtues) with one another (whether within a given society or crossculturally) but rarely consider how they are (respectively) linked to truth. As Foucault, among others, has taught us, this is a question not of truth in an abstract, ideal, or Platonic sense, but of *truth-making*, of the various ways in which society understands and authorizes truth, hence of distinct relations to truth and perhaps of distinct kinds of truth. This is a position with respect to truth that acknowledges human finitude (the limits of what we can know or how we can anchor our knowledge) and, in the traditions of sociology (Marx, Durkheim, and Weber) and of anthropology (Boas and Geertz, Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard), places the ground of knowledge and understanding within society or culture rather than beyond it.

One of the postsecular debates is whether science (including social science)—by now widely popularized—operates with a limited conception of truth. It is powerful, certainly, and has enabled all kinds of discoveries and inventions, but it may not work so well in grounding the right and the good. Hence, the hegemony of science (or scientific rationalism) has produced existential crises that dissolve into anomie or conversely get resolved by too voluble alternatives, short-circuited in militant or narrow forms of nationalist, religious, or scientific reductionism. Science does not appear to provide a secure ground for ethics or viable guide for living (despite some very good directives with respect to the environment). It does not tell us what to do or reassure us that what we are doing

---

14. Although I do not discuss it here, compare Richard Rorty (1979).

is right, nor yet advise us how to resolve ethical conflicts, including those (like deployment of military weaponry or genetic engineering) that scientific discovery creates in the first place. The very idea of creating a science of ethics (even the bureaucratic rationalization of ethical principles) should make us uneasy.

Insofar as the true and the good appear to diverge or do not necessarily coincide, and received truth no longer appears to provide a sure guide to action, ethics rises to the surface as an *explicit* problem. This is acutely evident in societies whose ways of life have been radically undermined by colonial, imperial, or capitalist expansion and violence (Burridge 1969; Robbins 2004; Lear 2006) and it has been characteristic of Europe since at least the Enlightenment and the Reformation (and doubtless before). How do we resolve the gap? Where do we find the assurance that we are acting correctly or have a sure path to choose? Where do we ground ethics or how do we make ungrounded choices, or choices in an ungrounded world?

Foucault phrased the central issue with characteristic perspicacity, writing:

> If we define spirituality as being the form of practices which postulate that, such as he is, the subject is not capable of the truth, but that, such as it is, the truth can transfigure and save the subject, then we can say that the modern age of the relations between the subject and truth begins when it is postulated that, such as he is, the subject is capable of truth, but that, such as it is, the truth cannot save the subject. (Foucault 2005: 19)

What Foucault here calls spirituality brings us to what anthropologists have called religion, or rather, to religious means of truth-making, and hence to the relation between ethics and religion. In a famous essay Clifford Geertz (1973c) announced that one way to describe the province and work of religion is as the means by which models *of* the world (what it is truly like) and models *for* living in it (what it is good to do) are brought together, condensed in powerful symbols such that the model "of" and model "for" each make the other seem realistic and reasonable. While Geertz was criticized by Talal Asad ([1983] 1993) from a Foucauldian perspective for (ostensibly) both illegitimately reifying religion as a discrete and permanent object in the world and for underplaying the disciplinary means by which people are rendered religious subjects, I read Geertz's essay as being primarily about how notions of the good have been interlinked with notions of the true within certain kinds of cultural regimes or worlds, and in the that respect compatible with Foucault (at least the Foucault of the 1982

lectures, written, after Geertz's). Moreover, as Geertz points out, in perhaps too functionalist or universalizing a manner, the ideas and practices we call "religious" recognize (rather than ignore, deny, or conceal) existential questions of misfortune, injustice, and incomprehension and offer people a way forward in face of them. These are questions for which science can provide neither a model of (an explanation) nor a model for (living with respect to), let alone their conjunction.

If religion in Geertz's description articulates the relation between the true and the good and indicates places where they might even be identified with one another (more or less successfully), Roy Rappaport (1999), drawing upon J. L. Austin ([1955] 1962), subsequently provided an argument as to how this might take place, namely through liturgical order and performance. Ritual produces a particular kind of truth, one that is the inverse of a correspondence theory in which the truth of a statement is determined by its correspondence to a state of affairs; through ritual, *the quality of a state of affairs is determined by its correspondence to what has been pronounced*. Ritual performance also publicly initiates, enables, or entails specific commitments and trust (disabling alternatives and lies) among participants, thereby providing them with a means of direction and certainty. I will have more to say about Rappaport shortly.

In one respect Geertz's depiction was a generalization and elaboration of E. E. Evans-Pritchard's famous argument (1937) that witchcraft "explains unfortunate events," that is, that it serves to address those parts of experience for which naturalist or materialist theories cannot provide an answer. If granaries collapse because termites eat away at their posts (a material process that Azande understand perfectly), that knowledge does not serve as a satisfactory explanation for why the granary collapsed just at the moment I was taking a nap beneath it. If biomedicine offers a materialist explanation for cancer or dementia it cannot explain my bad luck in having the disease. Moreover, it cannot supply a satisfactory model for living with the condition or the knowledge that one is genetically predisposed to it. And of course, neither Zande witchcraft nor science can tell you how to live, irrespective of misfortune. The good life cannot be reduced to a healthy lifestyle, even if that seems the somewhat frantic displacement that many middle-class people are making today.

A reason we should reject the functionalist dimension of what are otherwise compelling arguments is that it is clear that these practices (whether "religious" or not) fail to fully (comprehensively and consistently) address all questions that arise. If Azande ideas about witchcraft explain my neighbor's misfortune by

attributing it to my occult and nefarious actions, they do not explain to me why I, of all people, happen to be a witch or help me to live with that fact. As Greek tragedy illustrates, we often have to live in the wake of failure of harmonious resolution of the model of and the model for in our lives. Moreover, contrary to Malinowski's explicitly functionalist argument that religion or magic reduces anxiety, the prevalence of Azande witchcraft and the associated premise that no death is a "natural" one can only serve to produce anxiety, or at least uncertainty (although Evans-Pritchard says the Azande are not particularly anxious). This is not just the uncertainty that my children or I may become victims of witchcraft but that I myself may be acting, unknowingly, as a witch or that the accusations against me could be true. Max Weber ([1930] 1992), too, argued that Calvinism gave rise to anxiety in its adherents. Of course, one response to all this is to claim, as Geertz does, that religion remains precisely the place where these limits (religion's own limits) can be addressed. Hence the *Book of Job*. And hence Meyer Fortes' ([1959] 1983) brilliant application of Oedipus and Job to Tallensi ideas in colonial (and presumably precolonial) northern Ghana concerning the failure of expected ancestral benevolence and the indeterminacy of fate. Religion or philosophy must leave some space for irony, both the kind of Sophoclean irony that fate could be working against me, and the Socratic irony that there are limits to what I can know about myself or how I can perceive the truth (Lambek and Antze 2003).

In sum, there is no social formation in which the harmonization of the good and the true is fully resolved. There is always the risk of irony replaced by anomie, cynicism, or skepticism on the one side or by revitalizing un- or anti-ironic fervor on the other.

Anthropologists do not have any advantage with respect to these questions over the people whose lives they study; all of us are caught by what may be described as human finitude. That is to say, first, that we are caught by the limits of our own understanding and do not have direct recourse to any order beyond human thought and language (remarkable and diverse as these resources are); and second, we are caught by the limits of our particular inheritance, our history, memory, and circumstances, although our language, experience, and actions enable us to expand our horizons. Of course, strong truth claims, whether coming from science or religion, attempt to override these facts, to universalize our positionality (we can all be saved) or to transcend the human. One of the reasons for their prevalence and attraction is that many experiences we face, starting from our thrownness in the world, the very existence of life in the universe

and the remarkable fact of our consciousness of it, from our contemplation of the sublime starry heavens to the observation of mundane pettiness, routine malfeasance, and occasional evil here on earth, do seem to surpass the limits of ordinary human comprehension.

While the quotation from Foucault marks the distinctiveness of modernity (but only, I have suggested, to a degree), both relations he describes exist side by side in any society. A thin stream of anthropologists, from Paul Radin (1957) to Kai Kresse (2007), have documented the presence of philosophical (skeptical) thought in a wide range of societies and there are multiple genres of text and practice—from proverbs to divination—that acknowledge human finitude and uncertainty. Spirit possession, as I have understood it (Lambek 2003), is in its very means or genre intrinsically ironic and highlights existential questions without resolving them (without saving the subject, in Foucault's language). Søren Kierkegaard (2001, and compare Lear 2003) and subsequent thinkers have addressed comparable existential quandaries with comparably ironic means. And with respect to Foucault's telling depiction of a premodern age or condition, insofar as a society subsists or once subsisted outside a Christian or Muslim sphere of influence, salvation may not be the appropriate mode in which to describe subjection to the truth. (Could it not be annihilation?) The gods are frequently amoral and people can as easily be seized or persecuted by untruth (in the form of demons) as saved by the truth.

It is, I think, implicit in Foucault's remark that what is at issue are different conceptions of truth, in effect differently constituted kinds of truth, rather than different relations to a single kind or absolute truth. Modernity values truths of logic and correspondence truths that can be arrived at by the application of scientific method (hypothesis testing, evidence based). In this formulation human experts discover truth. In what Foucault calls spirituality, truth as it were reveals itself, discovering (even overpowering) human subjects. This is the truth of unconcealment as described by Martin Heidegger (1993) and framed by some anthropologists in terms of heightened experience (opened or enriched by awe, closed or impoverished by trauma . . .). Different from both correspondence and disclosed truth, is the truth of sanctity, as brilliantly discerned by Rappaport as a product of the enactment of liturgical order (rituals).

For Rappaport (1999), practitioners of liturgically ordered rituals become definitively identified with particular enunciations and enactments and subject to the commitments, identifications, and relationships established through performance. They also become attached to the liturgical forms that have made

them who they are (a Christian can hardly deny the consequentiality of the rite of baptism or a Muslim or Jewish man that of male circumcision). These become truths of a specific kind. Moreover, highly sanctified postulates, relatively unchangeable and deeply meaningful but ultimately informationless (like, "there is no God but God") move outward from rituals at the heart of the liturgical order to sanctify political acts and ultimately the acts of everyday life, as they are uttered at inaugurations, in jural witness, before or after meals or journeys, and so forth. In such a world the ordinary is deeply and comprehensively sanctified. That American dollar bills say "in God we trust" or that French francs declared "*liberté, égalité, et fraternité*" illustrate the prevalence of sanctification even in manifestly secular polities and with respect to the ostensibly most profane of objects. By anchoring values, acts, persons, relations, and objects with respect to sanctified truths and by orienting further acts with respect to them, sacred utterances are ethically consequential.

While some theories of ethics seek firm grounds—and that is, in effect, what the practices we call religion try to offer—other thinkers, including me, think that certainty and sure grounding are ultimately unavailable. We can and do acquire a degree of certainty through submitting to liturgical order and sanctifying rituals, prescriptive rules, extreme forms of devotion, and the like. They provide our self-identities and our relationships with a measure of stability and give us a sense of continuity and direction. Insofar as social facts and ethical conditions are performatively constituted, their source in human action is often concealed to the actors, in what Rappaport has referred to as the mystification of performativeness. My own self-constitution is likewise partially mystified to me. And yet, in any society, skepticism periodically shows itself—certainty is disrupted, alternatives appear, ritual action is demystified, and the sense that there is no firm ground for knowledge or value, threatens to prevail.

I think it is fair to say that secularism as defined (for these purposes) as a loss of religious faith or, as I would rather see it, a collapse of liturgical order and a retraction of the presence of sanctification in everyday life, has contributed to a sense that the connection between the good or the right and the true have become unhinged, and perhaps to their disconnection in fact. They are unhinged both at the ideal level (producing existential crisis, anomie, or vertigo) and perceived to be unhinged at the practical level (producing uncertainty, cynicism, rumor, and actual corruption). Truth is accessible but it is not longer salvific; how the world is (models of) appears disconnected from directives for living ones life (models for). What we know about the world does not help us to know

what to do in the world. In sum, modernity is inflected or infected by a sense of ethical impasse. The situation is less that our ethical precepts no longer fit with one another (as philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre [1984] laments) nor that there is more unethical behavior present in the world now than in the past (a matter that it is surely impossible to ascertain), but that we no longer understand or experience the relevance of truth for the conduct of our lives. Truth-making has shifted to sites like bioscience and medicine, which can offer only partial, limited, or distorting models for conduct or criteria of action, let alone redemption.

However, the picture is not as bleak as it looks. We remain subject to the ethical even if we do not explicitly realize the fact. The same functions that were or are displayed in liturgical rituals and explicitly sanctified utterances hold for the performative (illocutionary) dimension of other kinds of acts, and indeed for the tacitly performative dimension inherent to all acts. They may not orient us so clearly with respect to life-term goals, projects, or modes of being, but they underpin everyday comportment, personal dignity, and respect for others.

As the next section will show, there are also plenty of public calls in which the true, the good, and the right appear to be mutually embedded.

A ROAD TRIP: REFLECTIONS ON FREEDOM AND CARE

One of the bases for a distinctively anthropological approach to any topic is to comprehend diversity. People do things differently over there and some people do things differently from me here at home. How I can do justice to the diversity, forging a position that goes beyond the one I started from? This itself can be conceived as an ethical as well as an intellectual project, even if far too much ink has been spilled over the question of ethical relativism. In this section I confront public assertions of distinct ethical values or projects ostensibly characteristic of two distinct communities, in order to demonstrate not just an immediate difference in the pronouncement of values but two different ways of conceptualizing ethics. As will become evident, my position here is less that of the neutral ethnographer than the argumentative philosopher.

Cultural diversity has often been signaled by means of distinct values, as displayed in the political and religious spectacles of various communities and in the work of anthropologists who study them (from Benedict [1934] 2005 and Kluckhohn 1951 onward). Sometimes these values are simply announced— proclaimed in speeches or on billboards or displayed in public performances,

ranging from church services to Balinese cockfights or American football—and anthropologists draw from what people say or display in public about themselves and to themselves, interpreting such performances as literary critics might interpret a text. It is with two such proclamations that I begin, but keeping in mind that the proclamation of values says nothing about whether they are adhered to. They tell us what is said publicly but voiced, as it were, in this case only through anonymous third parties, they do not tell us what is thought or done otherwise. In a way, then, the following excursion is deceptive. A central part of the lesson is that the method I deploy is inadequate, being ethnographically thin and not addressing how the texts are received.

Freedom (in New Hampshire)

Let's begin with something quintessentially North American: a road trip. Journeys themselves are often allegories of ethical self-formation. They describe the growth of life experience (*Erfahrung*) through the acquisition of experiences (*Erlebnis*) (Jay 2005), openness to new encounters and the freedom and agency—the autonomy—characteristic of the automobile. In America, cars are self-objects and metaphorical as well as literal vehicles of individual freedom. Cars and road trips are vehicles by means of which the self can work on itself; those who cannot travel can make the journey vicariously by reading or watching films. On the road, life is in our hands and anything is possible. Anthropological fieldwork is itself a special kind of road trip.

But let's ignore allegory and keep things simple. Suppose it is a nice summer weekend and you decide to drive from Boston to Montreal. The road takes you through New Hampshire and Vermont, where the mountains are covered with lush foliage. The license plates in Vermont draw your attention to that fact, describing Vermont as the *Green Mountain State* (a translation of the French *vert mont*). But in New Hampshire the statement on the license plates is quite different. It reads LIVE FREE OR DIE.

Ethical knowledge or wisdom often comes condensed in proverbs, maxims, precepts, and exhortations. In literate societies these are often visible in public spaces, like the characters hanging on banners in Confucian ancestor halls or the calligraphy carved into mosque walls. In North America, individual states and provinces have mottos and these are often displayed on license plates, visible to all travelers by road. Some inscriptions just describe the state or advertise for tourists but there is usually some kind of value embedded. Consider

the following brief selection: Spirit of America (Massachusetts); Open for Business (Nova Scotia); the shift in Arkansas from The Land of Opportunity to The Natural State; or the simple pointer Nebraska.gov. The state of Idaho inscribes Famous Potatoes on its license plates.[15]

New Hampshire's phrase is far from potatoes. *Live free or die* could be described as ethical; it seems to hover between a personal conviction ostensibly ascribed to the driver and an exhortation or command to those who view it. It has an affinity with Mosaic Commandments like "thou shalt not kill," or a Kantian categorical imperative, like "always tell the truth." However, *Live free or die* is a bit more ambiguous than such absolute demands. It doesn't say what living free means or what you need to do to live free—and whether, perhaps, to reach that end, killing or lying, for example, might be permissible. It appears to set an end—living in freedom—above and beyond the means to reach it, suggesting that the end could justify the means. But it is also unambiguous, categorical in a different sense from Kant's; things are black and white, *either* you live free *or* you die. They are mutually exclusive. And there is no question as to what you *should* do. Presumably you would die trying to reach life in freedom or to protect the freedom you already have, suggesting again a relationship between means and end in which violence could be invoked. Indeed, the license plate shortens the original slogan, which was *Live free or die: Death is not the worst of evils* (a sentiment shared by suicide bombers).

There is another ambiguity in the seemingly bold and forthright statement. It appears to proclaim that the bearer of the license plate does *live free*. After all, he is driving at home, in the United States, not seeking passage as a refugee in the back of a truck at the Mexican border (whose own attempt to "live free" is denied). He is proud of his freedom (I use the masculine intentionally here.) And yet, drivers in New Hampshire are compelled to have licenses, to be of age, to affix plates to their vehicles, and so on. They are subject to law, and to the state. Additionally, the last words of the statement, *or die*, might suggest or insinuate that freedom is under threat. So there are conjunctions both of freedom and subjection and of complacency and vigilance. The phrase can be considered ethical both in its assertion of a primary value or highest good, *live free*, and in its clear direction of what one has to do or be ready to sacrifice in order to achieve or maintain that good, *die* in its defense. It also strikes us as ethical

---

15.   Licence mottos are all drawn from the web.

because of the kind of tension or suspense between life and death it provokes and even celebrates.

What does it mean to *live free*? What is meant by *freedom* here? Philosophers speak of the existential condition of human freedom as the basis for ethics. We are free to choose how to live, and indeed, for some philosophers, we are condemned to that freedom, it is a burden. If we were not free in this sense we would not be alive or not be human. Without our freedom to choose, any path we take would be relatively meaningless. Without the freedom to be good (or not), being good would hardly be of ethical consequence. In this view, freedom does not only establish the need for ethics it is also the primary condition for our existence as ethical subjects.

My guess is that such philosophical considerations were not foremost in the minds of the authors of the New Hampshire motto nor are they uppermost in the minds of the car owners and drivers in that state. I also suspect that the connotations of *live free* have changed with time. Originally the phrase referred to the independence of the early American republic from Britain. According to Wikipedia, the phrase originates in a toast written by General John Stark, New Hampshire's most famous soldier of the American Revolutionary War, on July 31, 1809.[16] Subsequently it spoke to the defense of freedom in successive wars in which Americans were engaged. Possibly it once spoke to African-Americans escaping the south prior to the Civil War. The phrase would have been especially saliently during the Cold War when Communism was depicted across the United States as a threat to freedom, and indeed the motto was only officially adopted by the state in 1945. It may have regained salience after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center.[17] The first phrase to appear on New Hampshire license plates was *Scenic* in 1957 (replaced for one year in 1963 by *Photoscenic*).[18] *Live free or die* first appeared on the plates in 1971, thus at the height of tension in the United States concerning military involvement in

---

16. http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Live_Free_or_Die.

17. The related phrase "liberty or death" is quite widespread, serving as a motto declaiming independence in Greece, Bulgaria, the Republic of Macedonia, Uruguay, and elsewhere. Emmeline Pankhurst famously remarked in a speech delivered in Hartford Connecticut in 1913, "We will put the enemy [the British government] in the position where they will have to choose between giving us [women] freedom or giving us death" (http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/apr/27/greatspeeches).

18. http://www.worldlicenceplates.com/usa/US_NHXX.html.

Vietnam (and the year of the revelation of the Pentagon Papers in the *New York Times*). Its application evidently was not a neutral act.

Two related uses of freedom can be drawn into the picture. First, as the reference to Communism implies, there is the association in the United States of freedom with capitalism, as in the "free market" and "free enterprise." The ideology and practice of neoliberalism reinforce this, placing freedom in the hands of the supposedly autonomous and self-enterprising individual, who is responsible for making the most of his opportunities. Second, there is the idea of freedom of conscience, harking back to the religious freedom sought by the first British settlers in North America, and now phrased as freedom of religion. Freedom of religion, though, is itself an ambiguous phrase as it could refer either to the separation of church and state or to the role of the state in ensuring the right to practice what it recognizes as religion. It can and has been used to support the rights of Christians to proselytize among members of other communities (Mahmood 2015), but might be less likely to be so invoked in the United States on behalf of Muslims or for people whose practices are not recognized by the state as religion.[19]

More generally, we can now see that the phrase on the license plates understands freedom as *rights* and hence refers implicitly to the protection of rights. These are the rights of citizens, but citizens as individuals, not the collective—more likely the right to own guns than the right to live in a community free of firearms. At issue are rights to vote and to self-governance, and also to own and protect private property, all linked to what C. B. Macpherson (1962) called possessive individualism, as characteristic of thinkers in the liberal tradition and as has been taken over by social conservatives.

---

19. Interestingly, in 1977 a couple who were Jehovah's Witnesses won their case at the Supreme Court granting them permission to cover up the slogan "live free or die" on their licence plates, which they found "repugnant to their moral, religious, and political beliefs." For the judicial opinions for and against, see Wooley v. Maynard, https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/430/705 (accessed June 20, 2015).

   On freedom John Austin remarks astutely, "There is little doubt that to say we acted 'freely' (in the philosopher's use, which is only faintly related to the everyday use) is to say only that we acted *not* un-freely, in one or another of the many heterogeneous ways of so acting (under duress, or what not). Like 'real,' 'free' is only used to rule out the suggestion of some or all of its antitheses. As 'truth' is not a name for a characteristic of assertions, so 'freedom' is not a name for a characteristic of actions, but the name of a dimension in which actions are assessed" (1970: 180). I discuss freedom further in Lambek (2015b, Chapter 1).

In sum (and with a little "license" of our own), we can unpack a whole worldview and ideal way of life, buttressed by a political philosophy, from a single phrase found on the license plates. The motto condenses a series of interconnected assumptions, values, and admonitions. And it comes close, in the phrase Geertz (1973c) used to describe religion, to combining a *model of* the world—how the world is, composed of free property owners and their enemies—and a *model for* living in the world—freely and defending ones freedom to the death if necessary.

How salient all this is for citizens of New Hampshire is another matter and something I have not done the research to address. It is perhaps no coincidence that New Hampshire is a fairly conservative state. However, while it has a lower percentage of democrats than neighboring Vermont,[20] with which it shares a long border, and maintains a different political temper and social tone, in 2008 New Hampshire gave Obama a majority and elected a Democratic governor and senator. A long-held commonplace of anthropologists is that one must distinguish what people say they do or say one ought to do from what they actually do. Hence in tracking down whatever we mean by ethics it is insufficient simply to examine such condensed statements in places like license plates or to make a list of peoples "values." We also need to examine their actions. And we need to explore both the gap between the claims about value and actual practice and how people themselves live, understand, rationalize, and even theorize that gap. Nevertheless, the motto is a social fact and it could serve the sort of sanctifying function Rappaport describes for sacred postulates (1999, Chapter 10), anchoring a series of secondary but more immediate values and practices by which the citizens of New Hampshire lead their lives.

Remembering (in Québec)

Let's put these thoughts on hold as we pause at immigration and cross the border into Canada to enter the province of Québec. Here the mountains end and human occupation on the landscape looks less tidy. The license plates now say Je me souviens. Literally this means, *I remember*. Remember what? Although I grew up in Québec and am in that respect a "native," I cannot remember anyone ever telling me what we were meant to remember. (Indeed, until 1978, by

---

20. Spotted on the University of Toronto campus June 2015, a young man in a Vermont t-shirt with the slogan "Live free, eat pie."

which time I had left Québec, the license plates read La Belle Province.) So let's assume it means whatever people think it does. There is reason to suspect that for many people the phrase refers in the first instance to national pride. It is written in French and it suggests, *I remember our heritage; I remember our language; I remember to speak in French*. According to the official website,[21] the phrase was carved on the door of the Québec Parliament in 1883 by architect Eugène-Étienne Taché and the "true meaning" has been debated ever since. The site continues, "Taché did not leave any document revealing the intended meaning of the motto. His contemporaries interpreted its meaning as a declaration of the French Canadian nation remembering its past: the glories, the misfortunes, and the lessons. Nowadays, the most widespread understanding of the motto is as follows: francophone Quebeckers cherish their French roots." The phrase is highly political insofar as it requires all citizens of Québec, regardless of their origins, mother tongue, or ideological persuasion to voice the sentiment of those who wish to "cherish their French roots." If memory is preserved at the expense of what is forgotten, here that is above all the First Nations inhabitants.

The phrase is not written in the imperative like the New Hampshire slogan, but in the first person. Hence it is not addressed directly to another. Nevertheless it is implicitly exhortative, *I remember . . . and you should too*. Like the New Hampshire slogan it is exemplary in intent and also nationalist and conservative in content and form. To share in historical memory that is presumed to be held in common is to make a claim of citizenship and, in effect, of loyalty to the nation. However, the slogan describes a historical situation that is in effect the obverse of the one in New Hampshire. Québec *was* conquered by the British army and for many Québecois this has meant that they do live or have lived in a state of relative unfreedom. Where the New Hampshire slogan is a lesson drawn from victory, the Québecois slogan is drawn from defeat. And yet the revolution is ongoing. The admonition to remember is precisely *not* to (let) die!

In what follows I develop an idiosyncratic interpretation of the motto, for my own ends. To begin with, the French verb, *se souvenir*, is reflexive, making it impossible to translate literally in English. There is a small set of such verbs in French. Thus *s'assoir*, to sit, means literally to sit or seat oneself. *I remember myself* is (in most contexts) ungrammatical in English, necessary in French.[22]

---

21. http://provinceQuébec.com/info_Québec/motto-license-plate/.

22. There is in English an old-fashioned usage of "remember yourself," meaning act properly, don't make a fool of yourself, or embarrass your companions.

Thus to remember has a more explicitly reflexive quality in French than it does in English, announcing a degree of self-consciousness or self-awareness. This is also the effect of the license plate: How can I forget or ignore that I am remembering when I am simultaneously stating that I remember? To remember is to make a claim to remembering.

In exploring what this claim is about, let's try a little more liberty in translation. I like to imagine that *Je me souviens* could translate as *I remember . . . to buckle up; I remember road safety; I remember to look out for myself on the road and to look out for you, too, my passengers, fellow drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians . . .* Indeed, we could go on from here and make a slightly freer translation (would this be included in the freedom that people of New Hampshire are prepared to defend?) and say that *Je me souviens* means *I take care*.

Let us note several things. First, written in the first person, the phrase implies a taking on of responsibility more directly than the New Hampshire phrase, whether the latter is read as imperative or simply a statement of fact. *I* remember or take care; I commit myself to doing so. This statement is simultaneously acknowledged, a sense that is reinforced by the reflexive quality of the French verb. Second, then, we can ask responsibility for what or whom. As the object is not stated explicitly it is open like the informationless sanctifying postulates analyzed by Rappaport. It applies to the nation and its history, language, and culture or present state of unfulfillment. After all, the phrase is deliberately enunciated in French, anchored on moving vehicles that circulate from coast to coast in Canada and down through New Hampshire to the beaches in Maine and further afield to Florida, a French statement in a largely Anglophone world. But as noted, the object of memory or attention could include the self and the others on the road, remembering to drive carefully. Here there is a suggested address—I take care *and so should you*. Again, this is the obverse of the illocutionary force of the New Hampshire statement (You should live free or be prepared to die *and I too live by that motto*).

Insofar as memory or care has an object, the phrase is other-directed in a way that the New Hampshire one is not. *Live free or die* is at once a form of pedagogy to other citizens and a warning to potential enemies, but it is premised on individualism. *Je me souviens*, in my idiosyncratic reading, that is, as *I take care*, suggests looking out for the other as I look out for myself, possibly even putting the other first. It exemplifies not an ethics of freedom but an ethics of care—of caring for tradition perhaps, and care for others. In that sense it approaches a kind of feminist ethics or any ethics that gives a central place to recognition *of*

the other, responsiveness *to* the other, or responsibility *for* the other. It could be said to be a less active stance than the New Hampshire motto, and even a passionate one in the sense of passion as reception, taking in, allowing oneself to be swayed by the need or condition of another.[23]

But suppose *Je me souviens* is read literally, as intransitive, with no direct object that is remembered or person who is cared for. As intransitive verb without object, it is also continuous, without end or termination, *I am remembering* rather than I remember *that* or *whom*. *I care* is a stance to life, an end that is simultaneously a means—and in that sense very similar to how some thinkers have described ethical practice.

In this sense, *remembering* refers to attentiveness. *I am attentive*. Being attentive includes being responsive, being awake, being engaged in and with the world. Moreover, if care in the transitive sense leads to other persons, perhaps to the labor of daily care of and for others, it can also attest to caring for values, goals, activities, and reasons. And it can imply being careful, or having cares or worries. "Things in the world *matter* to me. I am conscious and I am conscientious. I am in ethical relation to the world."[24]

The reflexive quality of remembering in French could further lead to the theme of self-questioning. Should we be as categorical and certain about our values as the New Hampshire slogan appears to be? Or should we respond more slowly, reflecting on the past, *taking care* to understand each new situation as it emerges, and to understand others before reaching our own conclusions, say, with respect to what *freedom* means? This is an urgent issue as I write these words in the immediate aftermath of the assassination of the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists in Paris and the responses and counterresponses to which those terrible events gave rise. Were the French police operating by the New Hampshire motto, putting their own lives in danger to protect freedom, not to mention killing those who appeared to challenge freedom? But what or whose

---

23. In the sense of *caritas* it could find its source in Québec's Roman Catholic heritage. But it is also close to what has become the common English salutation, "take care." For different apprehensions within recent anthropology, compare Andrea Muehlebach's discussion of invocations of care in neoliberal Italy (2012) with Cheryl Mattingly's account of how notions of care expand from the intimate and personal to advocacy and activism concerning such matter as specific diseases, hospital reform, or racialized injustice (2014).

24. In this paragraph I am bordering on Martin Heidegger's concept of *Sorge*, translated as care.

freedom is being protected here? The freedom of those in power to make fun of and humiliate those who are not in power? The freedom to pander to racism? For all the weight some theories of ethics give it, freedom is not a neutral word.

The limits of slogans

Do these different slogans say something about the political units that advertise them? And can we draw any conclusion from what people say about themselves, or rather, about what the government in each place *requires* people to say (there is no "freedom" in New Hampshire to drive without license plates; no leeway in Québec to "forget" to get a license or to have it written in French). Do the mottos bear any strong connection to what people do, or to their outlook on the world? Do Québecois have better historical memories? (As anyone who has been there knows, they are certainly *not* safer drivers.) Are New Hampshire citizens more ready to die for their country? These are tricky questions and they are not ones I want to follow. I am not interested here in comparing Canadian (or should I say, Québecois?) and American ethical values or in evaluating between rights-based and identity-based political cultures and I am not interested in this lecture specifically in nationalism either.

There is one point that urgently needs to be made. Even if the slogans tell us something about the social salience and the cultural and political environment in which the citizens of New Hampshire and Québec respectively live, they do not tell us anything about the possible clash of alternative values or interpretive practices, nor how individuals respond. This is ethics in the realm of the ideal not the actual. We do not know anything about the opinions or actions of individual drivers. They may be cowardly or lazy, unresponsive to or critical of nationalist sentiment and rhetoric—and yet they all have to live with the ubiquitous public display of these messages and their possible influence on themselves and their fellow citizens. They can think for themselves about their attachment to the values expressed, and respond critically to them, but they cannot fully ignore them (albeit, the words may simply fail to resonate, like dead metaphors.)

We must be careful (*sic*) not to over-generalize, produce stereotypes, or make assumptions. However, we can look more closely at what is entailed in having to acknowledge someone else's original speech act, or a collectively produced speech act, and indeed represent it as one's own. What kind of ethical subjects are thereby produced?

The license plates are cultural texts in the form of speech acts (statements). But despite the use of personal pronouns, they are not speech acts as we usually understand them. That is to say, there is no direct and immediate connection between an immediate social context and the proclamation. The owners of cars have little choice in the purchasing and affixing of license plates. Someone from one state may borrow the car of someone from another. Rental cars move readily from state to state and among different drivers. The statement on the plate tells us nothing directly about the opinions or commitments of the owner or the driver of the car. (In this respect the statements are different from those on vanity plates or bumper stickers.) They do not hold the owner or driver to any specific commitments other than their commitments to the rules of the road, of car ownership or rental, and perhaps to the laws of the country more generally. They are therefore not in themselves ethical in the deep sense in which some philosophers see us as tethered to our words (Cavell 1994), responsible for what we say when, how, and to whom we say it.[25] They are merely quoted proclamations about what the state considers important to say about itself (landscape, freedom, memory, potatoes). And yet at some level, the drivers of the cars *are* connected to the words put, as it were, into their mouths. Moreover, readers of the license plates are all interpellated by the exhortations inscribed on them; they can turn away, but they have been addressed. And in addition to these implicit connections between the drivers and viewers and the statement themselves, there is also a connection of the kind that I noted earlier, between the value expressed and a kind of truth, albeit not a correspondence truth. The statement carries the authority of the state; it rests unquestioned and largely unquestionable.

If we want to own a car we are forced to affix a license plate and hence, in effect, accept the statement written on it. We are in this sense subject to it as we are subjects of the state. The sentiments may say little about us as individuals, our character, or political leanings. But to protest too much concerning the latter point makes us rather like the ideal New Hampshire citizen claiming individual freedom of thought. In fact, we live in a world of objects and vehicles and rules and advice. Our freedom is not and cannot be absolute. We are shaped by this world. It is *how* we live in it or with these things, selecting and weighing among them, interpreting them in the course of living our lives that is one way to describe the substantive unfolding of ethics. How do I take care, in the sense

---

25. Roy Rappaport (1999) argues that ritual acts harness the canonical with the indexical.

of which rules, symbols, sentiments, and proclamations do I care more about, balance my commitments among, act on, embody, personify? How do I show through my actions what matters to *me*?[26]

Two conceptions of ethical life

It should be clear that I am using the license plates not primarily to illustrate two different values that are expressed and that may or may not be operative in neighboring territories within North America. I am using them to exemplify different ways to conceive of ethics and its place in our lives, as well as one particular way in which the ethical environment is shaped in state societies.

One of the destinations to which this brief experiment in hermeneutics leads is that whether or not the license plates exemplify two distinctive values or orientations to the world found respectively in New Hampshire and Québec, they do seem to exemplify quite distinct political philosophies as elaborated more abstractly in the academy, one of which is rights based and the other is recognition based. Moreover, they exemplify fundamentally different notions of the person; in the one case persons are taken to be vigilant agents, outwardly directed, and possessive individuals; in the other case they are equally vigilant subjects, inwardly responsive, and embedded in relations of mutual care.

It is evident that the values expressed on the New Hampshire and Québec license plates are not strictly commensurable with one another and hence cannot be conceived as mutually exclusive (except insofar as one can affix only one license plate to one's car). They are not commensurable in part because they speak to or emerge from different conceptions of value, different streams of Western philosophical thought regarding ethics and politics. They indicate that there are a variety of ways to respond ethically to the world, not merely entextualizing and objectifying certain individual values at the expense of others. They point in different directions with respect to how we might consider ethics more generally, whether as freedom in relation to making and following (or resisting) rules and power or as a kind of attentive and judicious practice.

The license plates in the state of New Hampshire proclaim *Live free or die*. Those across the border in the province of Québec assert *Je me souviens*. Both

---

26. As Marco Motta adds (pers. comm.), following Stanley Cavell and Sandra Laugier, how does what matters to me, matter to others too? How does something matter to *us*?

expressions are nationalistic and each proclaims citizenship and pride in collective identity. But it is the difference in the two statements that interests me here. *Live free or die* is categorical. It takes a stand. And it offers two mutually exclusive alternatives: either/or. It is also phrased in the imperative; it tells you what you should, must, or ought to do. It has the form of an order or perhaps a rule (even if it is a rule to live free of other peoples' rule). *Je me souviens* declares simply what one does or hopes to do, perhaps despite oneself. It describes a disposition or a practice—the practice of remembering or, as I have developed it, of paying attention and taking care. It is not a matter of choosing one alternative to the exclusion of another or of commitment to the death, but it is continuous and a matter of degree. Remembering can be understood as constituted through ongoing judgment as to what or how much to remember, and with respect to what or whom, and conversely, what to let go of (Lambek 1993). (After all, one cannot remember everything and certainly not at once.) Moreover, remembering and taking care can be understood as forms of receptiveness, relatively open to the world and circumstance, whereas living free or dying implies an active stance, even a defensive one, an unencumbered distinguishing oneself from, or even opposing oneself to, the outer world and circumstances understood as demanding or threatening.

Here is one further distinction we could point to. *Je me souviens* is a statement that belongs to *ordinary ethics*; it speaks about how to live, all or most of the time, in the everyday world. While it might distinguish exceptional events that should be commemorated or kept silent about, this is not explicit. Indeed, the idea could be that the extraordinary is folded into the everyday, through the work of memory. (It may, as noted earlier, implicitly acknowledge a condition of unfreedom.) Conversely, *live free or die* indicates the exceptional, the limit, and the extreme event—the military campaign or the last stand. Living free might be ordinary (or it might raise the ordinary to the extraordinary) but in what respects are not specified. "Freedom" appears to be a transcendent value, something outside and beyond ordinary life (one can die for it), such that defending it is extraordinary.

It is also significant that *Je me souviens* is uttered in the first person. It is illocutionary in the sense that it announces who I am and what I am about; it makes a claim or commitment. It says in effect: *I* take responsibility. You and I can now judge my behavior accordingly, whether I do in fact remember, whether I am careful or act responsibly, and whether I acknowledge my lapses. You can hold me accountable. It does not try to persuade you or impose on you. *Live free or die* also stakes a position, but somewhat indirectly. Read as an injunction, in

the second person (it can be read in other ways), it instructs an addressee what to do. Addressees are accountable in the first instance to my words (to the words of the state), rather than to their own.

I have used the license plates as vehicles for opening up the question of ethical value more broadly. Should we conceive of such value as categorical or practical, as marking a threshold we will not cross or a mode of being we engage in every day? Is the ethical about boundaries or about receptivity? Insofar as we cannot resolve such questions or insofar as we select a practice approach (as I have been leaning heavily toward), it becomes evident that the discernment of discrete public values abstracted from acts and persons is not the best road for understanding the ethical lives of those who proclaim them. Exclusive attention to public values runs quickly into the danger of caricaturing cultural difference and presenting people as one sided. In what respects are particular values salient to citizens and to what degree do they shape or characterize their actions? For a more satisfying and richer analysis we would have to move beyond objectified values to lived action and practical experience.

Between disposition and objectification

Je me souviens could also be read as: I am conscious, I am aware of what I am doing, or aware that I should be aware. Within the literature on practical reason there has been some debate about this. On one side there is an argument that says character is the product of the cultivation of dispositions, such that we come to do what we do (the right thing, the wrong thing, the judicious thing) without stopping to think about it. Some acts are like that, part of our habitus, as Pierre Bourdieu (1977) puts it, going without saying. You smile at people who smile at you, utter greetings, shake hands. If someone drops their wallet you call out to them and hand it back. You don't think twice. But a moment's reflection suggests that many acts do take a moment's reflection, and often more than a moment, perhaps a sleepless night. Many ethical situations are characterized precisely by their difficulty. This is true even for people who have worked hard to cultivate their dispositions and are those we can claim without hesitation are of "good" moral character. A person of good character will take time and trouble over a difficult issue, possibly giving it more thought than the person of weaker character. (That is to suppose time is available, which is not always the case, but we usually have plenty of time after the act to reflect on, and perhaps regret, what we have done.)

It is impossible to discern a clear line between what goes (or is done) without saying and what does not. "I feel" grades into "I am conscious," into "I pay attention," and then, "I exercise my judgment," and "I take my stand." It would be highly distorting to define ethical action exclusively either as unmediated expression of moment, mood, or character or as carefully deliberated and executed. It would likewise be distortive to distinguish between two objectified kinds of acts or forms of practice, one unconscious or tacit and the other reasoned and deliberate. What we can distinguish analytically are complementary perspectives on action that highlight respectively marked performative acts (like promises or apologies), in which the explicit or deliberate is culturally coded in the act and utterance, and ongoing practice, in which judgment can be tacit or not, but is socially unmarked (Lambek 2010a).

We can think of the ethical as moving along a continuum from disposition, attentiveness, or ongoing practical judgment through various kinds of objectification, including those of performing nameable actions, giving reasons, setting rules, proclaiming maxims, offering rationalizations, deliberating and disputing alternatives, and elaborating philosophies (Keane 2010). Such objectifications can in turn be debated, interpreted, and internalized.

There is evidently much to be gained from interpreting ethical objects as cultural texts, as I have done with the license plates. But insofar as the texts are treated as static, the account seems to hover above social life itself. It ignores how values actually shape and are shaped by social action; how people themselves interpret the texts, whether and how what the texts proclaim becomes part of people's lives. We have to turn our interpretive skills on practice and performance themselves, to see both how they are shaped by texts and how new texts emerge.

THE ETHICAL AS SELF-INTERPRETIVE PRACTICE

I have approached the end of this lecture only to arrive again at the beginning of my own arguments. What I have done is to move from a consideration of two ethical *objects*, two statements of specific values, or ethics *as* an object, and shifted to asking what happens when we understand ethics as embedded in or intrinsic to practical activity—as action in the world and in the ways in which we lead our lives. I have further implied that living our lives is inevitably a matter of exercising our practical judgment (what to remember or attend to,

which freedoms to cherish or exercise, how strongly to stand by specific values and commitments or compromise among them, how to stay true to others and to ourselves). How we live our lives is inextricably connected to who we are as persons and in relation to others.

The ethical cannot be simply about what we *should* do but has to address what we *do* in fact do and face what we *have* done (or left undone). We do not always live up to our values. And we cannot live up to all of them equally and consistently. Life makes that impossible and if it didn't, we would invent new values anyway, out of boredom or mischief. Whatever we talk about when we talk about ethics, it has to include the necessity for discernment, the inevitability of infelicity and failure, and the means by which we, as individuals and within specific traditions, address the complexities and messiness of life, both its richness and expansiveness and its limitations and disappointments.

The ethical concerns how things (come to) matter for us. Our lives are deeply informed by what matters and indeed we live our lives as if things matter. That "as if" becomes reality (rather than an audition or rehearsal), so that things *do* matter to us and for us and we know both what (some of) these things are and that they do matter. (That is why I discussed the question of truth.)

At the beginning of the lecture I asserted that the ethical could be understood hermeneutically. If I have shown that the interpretation of two cultural texts cannot take us very far in understanding the ethical practice of their respective publics, I hope that I have also shown that the statements on the license plates can be read as interpretations of what is at stake in ethical practice. Humans are (some of the time, relatively) free, attentive, and self-interpreting creatures. The "interpretation of cultures," as Geertz put it (1973d), can be read as the way that in living their lives people selectively interpret the multiple texts and vehicles their cultures offer them, much like actors interpret a role, or musicians a score (Lambek 2014). Of course, lives are more complex than the interpretation of a single role or score; part of the work of interpretation involves ongoing judgment concerning which roles or scores or values to take on, to continue to follow (to "remember"), and how far ("or die"), and how to articulate among them, and do so with a balance of continuity and variety or experimentation (Lambek 2013). How things matter to us is realized in the ways we live our lives, keeping commitments or breaking them off and meeting new circumstances with discernment, and sometimes with imagination and risk, perhaps even with the tone and pitch, the acuity of gesture, the attentiveness, the sheer courage, energy, verve, and splendor with which (say) our best opera

singers (athletes, artists, activists, intellectuals . . .) interpret simultaneously their scores, their roles, and their lives. On the other hand, we can acknowledge that we rarely live up to idealized exemplars—exhibiting less grace, virtue, acuity, bravado, or focus, and often stumbling, idling, or crashing, pushing against our limitations or resigning ourselves to live within them.

I have suggested that the enunciation of public values and our responses to them are insufficient to describe how ethics pervades our lives and is realized through them. I also suggested that one of those statements, namely *Je me souviens* offers a guide to one place where we might look further. However, this picture of remembering, attending, or caring needs to be grasped as more active than it might first appear. If we pay attention, and if things come to matter for us, they matter insofar as they are manifest in our actions. But at the same time, we are often inattentive, careless, or experience difficulty in acting or knowing how to act. Circumstances can take us by surprise.

Examining action close up it is evident that how things matter (that they *can* matter) is dependent on (or can be described by) the criteria assigned and applied to them. Each act and utterance is subject to criteria that ascertain whether it is distinctive, clear, complete, consistent, apt, and so forth. John Austin ([1955] 1962) listed a series of felicity conditions that must be met for any speech act to be successful. Each of these conditions is subject to criteria (Cavell 1979). Thus, in the United Kingdom, criteria for marriage include that two people (and no longer necessarily of different sex) have each reached the age of consent, are not already married, appear together, utter their consent before a licensed official, et cetera. Moreover, each act puts new criteria into place. Once you and I have been introduced we should remember each other's names and continue to greet each time we encounter each other. Not to do so could then be judged (discerned, interpreted) as a fault. (Perhaps you do not matter to me or perhaps being courteous or being thought courteous does not matter to me—or perhaps I was simply distracted, wasn't sure it was you, or was embarrassed not to remember your name.) The immediate judgment, to make eye contact, to speak, is subject to subsequent judgment with respect to courtesy, tact, sincerity, and so forth.

Specific criteria are brought into relevance through the illocutionary force of speaking and through the circumstances illocutionary acts put under a description or whose prior description they respond to or transform (e.g., that we are now acquaintances to one another). The truth and relevance of the criteria and of the moral states and relations in which we subsist or that constitute our

horizons are confirmed largely by means of liturgical orders and performative acts. Our ethical life can be described through our subjection to such orders and our engagement in such acts as well as to the way our practice is shaped and interpreted according to the criteria they instantiate. Each time we carry out an act, including the common acts of addressing or listening to one another, we are at least implicitly reproducing (re-enacting) or initiating commitments of various kinds. We may not live up to them—indeed, we cannot live up equally to all of them—but it is of the nature of human social life and human language that we are enmeshed in them.[27]

When we examine practical activity more closely it becomes apparent that we can distinguish a variety of ways in which we talk about acts and apply felicity conditions. Thus, if I announce a last round of drinks before the pub closes, this is a recognized act among the kinds of things one can do (inviting a friend to the pub, ordering drinks, offering a toast, paying a round, etc.); the felicity conditions (right time and place, etc.) are evident. If I then speak to the person I have seen drinking alone and to excess at the bar and invite them to come home with me instead of offering to call them a taxi, my act is of a different kind and all kinds of other criteria come into play. We might disagree on what to call this act and which felicity conditions apply. If our evaluation of making the last call is easier or more straightforward than evaluating the invitation home (hospitality? proposition? looking out for someone who has had too much to drink? taking advantage of them? putting oneself at risk? . . .), both acts are subject to judgment. The difference is that the first has a description on which we agree and that is evident in the enactment and the second is one whose description emerges in the process of evaluating it. Perhaps it will be redescribed the next morning, and differently by each party.

If some acts (like a slap in the face) can be understood as instantaneous interpretations of situations, they are subject to further interpretation after the fact. Such interpretations are phrased in a language of conduct (of justification, excuse, apology, etc.) and also become embedded in unfolding narratives, their significance possibly changing as further acts take place, rearranged in the hermeneutic interplay of part and emerging whole. Actors and agents become characters, and lives can take on as many or more forms as there are genres of narrative or plots to novels. The ethical concerns all the different ways we link description with action, discriminate among different kinds of acts, and address

---

27. For further discussion see Michael Lambek (2015b).

the consequences of acts on our practice and for further acts, and eventually on our character and lives.

Practice in this sense is not a matter of following rules but of exercising judgment with respect to criteria and circumstance. By "judgment" I have meant not the making of judicial decisions but the process of discernment. This is more or less explicit and more or less rational, sometimes spontaneous, sometimes drawn out in tortuous reflection. It is a combination of sense and sensibility. What matters, and *how* things matter, are never purely subjective or purely objective, never purely rational or emotional, and never exclusively of the moment or fully beyond it, but the way these come together in how we live. The interpretation of our lives (immediately, prospectively, and retrospectively) is central to the living of them.

Whether a given act is to be described as virtuous is a matter not of adherence to a rule but of the quality of judgment it exhibits (which in some contexts may refer to how closely it adheres to the rule) and of our judgment in describing it. The judgments entailed in ongoing practice (in the moment, in what manner to act), no less than the judgments entailed in evaluating acts and character after the fact (judgments about the quality of judgments . . .), are rendered possible by the criteria at hand. Judgment occurs at multiple levels—I judge the circumstances in committing my act, and my act in its circumstances is in turn subject to judgment by others and by myself—and these judgments too are available for subsequent judgment. If the world is "turtles all the way down," (Geertz 1973e) it is "judgment all the way forward . . ."

Human life is intrinsically ethical not because we always do what is good or right—it is patent that we do not (and often cannot)—but because we are always subject to criteria,[28] subject to judgment with respect to what to do and evaluation as to whether we are doing or have done something well or badly, doing what is good or right, necessary or sufficient, justified or justifiable, honoring commitments or responsive to new invitations—and subject to our own self-evaluative, self-interpreting processes. Jean-Paul Sartre ([1943] 1956) wrote that we are condemned to freedom. What that means in practice is that we are

---

28. An astute referee has noted that it is not clear or obvious that all criteria are ethical criteria. My response at present is to say that presumably there are criteria that discriminate among criteria and that describe what else they might be. Whether to call such "metacriteria" ethical is an open question. As James Laidlaw (2010) has noted, the acts of a man with a brain tumour might be judged according to different criteria than one without.

condemned to continuously exercise our judgment. This includes judgment over circumstances—what we do now, or abstain from doing, or do next?—but also judgment prospectively, over what we want to accomplish or who we want to become, and retrospectively, over our previous acts, our commitments, our character and our lives (and all of this by means of the distinctive cultural vehicles, language, forms of personhood, temporality, embodiment, semiotic ideology, etc., available to us and perhaps necessary for us). If ethics is about how things matter for us then it is also about how we matter to ourselves, and as ourselves.

The ethical is not an object; it is immanent to action or speaks to what is immanent to action yet can never be fully reduced to words. Insofar as it animates action, perhaps we should take a leaf from German idealist philosophy and countless societies of animists and conclude with the provocation that ethics is action's *Geist*, the mind, spirit, sense, or sensibility that animates it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Althusser, Louis. 1971. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, 121–76. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Arendt, Hannah. 1998. *The human condition*, 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Aristotle. 1976. *The Nichomachaean ethics*. Translated by J. A. K. Thomson. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Asad, Talal. (1983) 1993. "The construction of religion as an anthropological category." In *Genealogies of religion: Discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*, 27–54. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Austin, John L. (1955) 1962. *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 1970. "A plea for excuses." In *Philosophical papers*, edited by J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, 175–204. New York: Oxford University Press.

Banner, Michael. 2014. *Ethics of everyday life: Moral theology, social anthropology, and the imagination of the human*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bateson, Gregory. 1958. *Naven*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Benedict, Ruth. (1934) 2005. *Patterns of culture*. New York: Mariner Books.

Bernstein, Richard. 1983. *Beyond objectivism and relativism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Burridge, Kenelm. 1969. *New heaven, new earth*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Cassaniti, Julia, and Jacob Hickman, eds. 2014. "New directions in the anthropology of morality." *Anthropological Theory* 14 (3): 251–62.

Cavell, Stanley. 1979. *The claim of reason: Wittgenstein, skepticism, morality, and tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 1994. *A pitch of philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Csordas, Thomas. 2013. "Morality as a cultural system?" *Current Anthropology* 54 (5): 523–46.

Das, Veena. 2007. *Life and words: Violence and the descent into the ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 2013. "Wittgenstein, Ludwig." In *Theory in social and cultural anthropology: An encyclopedia*, 936–40. London: Sage Reference.

Daswani, Girish. 2015. *Looking back, moving forward: Transformation and ethical practice in the Ghanaian Church of Pentecost*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Dave, Naisargi. 2012. *Queer activism in India: A story in the anthropology of ethics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 2008. "Abraham, the Other." In *Religion: Beyond a concept*, edited by Hent de Vries, 311–38. New York: Fordham University Press.

Desjarlais, Robert. 2003. *Sensory biographies: Lives and deaths among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Evans-Pritchard. E. E. 1937. *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fassin, Didier, ed. 2012. *A companion to moral anthropology*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Faubion, James. 2011. *An anthropology of ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fortes, Meyer. (1959) 1983. *Oedipus and Job in West African religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon.

———. 1997. *Ethics, subjectivity, and truth: Essential works of Foucault 1954–1980*. Vol. 1. Edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: New Press.

———. 2005. *The hermeneutics of the subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Picador.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. (1960) 1985. *Truth and method*. New York: Seabury.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973a. "Ideology as a cultural system." In *The interpretation of cultures*, 193–233. New York: Basic Books.

———. 1973b. "The growth of culture and the evolution of mind." In *The interpretation of cultures*, 55–83. New York: Basic Books.

———. 1973c. "Religion as a cultural system." In *The interpretation of cultures*, 87–125. New York: Basic Books.

_____1973d. *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

_____1973e. "Thick Description." In *The interpretation of cultures*, 3–30. New York: Basic Books.

Heidegger, Martin. 1993. "On the essence of truth." In *Martin Heidegger: Basic writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell and translated by John Sallis, 115–38. San Francisco: Harper.

———. (1927) 1996. *Being and time*, 7th ed. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Heintz, Monica, ed. 2009. *The anthropology of moralities*. New York: Berghahn.

Hirschkind, Charles. 2006. *The ethical soundscape: Cassette sermons and Islamic counter-publics in Egypt*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hollan, Douglas, and Jason Throop, eds. 2011. *The anthropology of empathy: Experiencing the lives of others in Pacific societies*. New York: Berghahn.

Jackson, Michael D. 1995. *At home in the world*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

———. 1996. *Things as they are: New directions in phenomenological anthropology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

———. 2007. *Excursions*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

———. 2012. *Between one and another*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

James, William. (1909) 1979. *The meaning of truth, a sequel to "Pragmatism."* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jay, Martin. 2005. *Songs of experience: Modern American and European variations on a universal theme.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Keane, Webb. 2010. "Minds, surfaces, and reasons in the anthropology of ethics." In *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language, and action*, 64–83. New York: Fordham University Press.

Kierkegaard, Søren. 2001. *The Kierkegaard reader.* Edited by J. Chamberlain and J. Rée. Oxford: Blackwell.

Kleinman, Arthur. 2006. *What really matters: Living a moral life amidst uncertainty and Danger.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kluckhohn, Clyde. 1951. "Values and value-orientations in the theory of action." In *Towards a general theory of action*, edited by Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils, 388–433. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kresse, Kai. 2007. *Philosophising in Mombasa.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Kwon, Heonik. 2008. *Ghosts of war in Vietnam.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Laidlaw, James. 1995. *Riches and renunciation: Religion, economy, and society among the Jains.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

———. 2010. "Agency and responsibility: Perhaps you can have too much of a good thing." In *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language, and action*, edited by Michael Lambek, 143–64. New York: Fordham University Press.

———. 2014a. *The subject of virtue: An anthropology of ethics and freedom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 2014b. "Response to Hau Book Symposium on '*The subject of virtue*.'" *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (1): 497–506.

Lambek, Michael. 1993. "The past imperfect: Remembering as moral practice." In *Tense past: Cultural essays in trauma and memory*, edited by Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, 235–54. New York. Routledge.

———. 2002. *The weight of the past: Living with history in Mahajanga, Madagascar.* New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.

———. 2003. "Rheumatic irony: Questions of agency and self-deception as refracted through the art of living with spirits." In *Illness and irony: On the ambiguity of suffering in culture*, edited by Michael Lambek and Paul Antze, 40–59. New York: Berghahn Books.

———. 2010a. "Toward an ethics of the act." In *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language, and action*, edited by Michael Lambek, 39–63. New York: Fordham University Press.

———, ed. 2010b. *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language, and action*. New York: Fordham University Press.

———. 2013. "The continuous and discontinuous person: Two dimensions of ethical life." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19: 837–58.

———. 2014. "The interpretation of lives or life as interpretation: Cohabiting with spirits in the Malagasy World." *American Ethnologist* 41 (3): 491–503.

———. 2015a. "On the immanence of the ethical: A response to Michael Lempert." *Anthropological Theory* 15 (2): 128–32.

———. 2015b. *The ethical condition: Essays on action, person, and value*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lambek, Michael, and Paul Antze, eds. 2003. *Illness and irony: On the ambiguity of suffering in culture*. New York: Berghahn.

Lear, Jonathan. 2003. *Therapeutic action: An Earnest Plea for Irony*. New York: Other Press.

———. 2006. *Radical hope: Ethics in the face of cultural destruction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lempert, Michael. 2013. "No ordinary ethics." *Anthropological Theory* 13 (4): 370–93.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1984. *After virtue: A study in moral theory*, 2nd ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Macpherson, C. B. 1962. *The political theory of possessive individualism*. London: Oxford University Press.

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

———. 2015. "Religious freedom, minority rights, and geopolitics." In *The politics of religious freedom*, edited by Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood, and Peter G. Danchin, 101–5. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Marx, Karl. (1852) 1969. *The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers.

Mattingly, Cheryl. 2012. "Two virtue ethics and the anthropology of morality." *Anthropological Theory* 12 (2): 161–84.

———. 2014. *Moral laboratories: Family peril and the struggle for a good life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mead, George Herbert. (1934) 1962. *Mind, self, and society*. Edited by Charles W. Morris. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Muehlebach, Andrea. 2012. *The moral neoliberal: Welfare and citizenship in Italy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nehamas, Alexander. 1998. *The art of living*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1967. *On the genealogy of morals*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books.

Parish, Steven. 1994. *Moral knowing in a Hindu sacred city*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Radin, Paul. 1957. *Primitive man as philosopher*. New York: Dover.

Rappaport, Roy. 1999. *Ritual and religion*, *in the making of humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Robbins, Joel. 2004. *Becoming sinners: Christianity and moral torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rogers, Douglas. 2009. *The old faith and the Russian land: A historical ethnography of ethics in the Urals*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Rorty, Richard. 1979. *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rosaldo, Michelle. 1980. *Knowledge and passion: Ilongot notions of self and social life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1943) 1956. *Being and nothingness*. Translated by H. E. Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library.

Stafford, Charles. 2013. *Ordinary ethics in China*. London: Bloomsbury, LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology 79.

Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Throop, Jason. 2010. *Suffering and sentiment: Exploring the vicissitudes of experience and pain in Yap*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Waldenfels, Bernhard. 2011. *Phenomenology of the alien*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Weber, Max. (1917) 1946. "Science as vocation." In *From Max Weber*, translated and edited by Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Free Press.

———. (1930) 1992. *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. London: Routledge.

———. 1993. *The sociology of religion*. Boston: Beacon.

Weiss, Erica. 2014. *Conscientious objectors in Israel: Citizenship, sacrifice, trials of fealty*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Wentzer, Thomas Schwarz. 2014. "'I have seen Königsberg burning': Philosophical anthropology and the responsiveness of historical experience." *Anthropological Theory* 4 (1): 27–48.

Williams, Bernard. 1985. *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1967. *Zettel*. Edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright and translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. London: Basil Blackwell.

———. Forthcoming. *The mythology in our language: Remarks on Frazer's* Golden Bough. Translated by Stephan Palmié. Chicago: Hau Books.

What does ordinary ethics look like?

Veena Das

I begin this lecture with the concluding paragraph of my book *Life and words: Violence and the descent into the ordinary*, for I wish to deepen my understanding of the sense of scandal that the idea of ordinary ethics causes (rightly) and to ask how might I give solace to the anxiety created by the notion that we might detect ethical living within the recesses of everyday life?

> My sense of indebtedness to the work of Cavell in these matters comes from a confidence that perhaps Manjit did not utter anything that we would recognize as philosophical in the kind of environments in which philosophy is done . . . but Cavell's work shows us that there is no real distance between the spiritual exercises she undertakes in her world and the spiritual exercises we can see in every word he has ever written. To hold these types of words together and to sense the connection of these lives has been my anthropological kind of devotion to the world. (Das 2007: 221)

In a later essay (Das 2012) I called my juxtaposition of the term "spiritual exercises"—derived from Pierre Hadot—with the work of repair and containment of violence that Manjit performed in her everyday life as "scandalous." As I noted in that essay, the reference to "spiritual exercises" in Hadot (1995, 2009) was to scaling moral heights, whereas I was trying to wrest the very expression

away from the profundity of philosophy to the small disciplines that ordinary people perform in their everyday life to hold life together as the "natural" expression of ethics.

But before I proceed any further, I should perhaps explain the significance of such names as Manjit in the previous paragraph and others, such as Asha and Billu, who will appear later in the text. These are figures whose singularity in my texts makes them both flesh-and-blood creatures and figures of thought. Rather than introducing each in the kind of detail that I evoked in my earlier texts I invite the reader to trust me and take them as already familiar figures (see Das 2007, 2015a) who helped me to understand the following critical points. Asha and Manjit are women I described as living with poisonous knowledge of how relations were corroded and how the familiar took on an uncanny character after the terrible violence of the Partition of India in 1947. Listening to their words over a long period of time made me see that rendering the violence as "traumatic memory" would touch on a very different register than the notion of "poisonous knowledge." While in both cases there is the concept of the past that is reanimated in the present, poisonous knowledge brings the past forward as embodied knowledge and not through the return of the repressed. I used the idea of descent into the ordinary—evoking descent both as a picture of anthropological thought and as a mode of being in the world. Shane Vogel does a perceptive reading of the project: "Here we find not narratives of transcendence or heroism, nor scenes of spectacular horror and violence, nor remystification of the event as the inassimilable, but the quotidian and mundane views that event unfolds" (2009: 255). The everyday, then, is taut with moments of world-making and world-annihilating encounters that could unfold in a few seconds or over the course of a life. The singular figures who dot the discussion in this lecture are those who helped me forge a method of critical patience as a mode of doing ethnography that was commensurate with the picture of thought as a movement of descent. While the everyday continues to be treated as the residual category of routine and repetition punctuated by the disruptions of the event in much anthropological writing, I believe we may be at the cusp of a change as the full extent of how the apparatus generated by pictures of planetary extinction seeps into our consciousness making the everyday appear as bristling with dangers rather than as a place of security and comfort (Masco 2014).

This lecture is written in the spirit of someone who is taking a few more steps to understand what a movement of descent into the everyday might mean for rendering ethical life as "ordinary." I do not aim to provide either a survey

of the field or to contest other ways of thinking of ethics. Instead, what I want to ask is "what is it that blocks our ability to see the everyday and hence to imagine the ethical as inhering in the quotidian rather than standing out and announcing its presence though dramatic enactments of moral breakdown or heroic achievement"?

My analytical impulse in this lecture is to engage the writings of those with whom I am in overall sympathy for their attention to the ordinary but who, following the fifth-century Buddhist philosopher, Buddhaghosa, I might call "near enemies" (*aasana paccathika*)—as distinct from distant enemies (*duura-paccathika*)—being mindful that the reference is to near enmity of concepts and not of people (see Boleyn–Fitzgerald 2003; Sponberg 2001).[1] What are the subtle differences that surface in the scholarly work of those committed to the idea of ordinary ethics and everyday life as a source of ethics (as my fellow authors) but who might differ, for instance, in the weight they place on habit versus judgment, or in how the idea of the human emerges (or not) in relation to cultural differences? These differences have consequences for our understanding of ethics as ordinary and for the project of ethnography itself, as I hope to show. It is also the case that our reflections on ethics respond to the problems we have encountered in the world. Some, like Webb Keane (2015), might be moved by the desire to make anthropology a partner in a dialogue with other disciplinary practices such as those of neurosciences. Others, like Didier Fassin, might be moved by the need to determine the balance between contemplation and action. And yet others, like Michael Lambek, might be interested in working out how ethics might be treated as intrinsic to life. My own concerns stem from existential moments I encountered in the field that made me ask repeatedly, how can ordinary, everyday acts stand up to the horrors of ethnic, sectarian, sexual violence and at the same time be capable of morphing into these very acts of violence? Can we even speak of ethics in a world that seems to be so corroded by the circulation of hate? How can we make our own expressions "just" or "right" when so many ethical pronouncements that are made in the public domain seem to be either hollow or plain dissimulations in which the gap between words and deeds is so large you could drive a horse carriage between them? I make no excuses for the fact that my devotion to understanding better the humble, the quotidian, the everyday, comes from these existential questions—my

---

1. I have used phonetic spellings rather than diacritical marks as a way of making words in Indian languages easier to read for those not trained in these languages.

quest is not necessarily to find answers that will settle these issues once and for all, but to simply find a way of taking some more steps in the company of those with whom I find it stimulating to engage in *gyan charcha*—the genre through which people sat around wondering what different life a story could lead.

Let me then first lay out the issues relating to the conjunction of the terms ordinary and ethics that I aim to address and that are grouped around the following five clusters of inquiry. I hope to make a case for retaining some indeterminacy and looseness of connections among these clusters as a mode of argumentation, which is particularly suited to the questions at hand.

First, what gives concepts life? Otherwise stated, is there a harmony between the moral vocabularies we use and the worlds we live in?

Second, what are the implications of thinking of moral and ethical life, through the lens of the ordinary?

Third, how is everyday life made to appear given that it is difficult to see that which is before our eyes? How is the temporal structure of potential, actual, and eventual, implicated in our imagination of the everyday?

Fourth, how do we understand the modality of being-with-others as expressed in such unremarkable everyday features as the triadic structure of the grammatical person and number?

Finally, what does it mean to think of ethics as an expression of life taken as a whole rather than to privilege dramatic moments of breakdown or ethical dilemmas as the occasions for ethical reflection? How do we understand the working out of such moments in the domestic and daily contexts?

The connecting arc on which these clusters of inquiry might be arranged is simply that of asking what conceptual, methodological, theoretical work must we do to make ethical life in the everyday visible? How might we remove the air of obviousness with which the everyday is approached in much anthropological writing?

ALIGNING OUR CONCEPTS WITH OUR LIVES; OR WHAT GIVES CONCEPTS LIFE?

At a 2013 GDAT debate (the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory) on the motion, "There is no such thing as the good" (see Mair and Venkatesan 2015), I opened the discussion in support of the motion with the following words:

> At the outset I wish to state clearly that the debate, as I see it, is not about the metaphysical question of whether something like "the good" exists. We have already managed to perform the magical tricks of conjuring lots of things in anthropology—nature, humanity, society—and then making them disappear. Let us then leave questions about existence to theologians and metaphysicians—and, instead, ask what kinds of discursive regimes are enabled when we name something as "the good," a value that is made to stand apart from the flux and flow of everyday life and bestowed with a thing like quality. My colleague Hayder Al-Mohammad and I will show that in supporting this motion we are contesting precisely the temptation to separate out and name what is a normal stance people take in their attentiveness toward each other, and then to perform a baptism that will create boundaries around "the good" arrogating to anthropology the right to judge the behavior of others, good intentions not withstanding. (Das 2015b: 4)

Right after the remarks by the chair at the conclusion of the debate, Jonathan Mair asked what was probably on the minds of many members of the audience: "I wonder if all of you could outline briefly, in relation to the arguments you made in your respective speeches, how would you define the good?" (see Mair and Venkatesan 2015: 26).

Since the urge to think of concepts as somehow bounded through definitions is a common temptation in our thinking and our pedagogy, as if we would fall into a vertigo if we (we, the anthropologists, we the kind of persons who care about these things) did not know in advance what the boundaries of a concept, such as the good, or the bad, or the ethical, or the moral, are—it might be useful here to first lay out the ways we might think differently of concepts in general. With regard to our concerns with ordinary ethics, it is particularly salient to think of (a) what it is to live with concepts, and (b) what does it mean to say that concepts have life.

To live with concepts

I take some help from Ludwig Wittgenstein in formulating the issues here by first thinking of concepts as belonging to the normal way in which we go about our everyday life and then thinking of what gives them life.[2] In explaining the

---

2. I should clarify here that many anthropologists use words that have a Wittgensteinian ring—words like ordinary, language, practices, agreement—without quite comprehending either the depth of his discussion or paying attention to the play

significance of the "normal case" Wittgenstein clarifies his remark in paragraph 142 *of Philosophical investigations* by adding as an aside, "What we have to mention in order to explain the significance, I mean the importance, of a concept, are often extremely general facts of nature; such facts as are hardly ever mentioned because of their great generality" (Wittgenstein 1968: 56). Paragraph 142 to which this note is appended speaks of the characteristic expressions of pain, fear, or joy as well as such quotidian procedures as putting the lump of cheese on the balance and fixing its price by the turn of the scale as examples of concepts. The general facts of nature here are that lumps of cheese do not grow or shrink for no obvious reason and hence we can assume that this procedure that the shop owner follows forms the natural background of our lives—it does not stand in need of justification. It is so with characteristic cries of pain—as I have stated in my earlier work, my response to the expression of your pain is not about cognitive or intellectual certainty but about a feeling of rightness in the response elicited—the response reveals what stakes I have in our lives together (Das 2007).

Yet in intellectual discussions we often feel impelled to try to fix the boundaries of concepts—e.g., how do I know if you are really in pain or just feigning it? How much pain? (This might be the right question for my surgeon to ask me but not for my lover, or my mother, when they see my tearful face.) Does the concept of pain have fixed boundaries? Is the ability to feign pain part of

---

of different voices, especially in his later texts. Thus Wittgenstein uses the idea of the ordinary but that has little to do with the ordinary language philosophy of the Oxford School; similarly the idea of agreement in Wittgenstein is not agreement in opinion but agreement in form of life—concepts do not stand in a transcendental relation to the forms of life but are grown within these. Sandra Laugier (2011, 2013) gives the clearest exposition of how the notion that we as humans have a life *in* language touches on a very different register of such terms as agreement than the idea that language is external to the subject and that we use it as an object, among others. Jarrett Zigon (2014: 748), for instance, states, "With its roots in the writings of Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin, and today most famously advocated by Stanley Cavell, ordinary language philosophy claims that philosophical problems are in fact linguistic problems." But in fact, Wittgenstein's philosophy of language compels an inquiry into the ways forms are stitched to life and thus remake our notions of what is ordinary, what is extraordinary, what is convention and how our expressions and actions are always in danger of falling apart (see also Das and Han 2015)—the assumption that these issues are "linguistic problems" on the model of linguistics is completely off the mark from my point of view and misses the very structure of *Philosophical investigations* and its tone (see also Travis 2006).

the concept of pain? Could vagueness be the normal characteristic of concepts when we take them out of highly controlled text book situations—e.g., let x be a random binomial variable with . . . ?

Why are these examples important for thinking of ethics? Speaking about the vagueness of concepts, R. M. Sainsbury (2002) argues that the assumption that concepts, like sets, have sharp boundaries fails us precisely at the moment when moral issues are at stake. In some debates about abortion, for instance, he says, one can feel a real sense of shock at the realization that there is no set of persons with close boundaries: the concept person is vague at just that relevant point (as it is with regard to the question of whether corporations are persons within the purview of the first amendment of the US Constitution). In his words, "The difficulty is that moral concepts are often boundary-drawing (especially so the more naïve the morality), and legal concepts typically have to be. Trying to tie the application of a boundary-drawing concept (as who may legitimately be aborted is supposed to be) with a boundary-less one like who is a person poses a problem which is simply not solvable in the straightforward terms in which it is often posed"(Sainsbury 2002: 72).

Wittgenstein's exhortation that we think of concepts as normally having blurred edges (paragraph 71) illustrates what blurred edges might mean through the performance of a very ordinary act such as pointing to a spot. Taking the voice of Frege as his critic, Wittgenstein asks "But is a blurred concept a concept at all?" He then proceeds with this example: "Frege compares a concept to an area and says that an area with vague boundaries cannot be called an area at all. This presumably means that we cannot do anything with it.—But is it senseless to say, "Stand roughly there'—Suppose I was standing with someone at the city square and said that. As I say it, I do not draw any kind of boundary at all but perhaps point with my hand—as if I were indicating a particular spot."

We notice that the concept of area in this example is made to appear through the normal activities of embodied beings who have hands and fingers and can point to a spot to say "stand here," "stand there"—the concept of a boundary ceases to be of interest for it serves no real need here. (This is why though both Wittgenstein and Frege speak of unfolding of a concept, each has a different picture of what that entails.) Moving ahead to pages 203 and 204 of *Philosophical investigations*, we find the compelling idea that when we think of concepts as procedures or characteristic expressions we live with or that grow out of life, we don't *choose* them through a set of possibilities—rather as Wittgenstein says,

a concept forces itself upon us. When shown a line drawing of a rudimentary face and asked what you see, the answer, "this is a face," is given at once, not treated as one among several possibilities. Even if one thinks of the picture the first time as this and then as that, it is difficult, Wittgenstein says, to think of it as a question of fixing the concept. Of course one might say that in a different context, say, you are examining a patient with a neurological disorder in which your patient does not recognize faces—then, one might say that the need for defining the boundaries of a concept do arise. Concepts in this formulation are not embodied in words, or not in words alone, but might either be embodied in any kind of linguistic equipment (words, sentences, texts) or in the background of things that make ordinary procedures through which life with the other is lived, possible. I argue thus it is the internal relation that language as a whole (including gestures and physiognomy of words) bears to the world that provides the soil from which concepts are grown. This means that instead of thinking of a specialized vocabulary that draws boundaries around the notion of the moral or the ethical—all the grids on which moral theory is seen to move—it might be important to think of the ways in which ethics is embedded in what Wittgenstein called the whirl of organism.[3] Sometimes ethical moments may come up in intensified forms when, for instance, someone impulsively reaches out to pull a stranger away from a dangerous situation she has failed to notice, such as a car speeding by; at other times someone might give shelter to an endangered person in a riot or in other scenes of violence without being able to say why he or she did it. Explanations might be put on these acts later—but at that point the course of action might simply force itself on one similar to the way a concept forces itself on us in Wittgenstein's rendering.

A further thought of Wittgenstein that also holds an important place in Stanley Cavell's (1979) arguments about our life in language is that we learn to project words in new situations and in so doing we not only learn the nuances

---

3.   Reflecting on what picture of thought animates anthropological work, Anand Pandian (2015) offers a remarkable story of the return of a king to a parched land, the role that the anthropologist plays in this return, and the manner in which a space for this event has already been made in the ongoing stories told by the villagers to which the anthropologist simply lends his body and his labor, so to say. "These stories, in other words, may indeed be interpreted as reflections of a particular way of thinking in this part of the world, in their shared grammar of words and relations. But they may also be taken to present the nature and capacities of a mode of thinking in relation to he vicissitudes of ordinary life. We find here a picture of thought as an event among the events of the world" (Pandian 2014: 271).

of our language but also the nuances of the world. Showing how one comes to know what a concept is, Wittgenstein says, "One gives examples and intends them to be taken in a particular way" but then adds the caution that it would be a serious misinterpretation to assume that one is supposed to see in these examples a common thing that eluded the speaker. The task, he says, is to show by means of examples how one is to go on with the concept: "Here giving examples is not an *indirect* means for explaining—in default of a better one. For any general definition can be misunderstood too. The point is that *this* is how we play the game [I mean the language game with the word game]" (Wittgenstein 1968 paragraph 71).

Thus, for Wittgenstein, concepts acquire life in the give-and-take of ordinary life.[4] He proposes that, "what one means by 'thought' is that which is *alive* in the sentence; that a sentence would be a mere sequence of sounds or written shapes without this quality of life that animates it" (Wittgenstein 1967: paragraph 143). In the same paragraph, an analogy between circulation of words and circulation of money suggests that words that have gone dead are like paper money that cannot be used in the way in which real money can be used because there is no one to receive these words or these coins.[5] Independent of someone else's ability and willingness to receive words as meaningful when they are thus projected in new contexts, they might have meaning but they do not have life.[6]

---

4.   As Raimond Gaita (1990) reminds us, the most fundamental point of Wittgenstein's legacy is that we cannot purify our concepts of their embeddings in human life without being left with only a shadow play of the grammar of serious judgment.

5.   Consider the resonance in Bhrigupati Singh's (2014: 183; 2015) description of the conceptual work that the concept of *lebo-debo* (give and take) or *mann* (desire/weight) performs in the speech genre of *gyan charcha* (discussion relating to knowledge) in the everyday contestations with Bansi Maharaj, a colorful figure of a holy man, equally revered and equally suspected as a fraud in Shahbad, the site of Singh's fieldwork.

6.   See also Veena Das (2014a: 285) for a discussion of the way projection finds its limit. Thus it is appropriate to project the verb "feed" from feeding the child to feeding the meter to feeding someone's pride, but not feeding someone's love, since love is not seen as the kind of emotion that grows through flattery. Similarly the appropriateness or rightness of a word in a particular context is not simply a matter of social convention. I might be able to say "I mistakenly stepped on the child" but as Austin reminded us, we do not normally say, "I inadvertently stepped on the child" for that is not the way human adult bodies are seen as aligned to children's bodies. For a discussion of the theme of the mutual absorption of the natural and the social into each other as a characteristic of everyday life, see Han and Das (2015).

A discussion of ethical life would entail then, not only what words like good or bad mean but also what *we*—the ones who use them—mean by these words and how we show that they matter. When, for instance, I promise to take my child for an ice cream in the evening when I return from work but then tell her that I do not have the time today but that I promise to do so tomorrow, but tomorrow I come up with an urgent deadline, and so must yet postpone the event—I teach her not only the meaning of the word promise but also what it is to promise, how trustworthy is my word, how much she matters to me. In Cavell's thoughtful rendering of this kind of scene of learning, we end up paying far too much attention to the formal evocation of words like "I promise"—say in signing a contract—and not enough attention to the question of how these dispersed forms of action teach us what the moral force of a concept such as a promise is (Cavell 1979: 175).

I ask the reader to bear with me a little longer before I show the relevance of this discussion for understanding the project of delineating what we might mean by ethical or moral ways of living. Paragraph 97 in *Philosophical investigations* is crucial for understanding how concepts are embedded in everyday life. It goes as follows:

> We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound, essential, about our investigation, resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, proof, truth, experience, and so on. This order is a super-order between—so to speak—super concepts, whereas, of course if the words "language," "experience," "world" have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table," "lamp," "door." (Wittgenstein 1968: paragraph 97)

If then concepts have vitality this must be drawn from the life they participate in and not from the desire for abstract reasoning alone (there are cases in which abstraction might be at stake within a form of life but this is to be shown in each case). We are asked to step aside from our usual procedures of finding words (or propositions) that are weighty enough to be treated as "super concepts" and then like a net thrown into the swirling waters of life to catch whatever fish we can. Instead, the ethnographic task is to show, in what way concepts of the moral or ethical emerge in life just as the concept of chair might emerge only in relation to new body techniques of sitting, the valuation of the above and the below (sitting on the chair versus sitting on the floor) as

in societies with masters and servants, and the whole apparatus for producing and selling of chairs.[7]

I can see two objections that might immediately be raised. The first is that anthropologists follow their informants and the words they choose to privilege are those that have salience in the societies they study—*dharma,* face, *mandala,* sovereignty, charity, goodness, sacrifice, for instance. It would be argued that treating these words as surveyable is what provides a clue to what is the locus of value in a particular society. Thus the kinds of logical procedures I critique following Wittgenstein are, some will argue, precisely not the way concepts are traced in ethnographic work. Second, it might be argued that thought emerges in moments when we step away from the thick of experience (Jackson 2014)— thus, it may be said that I have not distinguished sufficiently between thought and being (or transcendence of concepts versus immersion in experience). For many, thought requires concepts that transcend the particularities of everyday life for that stepping aside alone makes it possible to engage in any comparative project.[8] These are important considerations and I will attend to them here and elsewhere in the lecture. For now I note that one way to answer these objections is to show how the concern with the ethical as a kind of sensibility can be shown by disclosing concrete experiences, scenes of instruction in everyday life, as embedded in a moral imagination. Not a single word about the good or the ethical might have been uttered in these scenes of the everyday, and yet they reveal the

---

7.   A critique of reasoning through the use of super concepts does not mean that I am opposed to "scientific rationality" as one reader of this text surmised. Rather it is to argue that what form scientific reasoning will take is not unrelated to the form of life within which such procedures as calculating, measuring, writing scientific papers take place. As Wittgenstein remarked it is not accidental that mathematicians do not come to blows on the question of whether the results of a particular procedure change between morning and night. If we found a society in which scientists based their experiments on this basis we would not just say that they are wrong—we would have to ask, do they perhaps have a different idea of what is calculus?

8.   One might be reminded here of the distinction often made between emic and etic concepts that might be related to but cannot be mapped fully on the distinction between conscious and unconscious models that Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) made with regard to the study of social structure. In the former case concepts were often treated like words while in the latter case what was at stake was the demonstration of an arrangement. I hope the reason why I do not so much reject these distinctions as go around them will be clear as we proceed, but I might signal here that the idea of concepts as these emerge within a form of life shows them to be not simply intellectual tools but as criteria that make everyday life possible.

concern with life as a whole to be embodying ethical sensibilities. I take one example from Sylvain Perdigon's (2015) compelling ethnography of everyday life in the Palestinian refugee camps in Tyre, Lebanon, to illustrate this point.

During his fieldwork Perdigon was puzzled by a particular paradox. He had meticulously shown the economic strains under which families in Tyre functioned and yet when asked about the experience of poverty, people denied that that their life as a whole could be described as "poor." T., an interlocutor in the field, related a specific set of educational scenes when asked how she had grasped the meaning of poverty as a young child. Here is one scene—call it a scene of instruction—that Perdigon describes:

> She speaks of seeing her older brothers, and her mother, hardly containing emotions frightful to her while politely declining gifts of clothes, money or meat, neighbors and acquaintances would present to the family during Ramadan and the 'eid. . . . She also speaks of learning nuances of sociality and from whom, when and why it was in fact admissible to accept certain kinds of goods offered in the appropriate, subdued manner. For example, it was allowable to receive even second-hand clothes from Husayn, the best friend of her older brother who hailed from the more prosperous camp of Nahr al-Bared in the North, and who was intimate enough to sleep in their house while in Beirut. T. was definitely not as sure of what to do regarding the playful routine of another friend of the boys who on his regular visits to their house would place a coin behind her ear and pretend that the coin was calling her ("T.! Take me, take me!")—up to this day she remembers anxiously interrogating the faces of her mother and older siblings for a cue that was not forthcoming.

Perdigon places these delicate and nuanced scenes of instruction in the general response refugee families gave to questions about poverty by insisting, "for us it is otherwise." This refusal of the "I, Poor" locution thwarts the system of reference on which poverty might only be spoken within the overarching discourses of humanitarian crises or through claims over the state for welfare provisions (Fassin 2012; Han 2012). In Perdigon's words:

> Indeed, their refusal to say "I, poor" seems to stymie the possibility of social justice itself, *if*, that is, we take social justice to require acquiescence to a prior operation whereby one is assigned a location and role relative to a field of social belonging defined from elsewhere. But one can also be attentive, with Gilles

Deleuze (1997), to the radical "democratic contribution" intrinsic to a type of utterances disruptive of the "logic of presuppositions" that makes it possible for a boss to give a command and be obeyed, for a "kind friend" to offer commiseration and advice and be listened to, and even for a rebel to be recognized as such when he defies an order. For Deleuze (1997), the emergence of such a speech genre in the writings of Melville, Musil, Kafka, and others participated of a "morality of life" diagonal to the "morality of salvation and charity" and called into being a "new community, whose members are capable of trust or 'confidence,' that is, of a belief in themselves, in the world and in becoming" (88). It is not the least paradox that *sabr*, this heaven-bound patient endurance that Palestinian women and men say they find in the embodied lifeworld of refugee poverty, might also be one name for just such a belief in the world.

In interpreting such statements not as belonging to the evaluative justifications for one's behavior but as belonging to a more unspecified "morality of life," Perdigon follows Deleuze in thinking of these scenes as enacting a morality that is diagonal to a moral position premised on the promises of citizenship, or in its absence, on promises on international covenants or other such legal technologies. This morality is premised on making dispositions and habits the very substance of a moral way of living and although it can and does draw on religious vocabularies (e.g., *sabr* or endurance in the case of the residents of the refugee camps, bad *karma*s in the case of the inhabitants of the slums in Delhi I studied), these words neither provided stable and consistent moral compass free from any expression of doubt about them, nor did they function as the kind of transcendental super-concepts that Wittgenstein warned against.

The kind of scene of instruction described here, is not unique to Perdigon's ethnography, nor is it the case that dissonances around what it is to be attentive to such regard for others within such constrained circumstances do not surface. Similar descriptions can be found in Clara Han's (2012, 2014) ethnographies of the urban poor in Santiago, Chile, on catching a critical moment in the life of a neighbor and providing wordless support though a quotidian act such as offering a meal to a hungry child whose mother cannot directly ask for food. Slow erosions of such sensibilities are also part of everyday life. Thus, Diana Allan's (2013) remarkable work on refugee life alerts us to the fact that relations between generations can become distant and the political projects of yesterday might seem hollow or empty today, putting severe strains on relations between generations. Instead of tracing moral vocabularies these ethnographies

are acutely attentive to the way ethical concepts are given life and then again, how life might be drained out of these concepts by the insistence on performance of virtues (e.g., suffering with dignity, loyalty to the Palestinian project) from which the subject has become distant and dissociated. Such is the case of wives of prisoners in Gaza (as distinct from martyrs' wives) who have to constantly negotiate suspicion over their conduct as young women with sexual desires, whose husbands are away, and whose actions are closely watched by neighbors and kin for any signs of betrayal to the cause (see Buch Segal 2015, forthcoming).

At the end of this section then, I am led to conclude that an answer to Mair's question about the definition of the good cannot be given—a similar sensibility is shown in various minimal theologies—*neti, neti*, not this, not this, say the Upanishads. Instead of enumerating qualities that would define the good, the best course might be to proceed with examples as Wittgenstein's reflection on concepts urges us to do. As we shift the focus of our attention to how any concepts, including ones through which we try to catch a sense of the ethical, emerge in the give and take of life, we may shift the focus of our inquiry to ask, instead, what gives moral concepts life?[9]

The lives of the moral concepts; or the harmony between words and worlds

In a classic paper on the relation between life and concepts Cora Diamond (1988) asks what is it to lose one's concepts? She takes the concerns of Elizabeth Anscombe (1958), who argued that the notions of "moral ought" or "moral obligation" might persist as words with a kind of atmosphere that clings to them but the divine law conception of morality that was needed to give substance to these concepts had disappeared. Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) also famously argued that the language and the appearance of morality persist in the contemporary world, even though the context in which the moral notions could be significant have disappeared. For MacIntyre, whose work is rightly regarded as a particularly powerful critique of modernity, the words we had from earlier moral vocabularies are still used with conviction but because the background intelligibility conditions within which they made sense have disappeared, they

---

9. By using the term "moral concepts," I do not wish to commit to any notion that there is a separate domain of life demarcated as "moral"—rather I am taking the notion or moral as a placeholder around which a description might be organized.

do not have any content. MacIntyre's contention that the narrative unity of life that tradition produced has disappeared under modernity has had a tremendous impact on scholars who have then tried to rediscover the concept of tradition as it orients one's life toward practices such as the cultivation of piety through disciplines of the body (Mahmood 2004). The question that might be raised with regard to these attempts is the extent to which we can separate domains of "tradition" as autonomous from an overarching "modernity" that reinscribes the notion of tradition within itself. Would one say that the creation of a Muslim identity that excludes the Ahmadis in Pakistan based on copyright law is an example of the ways concepts can be meaningfully projected and hence shown to have a life as they expand the domains of tradition? Or, alternatively, is this a case where moral fictions are created to cover over the gaps between experiences and concepts we have at hand (see Khan 2012)?[10] It is no one's case that concepts could be laid over a stretch of experience or that we can come to know the real by the layering of a system of names against a system of objects. Yet the question of how to think of the harmony between our concepts and our world, each implying the other, is a pressing issue and goes beyond a listing of virtues that can be named and treated as significant concepts of a given tradition.

Consider now a different but related scene in which words from older moral vocabularies circulate in a weak sense but cannot be used with conviction because the world has changed and so we are unable to make intelligible our experiences or actions to ourselves. Diamond (1988) cites cultural critic Duke Maskell and sociologist Robert Bellah (and his coauthors) who argued for the English and North American case respectively, that the words that used to work to express the moral and political commitments of people are not in harmony with the worlds they now inhabit (see Maskell 1985; Bellah et al. 1985). In Diamond's elegant phrasing, either the moral concepts go unnamed or they are misnamed—language is not so much dead as gone to sleep.

---

10. "In harnessing the language of copyright and trademark to the Ahmadi question, it [the court] was making much more apparent that the intent of these transgressions, that is the unlicensed use of titles, texts, modes, and spaces of worship was willful deception" (Khan 2012: 1114). In other words, the Ahmadis could not call their places of worship "mosques" because that would transgress against copyright law—as if a question (i.e., is the Ahmadi claim to being Muslim a violation of Islamic principles?) could not be answered through theological reasoning by the ullama but could be answered by taking resort to copyright law.

I will return in a later section to Diamond's radical reformulation of this issue of the harmony between the moral vocabularies available to us and the textures of our worlds by a reformulation of the notion of the human (i.e., human not in the sense of the place it occupies in humanitarian discourse or the picture of the human as a given) but for now I want to ask if any discussion of ethics or morality requires us to think of what moral vision of the world we have.

Few would doubt the influence that Kantian theory has exerted on the discussion of moral principles both in philosophy and in anthropology, even when critics have faulted it for its insistence on rationality to the exclusion of emotion or its assumption of the subject as sovereign. To take but one example, in his recent magisterial study of ethics, Keane gives a definition of ethical life "to refer to those aspects of people's actions, as well as their sense of themselves and of other people [and sometimes of entities such as gods or animals] that are not in turn defined as the means to some further ends" (2015: 4).

One might ask here if giving this definition of ethical life—its emphasis on treating values as ends in themselves—presumes a particular moral picture of the world and whether it can be used as a universal definition within which variations can be fitted as local adaptations or applications. I owe my formulation of these issues to Dieter Henrich's (1992) perceptive essay on the role played by a moral image of the world in the Kantian conception of moral action. Initially, Henrich argues, it would seem that the agent and the moral principle that regulates his conduct (the masculine pronoun is taken from Henrich's discussion) seem independent of any particular conception of the world. After all, we could posit that notions of moral actions arise because the agent is seen to exercise freedom with regard to his actions regardless of any particular moral picture of the world. Freedom consists in the minimal condition that in most cases one could have acted otherwise. Further, Henrich argues, it is always possible to question oneself about why one should act in a particular way and thus to justify or to doubt the validity of any given moral claims. But this argument further implies that the agent will have beliefs about the nature and sources of his conduct. "If this is so," argues Henrich, "we can also attribute to him beliefs about the world within which he acts and tries to actualize his intentions" (1992: 4). These beliefs must be consistent with the moral agent's viewpoint and further, if there are conflicting conceptions of the world, then they must either be related in a way as to avoid anarchy and confusion—or the moral agent must be able to establish the superiority of his worldview over that of the conflicting versions.

In his further discussion Henrich (1992) shows that the underlying concept of a moral image of the world plays a key role in Kant but that the architectonics of the system undergo important changes in his thought. For our purposes the questions might be restated as follows: In a Kantian inspired morality, what are the principles by which one can effectively distinguish between the morally good and the morally bad? What would motivate a rational enlightened being to follow these principles? A problem that any moral agent would be besieged by, for Henrich as for much of theology, is the problem of the disproportionate distribution of luck and the problem of unjustified suffering in the world. For both Kant and Rousseau, this problem of theodicy made it necessary to conceive of another order different from the empirical order—which could be the order of a divine impersonal law or that created by a personal God—to redress this imbalance. In the absence of such a transcendental order, the positing of a moral order for the empirical world would seem to become an illusory one since it cannot, in itself, redress the imbalance between goodness and unjustified suffering, alluded to earlier. Without going into further details, I will simply state that while Kant's architectonics gave some place to the pursuit of happiness as the motivation for acting morally initially, this was later replaced by the notion that it is an intrinsic or primordial respect for the moral law that motivates humans to act according to moral principles. Thus moral law imposes a condition upon all our strivings for happiness—it does not ask us to abandon the hope for happiness but rather replaces happiness coming from desire for particular objects (or persons), however procured, by a more generalized happiness as available for an enlightened rational person when she acts within the bounds of the moral law. While Kant is not invested in any ontological proof for the existence of God, a unified moral image of the world seems like a constitutive condition for the intrinsic respect for moral law that Kant posits as a basis for purposeful moral action.

I am not attracted or competent to pursue the metaphysical stakes of Kant's notion of the moral image of the world and its implications for moral action. Speaking within an anthropological register, what strikes me is that we are asked to simply trust the promise of the moral law—that in the end it will give us happiness because we will be aligned in a moral sense with a world that is overall a benign one. One might ask, however, what might sustain this trust in the moral image of the world as a whole? We shall see that this picture of moral action that settles the disorders of desire by placing them into the domain of lawful pursuits is resonant with many theories of the moral (and not only in

Western philosophy) as much as it is interrogated by those whose lack of trust in a benign world and a just overall order grows concepts of the moral and the ethical that might be quite different or diagonal to this conception; or else, one might even just settle for a moderate amorality as a way of sustaining life against many odds.

One could offer many examples of how belief in an ultimate moral order has been questioned by victims of the many disasters of the twentieth century that have been documented in the social sciences and humanities. Are we then living in a world in which, as Emannuel Lévinas (1988) argued, reason has become detached from all ethics? What meaning can religiosity or human morality retain in the face of the fundamental malignancy spread across the twentieth century evidenced in the rise of Hitlerism, Stalinism, Cambodia, he asked? Lévinas then proclaimed that this (twentieth) century marks the end of theodicy and asked if we can find meaning through some other means in the face of the massive human suffering produced by the idolatry of the real, and by a reason that has run amok?

My own answer to this issue has been to turn to another way of thinking of life—what I called (as discussed earlier) a descent into the ordinary (Das 2007; see also Brandel 2015 for an understanding of descent as a picture of thought). This is not because I think the ordinary has redemptive qualities in itself—indeed one of my concerns has been to show how forms of life contain within their womb forms of death—but because I am moved by the work performed on the ordinary in what Cavell called "allowing life to be knit itself together, pair by pair" (Cavell 2007). This is a vision different from one that puts its faith in any grand projects of redemption. It compels me to turn to a register of life that I call "ordinary ethics." I offer no guarantees that ordinary ethics provides any solutions to the kind of malignancies that I noted but it describes one modality of being in the world in relation to these malignancies; as an anthropologist I feel that making the effort to describe what such as ethics entails, how the small quotidian acts stand up to the horrific, is one way I can keep fidelity with the people I have worked with over the last three decades.

THE LENS OF THE ORDINARY

As a way of taking these thoughts forward let me start with the idea of the ordinary as the kind of concept that Wittgenstein was alluding to when he

urged us (his readers) to think of concepts becoming as unremarkable as chairs, and tables, and lamps—a point we discussed earlier in the context of his critique of super-concepts. But we might then ask: where would we look for the ordinary—does the ordinary always have the *appearance* of the ordinary? There are two thoughts here that I want to pursue—first, that the distinctions that we make between the ordinary and the extraordinary are sometimes the result of what Wittgenstein called "grammatical illusions"[11] or "superstitions" (Das, forthcoming); and second, that the notion of the ordinary takes us to an important characteristic of everyday life—viz., that its very ordinariness makes it difficult for us to see what is before our eyes. Hence we need to imagine the shape that the ordinary takes in order to find it—this could be the shape of the ordinary as the domestic, or as the neighborly, or as having the rhythms of the diurnal in the form of repetition. Depending on how we conjure the everyday, the threats to the everyday will also be seen in relation to this picture of the ordinary. If, for instance, we take marriage and domesticity as providing us with the image of the ordinary, then the threats might be seen through doubts about the fidelity of the partner (e.g., in *Othello*); if we see the ordinary as habitation within a world in which we dwell in a taken-for-granted way as an animal lives in its habitat, then the threat might be seen as our existence becoming ghostly (*Hamlet*), losing that natural sense of belonging (Cavell 1987); if the everyday is seen in terms of a precarious order secured through contract between warring men (Hobbes), then the threat will appear as the sexualization of the social contract (the figure of the abducted woman as analyzed in Das 2007).[12] Framing all these pictures of the everyday is the idea that everyday is a site on which the life of the other is engaged. Another way of expressing this thought is that it is "being-with" (in actuality or in imagination) that define for us humans, a mode

---

11. Grammar here refers to "philosophical grammar" or the way criteria tell us what an object or emotion or rule is within a form of life. "Grammar tells what kind of object anything is" (Wittgenstein 1968; paragraph 373). For further elaboration, see Das (1998; Han and Das 2015).

12. See Cavell (1987) for a full discussion on how the problematic of skepticism is inherited in Shakespeare's plays—thus how literature gives expression to the problem of skepticism. I have argued that the sense of everyday as also a scene of trance and illusion comes in many forms in the anthropological literature (Das 1998, 2007, 2014a)—a theme I carry forward in this section.

of being in the world—and hence of ways in which we inhabit the social and flee from it (Al-Mohammad 2010).[13]

Grammatical illusions, superstitions, and the extraordinary

Let me turn to the first thought I mentioned—viz., that we are sometimes led to bestow or add excitement to actions that might in themselves be quite banal when seen from within a form of life, yet take on an air of something extraordinary, in need of explanation or action or judgment from outside it. Wittgenstein called the tone of voice through which these feelings are produced as "superstitions" as distinct from simple mistakes or errors. This region of the crossing of the ordinary and the extraordinary becomes quite important in our relations to others who are seen to not share our criteria of what we take to be the common sense of our lives together.[14] Following this idea, we might ask what does it mean to make a place for the other in our form of life? In turn these issues lead us to ask: Do forms of life have boundaries? And if so, what is the nature of these boundaries? What implications do these boundaries have for thinking of ordinary ethics? As I have argued in some detail elsewhere (see Han and Das 2015) Wittgenstein does not imagine that there are boundaries around a form of life that correspond to a particular culture; rather, as his example of our language being like a city that has older quarters and new suburbs shows, he

---

13. I should perhaps clarify in the light of a comment made by an anonymous reviewer that such a characterization is neither a critique of rationality nor a picture of holism. Rather, it is a picture of the social, expressed as a being-with. See the following note for further clarification.

14. I am not making the case that we are immune from such doubts about the place of the intimate other in our lives, but such doubts about those who are closest to us and yet might one day show themselves to be alien take a different form. I take Heidegger's unwieldy term Dasein to refer to the fact that the form our existence might take is not given in advance and a word like the human might lead to the false notion that we are already satisfied in our knowledge of what humanity is. I hope that it will be clear that for the anthropologist, the "other" is not a theological, abstract term but encompasses different forms of otherness that include acknowledging the existence of the concrete other in one's life. How these issues of the other imagined as wholly other, or one who is my neighbor, or even one who could be me, intersect with each other in imagination and in actuality is where questions of ethics, morality, and politics emerge for the anthropologist (see Das 2014b).

sees the forms of life as extending or contracting in part by the manner in which humans and nonhumans act on the world.

In several places in his *Remarks on Frazer's* Golden Bough, Wittgenstein (1987) urges us to turn our glance from the primitive to ourselves when we read about the feelings of dread that the traces of fire festivals are said to evoke in us. Wittgenstein asks: was Frazer talking about the primitive men and their practices or about himself? Would the excitement attributed to the "primitive mind" disappear if we were to see the connections between our forms of life and those that he describes for the "primitive" or the savage man? Consider the opening passages of *The golden bough* in which Frazer sets the scene:

> Who does not know Turner's picture of the Golden Bough? The scene, suffused with the golden glow of imagination in which the divine mind of Turner steeped and transfigured even the fairest natural landscape, is a dream-like vision of the little woodland lake of Nemi—"Diana's Mirror," as it was called by the ancients. No one who has seen that calm water, lapped in a green hollow of the Alban hills, can ever forget it. The two characteristic Italian villages which slumber on its banks, and the equally Italian palace whose terraced gardens descend steeply to the lake, hardly break the stillness and even the solitariness of the scene. Diana herself might still linger by this lonely shore, still haunt these woodlands wild. In antiquity this sylvan landscape was the scene of a strange and recurring tragedy. In order to understand it aright we must try to form in our minds an accurate picture of the place where it happened; for, as we shall see later on, a subtle link subsisted between the natural beauty of the spot and the dark crimes which under the mask of religion were often perpetrated here, crimes which after the lapse of so many ages still lend a touch of melancholy to those quiet woods and waters, like a chill breath of autumn on one those bright September days "while not a leaf seems faded." (Frazer 1922: 1)

How is the extraordinariness of the landscape and our feelings that the calm waters and the green hollows of the Alban hills are suffused by the half remembered "dark crimes" committed under the "mask of religion" created here? How has the ordinariness of the landscape been bestowed with such extraordinary qualities as a chill breath of autumn on a bright September day?

Here is how Wittgenstein thinks how the feeling of some dreadful past is evoked. The second remark from his *Remarks on Frazer's* Golden Bough tries to take away the excitement that has been falsely added: "When Frazer begins

by telling us the story of the King of the Woods at Nemi, he does so in a tone that shows that something strange and terrible is happening here. However, the question 'why is this happening,' is essentially answered by just this [mode of exposition]: because it is terrible. In other words, it is what appears to us a terrible, impressive, horrible, tragic, etc. that gave birth to this event [or process]" (Wittgenstein 1987: remark 2).

The connections that Wittgenstein urges us to see are between the feeling that something terrible has happened here, and the *tone* that Frazer uses to describe it.[15] The tone of excitement obscures from view that words like ghosts and spirits and souls through which the feeling of dread and the uncanniness of primitive rituals is created are part of our normal English vocabulary and that such words at hand create the possibility of mutual translatability. Not only is this true of words but also of gestures. In kissing the picture of our beloved, or assuming that confessing a sin might absolve us from its consequences in the eyes of God, we are not picturing the beloved being there in the picture or our sins being dragged out of us physically—so why would we attribute such beliefs to the primitive man or his performance of rituals of the fire festivals? "Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of a loved one. This is *obviously not* based on a belief that it will have a definite effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at some satisfaction, and does achieve it, too. Or rather, it does not *aim* at anything; we act in this way and then feel satisfied" (Wittgenstein 1987: remark 9).

What I take from this remark is that the familiar word "ghost" gestures to the fact that an understanding derived from the common background of our lives as humans is implicated in the description of "savage" customs. The fact that Frazer can use such words at hand as "ghosts" and "shades" connects our lives to that of the so-called savages—their customs can be imagined within our form of life as a "human" form of life. If, on the other hand, someone had reported that the savage belief is that their own heads simply fall off the body when they kill an enemy (and are put back when the need arises) we would not know how to relate to such a description and would consider that we were, perhaps, not of

---

15. One might compare the discord created between sound and image through their juxtaposition in cinematic experience (Dale 1965) and the manner in which it can create a sense of impending danger though the image in itself might carry no such suggestion.

the same flesh, or that their ideas of what are heads and where they belong in the body are perhaps in need of a completely different description.

 We now come to the heart of the matter, which is this: granted that some customs or habits or ritual actions performed by the "other" will seem strange or even sinister, could one take away this feeling of something being completely alien to us by imagining the possibility that these connect with things we do habitually? Would that take away the false excitement that Frazer has added to these customs or procedures as somehow violating the sense of what is natural to the human in one's own corner of the world? There are many places in *Philosophical investigations* where we learn what it means to think of harmony between thought and world—I take a leap from that to say that I can see a path toward imagining that creating a space of possibility for the other is itself a mode of living ethically. In paragraph 448 of *Philosophical investigations* Wittgenstein talks about the sentence, "I have no pain in my arm," to ask, in what sense does my present painless state *contain* the possibility of pain? And now we can understand the importance Wittgenstein attributes to the fact that Frazer uses words like ghost or shade—words that already have a home in our language and thus enable us to see the connections between us and an "other" however far we might be in terms of social conventions because a space of possibility has been prepared through which we can project bits and pieces of our life (or my life in a particular corner of humanity I inhabit) to include some aspects of the life of the other.

Two ethnographic examples

I am extending what is a very precious thought in Wittgenstein—viz. how might we bring harmony between our words and our worlds given that truth is not a matter of fitting propositions to reality as if they were made for each other (as gloves are made for hands)? If we picture the everyday as the site where I engage the life of the other with all its threats and possibilities, what purchase does the idea of harmony between language and world have? How does ordinary ethics and its denial look within this picture of the everyday?

 I first take an ethnographic scene in which the existence of the other is seen as a threat to the survival of one's own way of life and trace how the desire for the psychic annihilation of the other is expressed as a temptation to escape the everyday. I contrast this with a second scene in which a possibility for newness is created by taking a stance in which a discourse, somewhat foreign to the

prevailing one, is absorbed by the metaphor of "overhearing," suggesting that even if one is not a direct addressee of the speech emanating from an elsewhere, could one still participate in it? I hope to make the examples work not to show commonalities between the examples given in my previous discussion of Wittgenstein's remarks on Frazer and the examples I offer but to demonstrate the force of Wittgenstein's notion that examples help us to see how to go on—here, to go on with the question of how to think of ordinary ethics as engaging the life of the other. Said otherwise, I am trying to release the potential contained in Wittgenstein's critique of Frazer to think of the moral issues that contemporary conditions of living with the other raise.

Fairness and experiencing the other as a threat

In her marvelous book on fairness, class, and belonging in cotemporary England, Katherine Smith (2012) tracks the sense of being excluded, discriminated against, and even disenfranchised among English working class members and how these feelings come to be expressed in relation to their imagination of what Muslim immigrants are able to "extract" from the government.[16] Although Smith is much more interested in seeing how her informants' notions of fairness relate to the discussion of fairness in Rawls and Habermas, her ethnographic intimacy with the people she talked to allows one to see how the expressions they use might be interpreted in the light of the previous discussion of how a space of possibility might be created or denied and its implications for thinking of our lives with the other.

Smith's working class respondents in Halleigh (in the vicinity of Manchester, UK) constantly evoked such expressions as "its not fair," "there is no free speech" in relation to the presence of Muslims in Britain and in their own local communities. Sometimes these expressions were used to express what they felt was preferential treatment given to the Muslims in such matters as bending institutional rules to accommodate their religious beliefs and at other times around an

---

16. See also Das (2001) and Hage (1998) for a discussion on how violence against the other might be shot through with an experience of vulnerability of one's own life. Such folding of contradictory affects into each other alert us to the trance-like character of the everyday variously characterized, as *méconnaissance* (Bourdieu 1990), uncanniness (Cavell 1988), or the creation of a subjunctive reality that holds out the hope that life could become other than it is (Seligman et al. 2008; Puett 2014).

unease with the veiling of the face, or not being able to share a sense of humor. On the question of veiling, one informant expressed his unease in the following way: "When we see someone and we are speaking to them, we like to see their faces. It's our way of life here. But they don't respect that. We just have to respect them in our country" (Smith 2012: 94).

Smith describes a more dramatic form of "protest" when Aaron, a young man who wanted to assert his right to free speech, began to wear a balaclava every Sunday to various local pubs on the pretext that it was his "religion." When asked by the landlords to either remove the balaclava or leave, he would shout, "This is my religion!" When asked why he was doing this, Aaron replied that he was carrying on a single-person protest against the fact that Jack Straw, Member of Parliament, had felt compelled to offer a public apology for remarks made when he was Home Secretary in 2006 pertaining to the discomfort he felt when talking to Muslim women who were wearing a *niqab*. Straw had asked them to remove it if they wanted to speak to him or else to choose to speak to a female member of his staff instead of him. In Aaron's words:

> I put on a balaclava. I thought, right, I'm going to make a statement. You know, what if I wore a balaclava on a Sunday. . . . It is my religion. . . . I have known the landlords in these pubs for years, but they have all come up to me and they would say, ". . . you've got to leave unless you want to take that off." I told them, "I'm not taking this off. It's my right to wear this. Its my religion." (Smith 2012: 93–94)

There are other instances Smith describes where informants, both male and female, felt that their sense of what is funny, when is something a joke or when is it an insult, is not shared with the Muslim migrants. Called "having a barter," the insults, quick-witted responses, and cultivating a disposition of "being not too sensitive" or "not taking it personally" were forms through which dyadic relations were maintained and exhibited in this working class neighborhood. As one of the informants explained, "It isn't really insults. Well, it is, but we just like to have a laugh. We just wind each other up (2012: 114–15)?"

We could call the remarks made of the importance of "seeing a face" or "sharing a sense of humor" as forms of quotidian racism through which Muslims are excluded from a shared life. But we might also focus on the way that talking abut Muslims in this way also begins to make what would have been an everyday, unremarkable practice elsewhere—a subject of great excitement, a sense of becoming disjointed with life in this part of working class England—leading to

feelings that there can be no space prepared within this form of life for Muslim others. In Aaron's actions in wearing the balaclava and proclaiming it to be his religion, we can see that there is a parodying of the *niqab*. Yet Aaron seems unable to see that his actions are in the nature of a flight from the everyday—others, including the landlords of the pub recognize this as the parody that it is and thus get him to leave.[17] Might it have been possible for these men and women to imagine a different form of interaction with their Muslim neighbors if they had tried to see what connections they might make with other things there are in their lives—maybe replacing the polarity within which they cast their relations with Muslims by analogies that might allow them to connect (Jackson 1987, forthcoming)? That such connections and analogies are regularly made and that certain words belonging to one tradition can be taken to be simply "words at hand" and used with different inflections across traditions is a common observation in many ethnographies on relations across different religious communities in India (Alam 2004; Chatterji 2012; Das 2010a, 2010b; Henn 2014). It is not that such possibilities of mutual engagement and recognition provide any guarantees against violence but as Bhrigupati Singh (2015) argues, a mode of agonistic intimacy allows those who are locked in conflict at one threshold of life (say, in political contestations) to come together at another threshold of life (say, through practices of spirit possession). It is possible to think of the everyday as holding the potential for continuous transfigurations that can make everyday slights, grudges, betrayals, boredoms turn into lethal conflicts as I have shown in the case of one of the neighborhoods I worked in where years of small jealousies and grudges between members of two different religions and castes (Hindu Chamars and Sikh Siglikars) inhabiting two adjoining streets became a violent orgy of killings as more powerful political actors converted this space into a theater of conflict for national level political confrontations (see Das 2007, chapter 9). Or else, as Fassin (2013) notes for police patrols deployed to keep order in areas where Muslim migrants live in the suburbs of Paris, the boredom of nothing happening can convert into a kind of quotidian

---

17. I am not making the point that revealing the trance-like character of his fears will persuade Aaron that his form of life is not under threat by Muslims for it is within the structure of skepticism about the other that it makes it hard to awaken from such a trance. I do want to note, though, that others within his own social world find Aaron to be behaving in a weird fashion, showing that a different sense of what it is to live with these others is also part of the milieu, as Smith's ethnography also shows.

racism in which police end up throwing around random insults and completely inappropriate body searches that could in turn grow into violent riots. Cavell (2007) asks us, social scientists, to consider how these "little deaths of everyday life" might become magnified by standing sources of social enmity—racism, casteism, sexism, elitism? The counterpoint might be that it is in small acts of everyday repair that what looks like a standing possibility of violence can be contained. Singh's (2015) work alerts us to changing rhythms, to the waxing and waning intensities, through which this life of the other is engaged. The recent work of scholars such as Al-Mohammad, Allan, Han, Singh, Perdigon, on which I have drawn extensively in this lecture, makes us acutely aware of the textures of attentiveness in sustaining everyday life in which violence is kept at bay without ever the satisfaction that the problem of violence has been solved once for all.

Wittgenstein's great insight into Frazer's *The golden bough* was that Frazer is unable to see that the feeling of dread that he attributes to the past dark crimes committed by savages is related to his own constricted imagination of the life of the other. This constricted imagination is apparent in Smith's informants who could not see that the Muslim neighbor does not have to fit fully into their lives as they imagine it in order to be part of that life. But there is a flight into fantasy that prevents her informants from seeing what is before their eyes. After all, none of the Muslim women who wore the *niqab* were likely to be hanging around with Aaron in the pub—so his imagination of the threats they posed to his way of being was more a result of what Wittgenstein thought of as "superstition." Smith cites Jürgen Habermas (1990) on value disagreements, which he argues become deliberations about "who we are" and how we evaluate what is a good life. For Smith, Habermas' formulation that we cannot jump out of a particular life history or form of life in which we actually find ourselves—and with which our identities are irrevocably tied up—resonates with what her respondents stated about the anxieties about preserving their forms of life (Smith 2012: 91) But Wittgenstein would alert us to is the fact that a harmony between our words and our worlds is also about being able to imagine the possibility that we could be other than we are (Jackson 2004, forthcoming).

I take Wittgenstein's comparison of our language (and thus our forms of life) to a city that is never finished as evidence of the open character of forms of life though this open character does not mean it is infinitely stretchable. "Our language can be seen as an ancient city; a maze of little streets and squares, of

old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses" (Wittgenstein 1968: paragraph 18).

Elsewhere I have suggested (see Das, forthcoming) that Wittgenstein's remarks of Frazer (especially 27–34) are oriented to make us consider existence as always capable of being more, or other, than its present realizations. For all our worldliness, then, we might never be fully at home in any particular world. It is also the case that as the remark on our language being like a city suggests, the openness of the language one inhabits—that it can have suburbs that are well ordered and streets from old that are like mazes—our worlds are, indeed, open to newness (see also Mattingly 2014). Of course, there are no guarantees that the imagination of this other in my life will work—and not swallow up my confidence that the forms of life itself might not disappear—but it is precisely this uncertainty that becomes the challenge for everyday ethics.

A SECOND EXAMPLE

Let me take a somewhat different example—that of how a new language of human rights is absorbed within a society that considers this language first to be alien but then opens itself to it through aligning its own conventions to the possibility of newness. In his work on human rights in Thailand, Don Selby (2015) traces the trauma in Thai society at the potential of violence within Buddhism, which came to the surface in the brutal suppression and massacre of student demonstrations in 1976 in Bangkok in the course of the democracy movement. For many Buddhists, there was the further trauma of remembering that the killings had been justified by powerful Buddhist monks such as Kulliiowattho Bhikku, who argued that it was meritorious to kill Communists since they were the personifications of Mara—the evil incarnation in Buddhism—whose purpose is to destroy Buddhism. Are the teachings of Buddha then capable of generating such brutal violence? Social conventions did not permit open discussions but Selby suggests that these anxieties were addressed through another language—that of human rights within the institutional spaces of the newly established National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), constitutionally mandated in 1997 and finally constituted in 2001. Selby tracks how initially the language of human rights was treated as something that was simply "overheard," as if the Thai people were not the direct addressees of this

discourse but had come to participate in it through indirect means. However, as complaints from citizens began to pour in and were adjudicated, the language of human rights came to be treated as another potential contained within Buddhism (and not as coming from the West) as they thickened and gathered weight. The traditional institutional mechanisms such as those of face work or of patronage relations were bent and extended to do work for the NHRC (Selby 2012). This is a fascinating example of how a space of possibility for newness was created by reinterpretation of what Buddhism might mean in the context of aspirations for democracy. Selby's comments that even without a proximal scene of devastation an event can occasion a turning back to the ordinary in novel ways (Selby 2012, 2015). He thus thickens the notion of the actual everyday by showing the potential of violence contained within it and tracking how newness might be absorbed within the scene of sameness to address moral disquiet.

Of course not all forms of newness might be absorbed in this way by extending the notion of tradition. Commenting on the aspirations expressed in what many call the Arab Spring, Talal Asad (2015) argues that traditions are plural and dynamic but that the events since 2011 in Egypt show that modern liberal states make it difficult or even impossible to permit certain experiments in the new direction within a particular tradition; Asad's analysis is complex and his conclusions about the possibility of a more just political formation in Egypt are pessimistic. The uprisings in Egypt, he says, expressed an aspiration that cannot be characterized as either "religious" or "secular" because people with religious and secular sensibilities were joined in their efforts to overthrow the old system and make a new beginning, to initiate a "democratic tradition" propelled by a desire that political obligation be founded on loyalty to the nation and not on fear of the state's violence. But as the later violent suppression of the movement as well as the internal dissensions that developed within the movement showed, an aspiration is not a realization. As Asad summarizes these issues,

> Some years later, well after the July 3rd military coup, looking back at the January uprising, it becomes apparent that there never was a "revolution" because there was no new foundation. There was a moment of enthusiasm in the uprising, as in all major protests and rebellions, but the solidarity it generated was evanescent. A hopeful attempt at beginning a tradition never guarantees the hoped for future: clear aims, good judgment, patience, and willingness to learn a new language and

how to inhabit a new body, are required to respond to the various dangers and opportunities that emerge from attempts to found a new political order. (Asad 2015: 8–9)

There are two important points that Asad is making. First, when one thinks of newness in terms of collective political action, it involves tectonic shifts that might be in the nature of slow changes that are not on the surface, and second, it involves the mobilization of energies that go into brining newness at the political level (but these energies are not always durable). Asad seems to acutely feel the failure of the Egyptian uprisings, noting that even among the Muslim intellectuals and leaders he interviewed there was less awareness of what learning a new language might entail such that it could be recognized as both new and Islamic or Egyptian. However, because Asad's essay occasionally collapses the notion of tradition with that of a form of life, he might have underestimated the importance of these moments of heightened intensities within the life worlds and their potential for generating something that might exist for now in the margins of consciousness but might grow later into something yet unthought. Said otherwise, one might ask if even failed political projects leave residues in the form of potential or unfinished stories that might reappear later in new ethical sensibilities in our lives. Thinking then of the everyday in terms of the potential, the actual, and the eventual, should free us from the default position that many scholars often unthinkingly fall into—viz., that the everyday is nothing other than the site for routine, repetition, and acquired habits.[18]

EVERYDAY AS A MODE OF REINHABITING

From thinking of everyday as the place where the life of the other is engaged, I move to the everyday as the space of rehabitation. In a paragraph that I continue to find compelling for my understanding of everyday life, Cavell (1994) dwells

---

18. Elsewhere I have tried to put pressure on the idea that habit is simple mechanical repetition, arguing that a more enriched understanding of habit sees it as an intermediary between the pole of the active and the passive in human action and not as a mere residue of repetition (Das 2012; for an excellent discussion on this point see also Hage 2014). I note for now that the opening up of the issue of habit as a creative force has yet to be fully assimilated in anthropological thinking (see especially Ravaisson 2008).

on the abstract conceptual moment in Wittgenstein where he talks about his philosophy having destroyed what was, anyway, a house of cards. Cavell writes, "Could its [i.e., the conceptual moment's] color have been evoked as the destruction of a forest by logging equipment, or of a field of flowers by the gathering of a summer concert, or by the march of an army? Not, I think if the idea is that we are going to have to pick up the pieces and find out how, and whether, to go on, that is go on living in this very place of devastation, as of something over" (Cavell 1994: 74).

The pictures of destruction that are first evoked here suggest that that those whose actions have (willfully or carelessly) destroyed a place of habitation (a forest, a field of flowers) have simply moved on with little regard to what was destroyed, whereas if we are to live in this place of devastation by picking up the pieces, the rubble, and remaking that place, we would need a different picture of what is destroyed in our lives and what it is to pick up the pieces again. I am sure that there are nuances in this passage that I do not fully comprehend but I feel confident enough to state that even when the space of destruction was dramatically present as in the violence of the Partition of India that I tried to document, the space of devastation was not simply the moment of horror but how this was carried forward and made part of that life that was reinhabited by the dwelling again (Das 2007). This is how I rendered the life of Asha, one of the protagonists whose life from some outside perspective might have been seen as rebuilt through a second marriage but for whom this rebuilding was not simply moving on to something new but also entailed a repair of earlier relations that were destroyed by the forces that impinged on her life. The argument I put forward here cannot be stated in terms of a simple contrast between a first-person perspective and a third-person perspective (i.e., from a first-person perspective she had not moved on whereas from a third-person perspective she had remarries and successfully rebuilt her life) but it does require that as ethnographers we do not rush to offer explanations that ignore the question of what mattered to Asha. This theme has been brilliantly formulated by Sandra Laugier (2005) who argues that what matters to one can serve as the touchstone of ethics as finding one's voice, and by Arthur Kleinman (2008) who shows how we might lose our sense of what matters in the plethora of voices that confront us from more abstract discourses on the ethical.

I briefly recapitulate the main points of this story in which the massive sectarian and sexual violence during the Partition of India in 1947 did not register in any direct violence faced by Asha herself but in the fact that her already fragile

position as a widowed daughter-in-law of a Hindu family became unsustainable with the death of her husband's elder sister and the impossible desires kindled in the dead woman's husband for her as well as her own uncertainty over what kind of betrayal would it be for her to surrender to these desires (see Das 2007, chapter 4). I described this unraveling of relations as "poisonous knowledge" and described both her dramatic contracting of another marriage (unheard of then for widows of upper caste families) and her patient cultivation of continued relations with the women of her first husband's family. I conveyed the devastation of her everyday life in the following way: "There was the poisonous knowledge that she was betrayed by her senior affinal kin as well as her brother, who could not sustain the long term commitment to a destitute sister. *What was equally important for her* was the knowledge that she may have betrayed her dead husband and his dead sister by the imagination of infidelity, and made a young child, her 'special' adopted son, feel abandoned" (Das 2000: 222).

Fifteen years ago I interpreted Asha to have made a "choice": "Once her sexual being was recognized in the new kind of gaze—someone in the position of a surrogate brother revealing himself to be a lover—she was propelled into making a choice. Would she wish to carry on a clandestine relation and participate in the 'bad faith' upon which Bourdieu (1990) recognizes the politics of kinship to be based? Or would she accept the public opprobrium to which she subjected the family honor for a new definition of herself which promised a certain integrity, although as an exile from the life projects she had earlier formulated for herself" (Das 2000: 221). Fifteen years later it seems to me that if the word "choice" suggests that there were two commensurate alternatives then this was not a good word to have taken to render what she described. Let us listen once again to her words: "I have been very happy, very lucky, that I found someone good to marry me. . . . If jija ji (HZH) had not begun to make passes at me, I might have lived an ascetic life, appropriate to a widow in my husband's house. . . . But after what happened between us, how could I have faced my sister-in-law? How could I have faced my husband in my next life? With him it is a connection for eternity. With my present husband—it is like two sticks brought together in a stormy sea—the union of a moment and then oblivion" (Das 2000: 217).

I must confess that the image she conveyed in these words was uncanny: a lifetime spent with a man who she had looked after, to whom she had borne two children, was like a meeting of two sticks in a stormy sea, simply because she was not his rightful wife in the eyes of god? Surely this is not easy to render as

a "choice" she made if we think that this implies that the alternatives are some-how commensurate or that what is at stake here is to choose between obligation and freedom.[19] There is a moral picture of the world here that also made her own present life somehow opaque to her, and yet in the small acts she performed in keeping fidelity with her sister-in-law and in continuing to visit her "adopted" son with whom she had a special relationship, despite all the veiled insults about her marriage from the same brother-in-law who had awakened her own sexual-ity, I saw a devotion to the world she could have just as well left behind. Should we just call this the ethics of "being-together" rather than an ethics of the act that can be isolated and judged? In the last fifteen years I have been encouraged by the work of feminist scholars such as Sameena Mulla (2014), who shows exquisite sensibility in her depiction of the weave of life within which victims of rape from African American families improvise and try to construct their own actions within a field of relations that is already marked by many forms of violence. The rape is experienced as one act in a series of other acts, and not the unique, world-destroying act that an outside rendering in law and moral-ity make it to be. In one case, for instance, a woman refused to press charges against an uncle who had a history of incarceration and had raped her because her desire for justice would mean pressing charges and appearing in a court of law, acts that she suspected might unravel a whole set of knotted relations by putting relatives who were providing care of one sort or another within the kin-ship network before the accusatory eyes of the law.

But just what is it that such attention to women (and men) who struggle to make everyday life inhabitable by withholding themselves from trading ac-cusations, or who swallow the poisonous knowledge of violations big and small,

---

19. It should be clear that the target of my criticism here is my earlier self, for I think I fell into the default language of choice. However, the contrast between domains in societies dominated by what Joel Robbins (2007) called a morality of reproduction as distinct from other domains where a morality of freedom prevails gives culture the overarching place in determining the range of freedom available in a society. Much as I appreciate a rehabilitation of Durkheim and of obligations in Robbins, the work on their own culture performed by women like Asha shows that the struggle to find one's voice is not simply divisible into domains of obligation and domains of freedom. Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us that the issue is that the singularity of the actual life lived cannot be absorbed into the idea of the "representative" man or woman (Bakhtin 1993: 77–78). That much social theory since Weber thinks of the ideal type of the individual (say, under Calvinism) as a unit of analysis should not blind us to the fact that the problem of singularity is of a different order than that of the average or the ideal individual type (see Humphrey 2008).

might achieve? Why worry so much about finding just the right expression: Is it choice? Or passivity? Or vulnerability to which all human action is exposed? I believe something is at stake for anthropology in thinking how our words might be aligned to the lives and stories we have been trusted with. Is this a good enough description of what we do as anthropologists? In many ways the very structure of participant observation as a method requires critical patience, acts of waiting, and letting different aspects of a story bubble up, or be offered in one way on one occasion and in another way on a different occasion. However, what it is to pay attention to expression (both that of one's interlocutors and one's own) through such acts of waiting is different from the kind of analysis done when we have "captured" the speech through compilation of recordings and are now analyzing it with techniques of linguistic analysis. For certain purposes when one is analyzing changes in speech patterns, for instance, or comparing regional variations in language use, these techniques serve very well, but I think we need to inquire if such methods do not lead to a retrospective false coherence that a narrative acquires simply because the context of telling has shifted.

There are some interesting criticisms about the mode of doing anthropology through the critical patience of letting a story or several ways of telling a story emerge in bits and pieces that may be worth considering because they bring out some underlying assumptions about our picture of everyday life. Thus, for instance, Michael Lempert (2013) argues that ethical events require communicative labor to happen and are hence precarious achievements and that this complicates the very notion of the ethical that he attributes to me—viz., that the ethical is intrinsic to practice. I have, of course, maintained (or tried to maintain) throughout my work that what Wittgenstein gives us is not simply a theory of practice either in the Marxist sense of praxis or in the sense of Bourdieu's logic of practice. In the work of scholars in the Wittgensteinian lineage, I have argued, the everyday is not simply the world of routines or habits but is shadowed by doubts that can become world annihilating, as I show with my work on rumor. Indeed, even in the snippets of the story of Asha that I gave here, we see everyday life as laced with fantasy, often morphing into a scene of trance. That is why when rendering the lives of my interlocutors I have often reached a point at which I let indeterminacy and uncertainty as to what they mean remain in the text.

What Lempert finds insufficiently specified in my writing is, in my reading of it, a result of another kind of fantasy that Lempert entertains and that shadows his words. It is a fantasy that the other could be made wholly transparent

if only we had enough recording equipment to replace the human ear with the ear of the machine: "Consider Das," he says, "who narrates with eloquence how 'small acts' (Das 2012: 139) can do big things, from care to harm, without ever announcing what they do. This exposes the fragility of ethical events, but *once we scrutinize real time ethical events with recordings and transcripts—as researchers on interaction do*—we can see more vividly just how precarious ethical events are" (Lempert 2013: 371, emphasis added). "I want to dwell," Lempert continues, "on this precariousness and argue that the study of ordinary ethics could do more to illuminate the labor and methods through which actors strain to make the ethical not just effective but intersubjectively evident" (Lempert 2013: 371).

As I hear the words of women like Asha and Manjit and men like Billu and children like Avtar and Vidya—all of whom live in my various writings (Das 2000, 2007, 2012, 2015a)—I read them as having made the space of devastation yet again habitable by working and improvising on how to go on with the very pieces of rubble their lives had become, and thus to allow life to knit itself back, slowly, laboriously, pair by pair. I don't see them as "straining to make the ethical intersubjectively evident." Instead, I find here the stirrings of life: when the survivor of years of torture in an Iranian prison, whose husband had been executed in the same prison finds that she can suddenly fall in love and mind terribly at being forsaken (Talebi 2011) or when survivors of a horrendous genocide can begin to restore lost and broken sacred statues to newly animated Buddhist temples (Guillou 2015). These stirring of life are not "communicative events" that have to be made "intersubjectively evident" as if there was first a private language and then came the event of making it apparent to the other by communicative labor. This is where finding "just the right expression" becomes a matter of not simply communicating but asking what is alive in thought: when would our words show us to be not of the same flesh?

I could not have taken a recorder to Asha or Manjit not only because words came unbidden but also because I felt that these women were not just telling me about events but about themselves—each of them was making herself known. It mattered whether Asha was speaking to me, her friend, or to a machine. Language, as Wittgenstein (1968) said, is a city with an old maze of narrow streets and new suburbs with well laid out streets. I would have to be context-blind (if not soul-blind) to think what was at stake for Asha was simply some kind of communication of an event as in a testimony before a court of law. A tape recorder is not a neutral instrument for me through which one is getting pure unmediated speech—we must ask who the "you" is who is being addressed when

one speaks to a tape recorder or a video camera or a person. This does not make the work done with tape recorders and with mining of big data through capturing the words that circulate on twitter or with hashtags in itself illegitimate, but it does ask that we think of the materiality of mediation in conceptualizing the difference between speech and voice (see Das 2007 and Vogel 2009 for the crucial difference between these registers of language and our relation to it).

Nayanika Mookherjee's (2015) book on the different lives of the stories of *birangonas* (lit. the war heroine), a title bestowed on women who had been raped by Pakistani soldiers or collaborators during the 1971 war of independence in what was then East Pakistan, shows the tortured terrain of the relation between publicity, secrecy, and everyday life. Unlike the stories of rape and sexual violation told within a judicial framework as in Truth and Reconciliation Commissions or in court trials, the stories of the four women *birangonas* did not come out in one go. There are contradictory affects with which the term *birangonas* comes to be infused in the local context: are they war heroines to be honored or soiled women (*khota*) to be shunned? Such contradictory affects that Mookherjee encountered in the field served as a warning to her to wait and learn what questions to ask. Thus Mookherjee waited, immersing herself in the daily talks and the everyday socialities of the village. She was sometimes invited by one of the women's husband to visit and hear their story; sometimes others pointed out to a family they felt she should visit and hear about their suffering. After all, a long time had passed between the time of the "incident"—*ghotona*—and the time of the telling. The story had gathered in itself, not only the memory of the original event but also how it was unearthed—"combed," the expression Mookherjee uses repeatedly—by different kinds of actors and traded for different values it carried. Mookherjee's delicacy of touch is visible in the subtle ways she wards off pressure on the women from husbands or friends to "narrate" what happened. She lets the experiences of different kinds of violations (and not by the soldiers of the Pakistani army alone) to seep through the ordinary expressions she finds, sometimes listening to what the women want her to "overhear" and at other times by her attentiveness to expressions that arise unbidden and evoke the sorrow or the terror of being brutally violated.

For the linguist anthropologist used to "capturing" the precise speech through the recording or videotaping equipment and then analyzing it in terms of an elaborate semiotic apparatus, this mode of collecting stories would seem suspect as it does to Lempert. But to the women who were subjected to the glare of media in the commemorative events in 1992 of the *muktijuddho*—the war of

1971, without fully understanding why they had been brought to these events or what their presence was testifying to—it was the tape recorder and a foreigner wishing to record their "testimony" that would have been threatening. The ethics of storytelling here is not easy to discern for the stories that might seem to perform the task of criticism in one domain (say, that of national publicity) might become lethal for the impact they have on the one whose story is being told. Here the bearer of the story is not a generic raped woman but a woman with this kind of family history, this kind of local politics, and it is her singularity that is at issue, not her place in the general scheme of things.

I remember in the context of the Sikh survivors of brutal violence in Sultanpuri, one of the low-income areas in Delhi where I became intimate with many people, a man said to me, "It is our work to cry and your work to listen" (see Das 1991). Though this was an indicative utterance, it carried the force of the imperative to me. The bironganas whose history Mookherjee narrates spoke about giving her the *mela itihash*, the *chorom itihash*—lot of history, severe history. But Mookherjee seems to have known that the burden of carrying this gift was to find a way of speaking with tact, mindful of the fact that their stories were not to be traded through transcripts of recorded interviews but had to be told in a way that was faithful to the double bind of their wanting their stories to be told and not to be told. The ordinary ethics I speak about in this lecture binds the ethnographer and the people she finds in mutually discovering what it is to find one's voice in one's history. It seems the right kind of moment to ask how we might think of the relation between the first person, the second person, and the third person in the scene of everyday life. Otherwise said, how does this triadic structure help us to think what it might mean to align the picture of the world with my world—or in Cavell's signature theme, what is it to find my voice in my history?

THE GRAMMATICAL PERSON AND THE TRIADIC STRUCTURE OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

Abhinavagupta, the great scholar of the Kashmiri monistic and tantric scholarly traditions, as well as the commentator of Anandavardhan's Dhvanyaloka (ninth century), the inaugural text for a new aesthetic theory in Sanskrit texts, reflects on the triadic structure of reality—*idam sarvam trikarupameva*, everything in this universe is of threefold nature—and uses evidence from the grammatical

structure of nonverb syntax as well as the triadic structure of grammatical persons to interpret the deeper meaning of what it means to be addressed by Shiva. It turns out that it is not only philosophers in the Sansktiric traditions but also modern Western philosophers who see questions of moral obligations embedded in the triadic structure of grammatical persons. I am interested in this section to ask how one might take insights from the discussion on the grammatical person to illuminate the question around which I skirted in the last section – what does it mean to have a first-person perspective on one's life (see Mattingly 2014)? Might we generate ways of thinking why is it important to find one's voice for any understanding of ethical life by taking a first-person perspective? Let me begin, however, not with the first person, but with the second person.

The second-person standpoint

The philosopher Stephen Darwall (2006) defines the second-person standpoint as the perspective you take in relation to me, when we make and acknowledge claims on one another's conduct and will. These claims from the second-person perspective might be explicit, as in acts of demanding, reproaching, or apologizing; or implicit, as in feelings of guilt and remorse.[20] Darwall develops his theory of the second-person standpoint primarily in relation to normative felicity conditions—i.e., under what conditions will I regard your claims on me to be justified. He gives us two scenarios: one in which the second person who is addressing me can draw upon valid reasons we share which give her authority to address me or demand something from me; and, the second, in which the second person can count on some such emotion as sympathy that makes me respond to the demand. An example of the first case might be the demand that a tax collector might make on me that I pay up; the second might be a beggar who looks at me with beseeching eyes as he thrusts forward an empty rice bowl. In the first case I am obligated to pay because the mutual relations between the tax collector and me in this scene of interaction grow from a contractual framework. The authority of the tax collector comes from our belonging to the same kind of community created through agreement on law. In the second case, I am not obliged to give the beggar anything but I might be moved to do so. I will not go

---

20. See also Webb Keane (2015 and this volume) for an acute analysis of grammatical persons—there are points of contact and points of divergence in our analyses that I bracket for now.

into the further intricacies of what Darwall calls the normative felicity condi-
tions (adapting the vocabulary of Austin's performative utterances) but I do note
that the second person standpoint in this discussion is about (a) how impersonal
rules or contracts are made to carry force in interactive situations; and, (b) how a
moral demand might be made on me that stems either from a contractual moral-
ity or a noncontractual one that counts on my recognition of the beggar's condi-
tion as somehow laying claim over me. However, Darwall makes no room for the
fact that in this theater of you and me being face-to-face, a response might just
be drawn out of me not because I can offer valid reasons for responding to your
demand but something about my being this kind of "human" is at stake. One of
the examples Darwall gives about reasons as to of why would someone respond
to a request to stop causing pain—say, by removing his foot that is pressing on
my foot—is that this act would make the world a better place to be in. My reac-
tion to this example with its Kantian tone is that outside the reified world of
philosophy, the normal reaction in such a case would be to just remove the foot
perhaps with a mild apology because that is just what we do, unless the idea was
to cause deliberate pain, in which case further explanations may be called for.

Is there something mysterious in the reaction that is elicited from someone
when, say, one is *moved* to respond to the beggar or when you do not pause to
think of offering justifications (even to yourself) as to why you should remove
your foot if you find yourself pressing on another's foot, perhaps in a crowded
bus? Al-Mohammad explains this by alluding to the relation between norm and
normality in the following way:

> Walking down a busy street, we often know how not to bump into one an-
> other, right? Erving Goffman says: well, it is because people look at each other,
> they are glancing, their bodies are communicating with each other. Then you
> get Tim Ingold, saying—"no, no, it's not a mental thing, it's not about vision,
> there's an embodied sense of where other bodies are." So they are giving you a
> metaphysical story about how, walking down the street, we order our bodies
> in relation to other bodies. That story is about normativity. Walking down the
> street, when I see somebody whom I might bump into, I'll open my body, I'll
> slow my gait to let them pass. Bodies make demands and claims on other bod-
> ies. (Al-Mohammad 2015)[21]

---

21. The informal style of Al-Mohammad's prose reflects the occasion when these
    comments were offered in a debate. See Goffman (1967) and Ingold (2000).

Al-Mohammad is pointing to a critical idea—viz., that something about our embodiment takes into account the concrete other to whom we respond without the necessity of positing a contractual framework of agreement. Cora Diamond (1988) takes us deeper by showing that situations in which a normal order has been suspended, recognizing another as human becomes the pivotal point at which one might fall on the side of death or of life. Thus our concept of the human being is not simply a question of logical classifications but of our understanding of what a "human" life is. As she says, "It seems to be the view of many analytic philosophers that the concept of a human being is the concept of a member of a particular biological species, *Homo sapiens*. And, indeed, contemporary philosophy offers a sorry range of alternatives. It will allow that if 'human being' is a term for membership in a particular species, we may construe it as combining description of a thing as a member of that species with some evaluation or prescription concerning the thing: 'Protect its life' and so on" (Diamond 1988: 263). Thus, she recalls that whenever she suggested to other fellow philosophers that the notion of the "human being" was of the greatest significance in moral thought, her suggestion was taken to imply that what she had in mind was something like a decent or admirable human being (member of a species plus something added to it).. However, what Diamond was aiming at, was to ask what does it mean to know someone as "human" in the way Wittgenstein asked what knowing that something is a chair is—viz., everyday experiences of sitting on a chair, knowing if it is alright to put your feet up, or to sit before being asked to, etc. Diamond then puts forward the simple but profound idea that it is part of the concept of a human being that an immense amount of what being human is, for us humans, can be present in a look that passes between two people; it is also part of the concept of the human that one's humanity can equally be denied in a look. As ethnographers we are not always able to discern the significance of such moments when one's humanity is negated in a second-person way, except in exceptional circumstances—e.g., in the gaze of the Nazi official who is sorting out which of the prisoners were ready to be sent to the gas chamber. But everyday life throws such challenges at us: for instance, I am repeatedly confronted by the realization that I do not know how to look at a beggar in the streets of Delhi as he is aggressively displaying his stump of an arm eaten up by leprosy and asking for money, whether I end up giving money or not. Something in his glance—that this is what a human could become—shames me in ways that I cannot describe. Diamond (1988) gives more weighty

examples from literature to show us, remind us, "this is what it is like to fail to accord such recognition, to refuse it."

Take the great scene in *War and peace* in which Pierre's life is saved. I cite Diamond's discussion of the whole scene showing what can happen in a first-person/second-person scene that is so different from the language of moral claims and rights and demands.

> He [Pierre] is brought as prisoner before General Davouit, who, when he first looks up from the papers on his writing table, sees Pierre, who is standing before him, only as the present prisoner, the present circumstance to be dealt with; but something in Pierre's voice makes him look at him intently. At that moment, "an immense number of things passed dimly through both their minds." Tolstoy says nothing of what things; but they may be such things as scenes of childhood, of courtship, of the death of a parent or sibling, or (in Davouit's case) of a fellow soldier; they may be hopes and dreams, perhaps in Davouit's case those inspired, many years earlier, by the Revolution. In that second look, human relations between the two men are established; and it is that look which saves Pierre's life. (Diamond 1988: 264)

Pairing this scene with one in Primo Levi (1958) in which too it is the exchange of glances in which the human is recognized or denied, Diamond says that what these writers show us is that there can be a depth of denial or of recognition telling us something about human life that has nothing to do with our choosing to evaluate things one way or another. "I cannot choose what weight it shall have that I fail you, or betray you, or that I on some occasion look at you but with a look that leaves you a mere circumstance and not a human being. Levi and Tolstoy show us, then, the shape of certain possibilities in human life" (Diamond 1988: 265). She concludes that to have the concept of a human being is to know how thoughts and deeds and happenings are met, and how they give shape to a human story; it is a knowledge of possibilities, their weight and their mysteriousness. Such a concept of the human radically differs from the concept of the human being as a member of the biological species *Homo sapiens*. What it is to grasp the biological concept is framed by different circumstances and needs than what it is to grasp the idea of the human in this interaction between two persons—but going further, the second-person standpoint here is not so much a *standpoint* as it is an *absorption* in the mutuality of life that we might create for each other.

I appreciate Darwall's sustained demonstration that to understand how moral rules are followed cannot be done by simply positing a third person that gives objective standards and rules and a first person who follows the rules as she makes herself the subject of these moral demands. Rather, we need to add a second person in the interactive scene. But going further, I hope Diamond's excellent demonstration about how an exchange of glances between two people, the possibility that one might either recognize or deny the other's humanity, brings to light the background conditions, a sense of what is natural to the human (by that she does not mean human as the given) helps us to take moral theory in different directions than that of demands and claims that arise within a contractual frame. Unlike the Kantian conception of an innate desire to obey the moral law because that would make the state of affairs to be better, we have here a picture of the ethical as embedded within these moments of recognition that contain within them also the lethal possibility of the denial of each other.

The noncontractual as the frame for relations

Perhaps it is possible to rethink the aspect of noncontractual basis of our moral and ethical lives in the following way. Knud Løgstrup (1997) makes the case for such noncontractual morality in everyday life by insisting that "trust is essential to every conversation." Developing this idea further, David Cockburn (2014) argues that speech is essentially a form of contact (not contract) between human beings. Simple as this idea is, it draws from an essential register in Wittgenstein's thought that "trust" that makes conversation possible is less a question of epistemological certainty and more a question of inhabiting a life together. A fundamental feature of testimony, Cockburn argues, is not that I come to believe in the truth of what another tells me because I take it to be *evidence* that things are as they are said to be but because in the process of offering and receiving testimony a *relation* is established between the speaker and the hearer. In Cockburn's words: "There is a crucial contrast between *believing* what someone tells me and *learning* from the observation from her expressive behavior" (Cockburn 2014: emphasis added).

Distinguishing between epistemological stakes and ethical stakes in the idea that trust is necessary in a speech event between any two people, Cockburn establishes that the issues that arise in the context of testimony also arise in the context of ordinary speech. He gives an example to make this point. If, for instance, my friend mentions a person suddenly (say, Mary) and says she will be

here later while we are in the middle of a conversation on the weird behavior of another person (call him Barry) who has just given a speech, I might be puzzled for a moment but then realize it is Mary Smith to whom she is referring, who is a friend of the speaker and might therefore know more about the situation. The meaning of my friend's statement has dawned on me because I trust my friend's words and so I strive to find how they could be meaningful. Cockburn's thought connects to the technical requirements of conversation such as turn-taking but it also points to the difference between a view of language that assumes an "external" relation between language and the world (first a mental representation and then a communicative event to make it intersubjectively evident) and an internal relation in which we constantly read each other's expressions together as beings who have a life *in l*anguage.[22] It is this trust that helps us put the best construction on words that seem opaque or out of place. In Cavell's writings we see the tragic consequences when this trust gives way to skepticism and reason turns against itself, as was the case of Othello demanding more and better evidence of Desdemona's fidelity or Lear demanding to be shown that Cordelia truly loves him (Cavell 1987). Not trusting the words of the other is in effect a lack of trust in the other and in our mutual capacity to have a future together. In the examples Cavell gives from Shakespeare, we see that small slights, hurts, insults in everyday conversations might transform into a psychic annihilation of the other.

The first-person and its opacity

One of the most compelling accounts I have read on suffering and responsiveness is an ethnography of African American families living with their terminally ill children, facing their deaths, and taking on responsibilities for their care in the face of formidable obstacles (see Mattingly 2014). Cheryl Mattingly characterizes the theoretical frame of her book as that of a first-person virtue ethics but she is careful to explain that her experiences with these families have also led her to modify Aristotle's theory of virtue. She explains, "Moral striving matters a great deal to people in all sorts of societies. What constitutes the good

---

22. Cockburn calls the first a Lockean view of language and the second a Wittgensteinian view. In the first case, the trust in the other results from an epistemological leap and implies a rather constricted view of the other while in the later case, it flows more from a grasp of the general framework of human life within which particular ways of speaking and thinking gather their sense.

life may vary widely from society to society, but it is difficult to imagine any community where this does not matter or where it has ceased to be important. . . . In fact, what may emerge from a focus on moral striving is not that people manage to live happy and flourishing lives but they are plagued by the threat of moral tragedy" (Mattingly 2014: 8).

Mattingly explains further that by a first-person virtue ethics she means that the aspirations of the families for a good life are not something that these care takers know in a "third-person sort of way," as moral truths that are out in the world, but that these are commitments and perspectives they have come to give themselves (cf. Mahmood 2004). She describes how a woman or a family will keep alive a hope for a child against all odds and how the singularity of a child's life appears in these narratives. The descriptions are contrasted with a third person perspective, such as that of a health worker who might have a different take on the situation of a terminally ill child on the basis of clinical prognosis. Between the objective knowledge of the health care worker and her mode of speaking and the way families strive to give expression to the value of this life for them, Mattingly finds that ethics is not only a matter of obligations that the families inherit but also of experiments that they conduct in the face of tremendous uncertainty and sorrow—an image evoked by the term "moral laboratories" in the title.

I have great sympathy with the attempt to define the project of caring through the lens of moral striving. My difficulty is that I do not see how a virtue ethics can be maintained without positing the narrative unity of life—a point MacIntyre (1984) insisted on in his critique of modernity. Indeed, one gets a sense that the families Mattingly describes with such tact are framing their stories in terms of a before and an after, giving it a narrative coherence. Yet I suggest that there are two "background conditions" that inform Mattingly's theorization of what she frames as "virtue ethics" and that cannot be character-ized in a straightforward way as constituting a first-person perspective. First, the stories she chooses to elaborate on are those in which a redemptive story seems to be providing a dominant frame. Thus parents who recreate themselves from a state of moral depravity (addiction, aimless violence, indifference) to a state of moral plenitude are given a voice in the text because they are understand-ingly the ones she admires and whom she befriended. There are others within the family who are not "up to the task" (as Mattingly puts it) and for whom she seems to have less sympathy. I wonder how making their stories appear in the text in whatever manner might have complicated the picture. Second, the plot

lines as Mattingly convincingly shows seem to resonate with Christian narratives of the conversion of the sinner, as does the figure of Jesus as the redeemer. How do these individual stories then get molded through the available genres? Put differently, how are third-person perspectives absorbed in the first person perspectives? What is the struggle of identifying what is my voice among the various voices that might live within me? My point is not that a first person perspective would have expunged all voices that come from the outside but that we need, perhaps, to dwell more explicitly on how I find myself in the dominant stories of my culture; equally important is the question of how do some voices retain the signs of their otherness? At one point in her discussion, Mattingly states that in the funeral orations on the occasion of the violent death of a young man, a gang member and friend of the dead youth says repeatedly, "The world is a cold, cruel place." Mattingly goes on to say, "Even the praise hymns sounded anguished. Yet, the response of families like Leroy's does not reflect the resigned despair that E. Valentine Daniel (1996) documents among the Sri Lankans, or that Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993) observes among destitute Brazilian mothers who have come to accept the inevitable deaths of children 'without weeping'" (Mattingly 2014: 192). Perhaps Mattingly might have leant more of her ear to such resigned despair among family members who were "not up to the task"?

It seems to me that what is distinctive in the stories of parents who found the resources within the Christian tradition to let themselves experience the tragedies that were unfolding was the presence of the second person, the child toward whom the stories are oriented, a fact that Mattingly never loses sight of ethnographically but passes over in her theoretical discussion since the first-person and third-person perspectives are brought into conversation but not the mediation of the second person in her theoretical structure.[23]

---

23. It is not that Mattingly does not touch on these complexities. Thus, in a crucial passage, she writes, "This is not to suggest that that our experiences are in any simple sense clearly available to us or give us an unquestioned understanding of what presents itself. . . . What's more, Lear comments, we have what he calls an 'ethical fantasy life, an inchoate sense that there is a remainder to life, something that is not captured in life as it is so far experienced.' . . . This experiential givenness, in all its shadowy complexity, can be contrasted with a "third person perspective" that begins with the categories themselves" (Mattingly 2014: 13). Brilliant as this formulation is, it does not face up to the issue that the contrast between a shadowy experiential complexity of the first person and the categorical clarity of the third person is not enough, for missing in this account is the second person.

It might be helpful here to consider the classic paper by Elizabeth Anscombe on the first person and its opacity. While we are used to thinking of the triadic structure of personal pronouns as if the three terms were symmetrical and indeed, while "I" functions syntactically like a proper name, Anscombe (1981) contends that it is not easy to know what "I" stands for (the argument is deeper than the idea that I is a shifter)—i.e., depending on context it can stand for Veena, or Michael, or Webb, or Didier. Anscombe offers a thought experiment, which I will not repeat here but I hope some readers will be tempted to pursue it further. The import of the thought experiment, as I understand it, is that I know myself in a third-person kind of way—i.e., I know that I have this name, I can give you the name of my school, or many other facts of this kind. However, if it comes to reporting if I am in pain, or how I feel about the beggar in the street to which I referred earlier, or to the testimony I give about myself, I do not observe myself and then infer that this is how I feel. If I characterize these activities as self-reporting then what kind of self is the self on which I am reporting? It is after all not one object among others—for instance, I cannot envisage the possibility of laying aside my self somewhere and then searching here and there to find it. So what does it mean that in staging the doubts on how do I know that I exist (Descartes used the first person)—i.e., not how do I know that the world exists but how do I know I exist? Famously, Descartes did not find the proof of his existence in the fact that he has a body but in something like a mind or a soul. I must postpone for another occasion a detailed discussion of how such perplexities about the existence of the self are dramatized in Buddhist and Hindu texts, but I do wish to point out that these matters are not simply matters of cultural differences. Just as Locke asked if the I remains the same at the inception of an act (I am doing it) and when the act was done, these texts are full of examples about the continuity and instability of the self, the place of the you in defining me, not just a someone who has these publicly recognizable characteristics but as challenging me to get a deeper sense of who I am. As Anscombe puts it, "Thus we find that if I is a referring expression, then Descartes was right in what the referent was. His position has, however, the intolerable difficulty of requiring an identification of the same referent in different 'I' thoughts. (This led Russell to speak of 'short term selves')" (Anscombe 1981: 31).

Of course short-term selves would not be acceptable as a defense in a court of law, but even in a court of law there is some recognition that the expressions and actions that come out of me might not be strictly mine on certain occasions, as in passion crimes or in the case of serious mental illness when we are

sometimes moved to say it is not the person who is speaking but the disease which is speaking. The same thought might be applied in ritual contexts when I might be dispossessed of myself by a spirit (Lambek 1981) or I might give myself on lease to another (the hotri priest in the vedic sacrifice) for the duration of the ritual (Das 1983; Malamoud 1996). In the famous dice scene in the Mahabharata that Hiltebeitel (2001) has examined in detail, when the protagonist, Yudhishthira, stakes his wife (the princess Druapadi) in a final desperate bid and loses her, she is dragged to the court in a disheveled condition.[24] The question she has for the assembly is, had the king staked himself before he staked me?—in other words, was he in possession of himself? I have elsewhere examined how her question silences the most profound proponents of the *dharma* (dharma becomes mute, as I put it) and thus her question looms over the entire text, making the text itself into an argument with the gods (Das 2013).

Would it make a difference to the narration of individual lives that the pressure of the cosmological or mythical in a world that inherits these kinds of sensitivities focuses on the impossibility of dharma, rather than on redemption narratives through the grace of a Jesus-like figure or through aligning oneself through a leap of faith to a figure like Saint Paul (Robbins 2010)? I do not wish to suggest that there is only one possibility of self-formation in any particular cultural milieu—stories about saints, gurus, and divine grace abound in the Hindu texts and in lives—but perhaps we need to develop and sharpen these differences as heuristic exercises (if nothing else) in order to see how something like a triadic structure of personal pronouns that seems like a morally neutral grammatical form might be embedded in a cosmology that in turn gives a different moral coloring to our ideas of what is the self in relation to the world.

I offer one example of this thought experiment though I cannot elaborate it in any kind of detail here. Based on his studies of Indo-European, Émile Benveniste (1971) famously argued that that the first and second person stand

---

24. The story of the epic is well known. It centers on the events that lead to a fraternal war of total destruction between two princely lineages, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The episode of the dice game is that of Yudhisthira, the eldest brother of the five Pandavas, who is lured into a game of dice with his opponent, Duryodhan, the eldest brother of the Kaurava lineage. After losing all his possessions in the rigged game, Yudhishthira stakes Druapadi, the wife shared by the five brothers, and loses her in the dice game. Dragged to court where she is assumed to be now the common possession of the Kauravas, Draupadi has one of the most profound discussions on *dharma,* or righteousness, that I discuss here.

respectively for the speaker of the discourse and his or her addressee. The dialogical context was central for Benveniste for an understanding of the grammatical person—thus he was able to argue that the so-called third person, one who was spoken about was in certain respects a nonperson since he or she was not indexed as a participant in the dialogical scene.

The terms first person, second person, and third person, seem to indicate relative distance from the speaker or enunciator of discourse, so it is intriguing to see that in Sanskrit the terms are *uttam purusha* (the supreme or best of persons), *madhyam purusha* (the intermediary, or one who is in-between), and *pratham purusha* (pratham literally means the "first" but it is intriguing that first here is used to designate what is the third in English grammar)—these designate respectively, the agent of speech, the listener, and the one spoken about who has the quality of both being third and being "first" because he or she can be brought into sentience through being addressed. Are these terms arbitrary designations or do they express a structure of aspirations?

Bettina Bäumer (2008) explains that in the canonical text Paratrisika, that Abhinavagupta comments on, the aspiration is to overcome the trichotomy of the three persons. The exegetical context is the explanation of the address of Bhairava (Shiva) to the Devi (the goddess) in the expression *shrnu devi,* "listen devi." For my purpose the most interesting aspect of the discussion is on the reliance on the vocative (Shiva addresses Devi as thou)—the second person (or the medium). An important point I want to flag is that even in the dominant scheme of Panian grammar in which the dialogical context of the grammatical persons is not evident, the pratham purusha (the English third person) has the nature of a remainder—that which is left to be supplied after the supreme person (I) and the intermediary or middle person (you) have been given their grammatical specifications. Since the pratham purusha (English third person) is *nara* or man[25]—who is also insentient within this cosmology unless addressed—we get two conceptions of the English first person: the concrete I that is enmeshed in ego (*ahamkara*) and hence is like the insentient object (the third) and the "I"

---

25. To clarify this point further, the grammatical persons are mapped onto the cosmological context when the grammatical rule is explained through the triadic character of tantra as Shiva (the one who is the speaker); Shakti, the goddess who is addressed; and nara (man) who has an insentient quality and hence occupies the place of the "third person"—thing-like—until he, too, can hear what is being said. Grammar could not, in this system of thought, be separated from cosmology. I leave this as a pointer for future work on the grammatical person.

that becomes the enunciator of discourse when incorporated in the fluid trans-actions of the personal pronouns as they intersect and flow into each other.[26]

Consider this passage: "That which appears even as 'this,' when addressed, becomes completely enveloped with the I-feeling of the addressor. The 'this' which is different from the addressor, when addressed as 'you' becomes shakti" (cited in Bäumer 2008). Other examples of the fluidity of the three persons are Kalidasa's addressing of the mountains in Meghaduta, "listen, oh mountains" that when thus addressed become a "you." Conversely the "you" when addressed in the reverential form—*bhavan gauravah*—the honored one, becomes the third person. Finally in creating the plural of the uttam purush (English first person) in cooperative activity in which you and I are engaged—the you is assimilated in the uttam pursuha as "we." "You and I are cooking" becomes "we are cook-ing"—showing the preeminence of the "I." This signals the thorny issue of the conditions under which "we" is allowed to subsume the "you"—a point I will briefly return to in the final concluding section.

The final point I want to make about the fluidity of the three persons in the process of exchange is that the discussion of grammar connects with the discus-sion on aesthetic theory where the puzzle was to think how it is that poetry can move me (as listener or reader) to experience the emotions portrayed in a liter-ary text as if they were my emotions. Similarly, in the texts on ritual the puzzle

---

26. Panini assigns the first and second person (designations according to English usage) on the basis of their cooccurrence with the pronouns *asmad* and *yushmad*, the abstract forms respectively of I and you, regardless of whether they are mentioned or omitted in the utterance. The third person is assigned by default to the remaining cases—*sheshe prathamah*. Ishwar Kaul, the great Kashmiri grammarian who was the first scholar to provide a systematic treatise of the grammar of a vernacular language, used a dominant Panian framework, but made brilliant innovations to render the specificity of Kashmiri not in terms of deviations but as a set of rules diagonal to the Panian rules (see Del Bon and Vergiani 2008). In the case of the triadic structure of grammatical persons, he was probably influenced by Abhinavagupta for in his definition—the first (pratham), middle (madhyam), and the last (uttam) are determined by one who is not the person addressed, the person addressed, and the speaker, *asrotr, srotr, vaktr bhedat* (lit. due to the difference between nonhearer, hearer, and speaker). The tantric frame of the dialogue between Shiva (the speaker) and Shakti (the goddess who is addressed) is implicit.

    I realize that taking the Sanskrit terminology for the grammatical persons appears confusing to the English reader but I do want to press on the point that there is a physiognomy to the words—so we feel disconcerted that the first person is actually the third person in English—but this might be an interesting experience for the reader.

was that one could interpret a third person way of expressing an injunction as applying to oneself. Thus the person of the sacrificer in the mimamsa texts is indicated by the optative mood—*svargakamah yajet*—let one who is desirous of heaven perform sacrifice. How does the one who is performing sacrifice recognize his desire in this general injunction?

My purpose here is not to give a detailed analysis of these texts on which there is already a formidable scholarship (Bäumer 2008; Lawrence 2008; Haag-Bernede 2001) but to show that for all our exhortations in anthropology to be open to alternate traditions of thought, we anthropologists have simply not cultivated the apparatus to engage these alternate conceptions that might give thought a different direction. An important question that might arise at this point might be to ask if such discussions are now consigned to textual traditions without much relevance to people's lives or if they were ever relevant to anyone except the scholars? I could give considerable evidence from literature that such a theoretical apparatus could illuminate important moments in various texts but I will give just one example of the flow between the first person, second person, and the third person (English terms) from my fieldwork.

One of the minor local leaders in the low-income neighborhood that I have studied is a Muslim living in a primarily Hindu neighborhood who is considered adept in dealing with the police and mediating with other officials in settling petty crimes or infringements of law. Explaining how he came to enjoy this position of influence, he said, "I am their mama (MB) Shakuni." Shakuni is an interesting character in the epic Mahabharata. The mother's brother of the Duryodhana, who refuses to yield the rightful share of the kingdom to his cousins, the Pandavas—a refusal that ultimately leads to the war of Kurukshetra and the annihilation of the warrior lineages. Now it is clear from the text that Duryodhana was constantly instigated to enlarge the theater of war by Shakuni, but it is not clear if this was because Shakuni loved Duryodhana and his brothers and hence wanted him to be the supreme king or if he hated the lineage of the Kauravas from which Duryodhana hailed because Duryodhana's father, King Dhritrashtra, had imprisoned all of Shakuni's brothers in the past because of a misunderstanding, where they all died of starvation. Shakuni survived because they gave their meager rations to him to eat so that he, the cleverest of all of them, could survive and avenge the injustice done to them.

In the utterance, "I am their mama Shakuni," the Muslim leader is the enunciator, the first person but we can see the presence of the second person in the same way that the honorific address to the second person was expressed through

the third person (*their* Shakuni mama) while Shakuni is the distant figure of the myth—the third person in whom the local leader recognizes himself from the angle of vision of his neighbors. This complex sentence—a self-disclosure—also shows how the leader left me to comprehend as best as I could whether he loved his neighbors or hated them and wanted their annihilation! I do not say that such modes of speaking could not be analyzed by the application of more familiar (in anthropology) forms of semiotic analyses but unless we begin to actively deploy other frameworks of thought we will not know in advance what forms of resonances and differences we might detect.

A second example in which the vocative plays a crucial role is the imaginary dialogue that my respondents often performed when explaining a particular situation. Elsewhere I have given a detailed exposition of Sanjeev Gupta's (a local leader) imaginary dialogue with an elected representative when he was explaining to me why they did not invite any elected representative on the occasion of the inauguration of the new transformers in their locality (Das 2014a). His point was that electricity was legally sanctioned for their area, which was an "unauthorized colony" in legal parlance and hence fell in the gray zone where the law was not clear about their entitlements to basic services but the elected representative had not offered any help to expedite the process. Gupta said, "*aji sahib aap hote kaun hain*—oh sahib, who are you?" with a string of further admonishments, as if the elected representative was present right before him. Similar use of the vocative in relation to oneself is a very important literary device to express self-criticism (see an example of Rama addressing his own right arm with the contemptuous "*re re*" as he prepares to kill the learned Shudra sage who was to be punished for daring to study the Vedas from the dramatist Bhavabhuti's *Uttarramacharita* (see Das 2013). Gupta is no grammarian but I found that my attentiveness to these forms of speech was guided by my familiarity with the discussions in such texts as that of aesthetic or ritual theory. Such attention was in turn vital for me to disclose the work done in everyday life within which people could sometimes receive the place their culture had made for them as a gift and sometimes as a rebuke (cf. Favret-Saada 2015).

THE IMAGE OF THE WORLD AND THE MORAL SUBJECT

We return in this section to the relation between the picture of the world and the moral subject—recall the earlier discussion from Diamond (1988) and

MacIntyre (1984) on the harmony between our moral concepts and our worlds. In relation to Henrich's (1992) discussion of the moral image underlying Kant's notion that there is innate desire to obey the law, I had raised the question as to what happens if our sense of the world as a whole is that it is not a benign world. How would our concepts reflect such a state of affairs? I discuss two issues in this section: the first is the imagination in the Hindu conception of life that it is embedded in violence sometimes seen as the very condition of living and sometimes as the character of the times in which humans come into history; the second issue is with regard to particular forms of life such as the life of Empire in which one cannot escape complicity with unjust projects even if one has tried to live a moral life according to one's own light.

Speaking of Jainism as a way of life, James Laidlaw (2014) in his compelling analysis of ethics through Foucault's notions of practices of freedom, describes the dilemmas of lay Jains as follows:

> It would be easily possible to portray a coherent project for the formation of a self-consistent virtual self (within Jainism). Such a project is readily articulated in various levels of detail by Jain intellectuals (as no doubt it is by reformist Islamic leaders) and indeed by comparatively unlettered laypersons. What these Jains describe is elegant and in many ways compelling; a project for the attainment of spiritual perfection and enlightenment through the rigorous ascetic elimination of all desire, passion, and attachment; but it is literally unlivable. (Laidlaw 2014: 168)

Laidlaw also speaks about the sense of impossibility expressed by his Jain informants as regards the ability to live a Jain life.

> I noticed early on in fieldwork that one point many lay Jains were keen to make clear to me was that "Jainism is impossible." By this they did not mean either that it is unclear what its teachings are or that it is literally impossible to follow them. . . . What people meant by "Jainism is impossible" is that for them, still committed as they are to their this-worldly life rather than to a soteriological path out of it, none of this tells them how to be a good Jain. . . . A good, lay Jain . . . should venerate, protect, and materially support those renouncers who follow the soteriological path; but this, because it requires good public standing, political and material resources . . . conflicts *directly* with the central precepts of virtuous ascetic life itself. The more you are a good lay Jain, the less you can be a true *Jain*. (Laidlaw 2014: 126, emphasis in original)

Now, Laidlaw interprets these expressions as indicative of the impossibility of living out a consistent moral vision and argues that a form of life such as Jainism provides a set of conflicting values and those who have chosen to live a lay life must endure the contradictions it entails. Let me recount that in the Hindu conception of life (bracketing for the moment dialogues internal to the tradition) the expression "Jainism is impossible" would have been an indication of a certain kind of disappointment with human life. Let me illustrate.

In my earlier work, I examined the debates between Jains and Brahmins in a thirteenth-century text from Gujarat, where the Brahmins contested the criticism against sacrifice by arguing that "life feeds upon life" and who can exist without causing some injury to the other—whether human, animal, plant, or the earth itself (see Das 1976, 2012)? This is a melancholic view of what it is to have human existence—and the idea of conflict of values or the choice between different values just does not capture this sense of melancholy that one has offended the world just by existing (cf. Diamond 2008)—yet the cure for this melancholy, the Brahmins seem to assert on behalf of the householder, is not escape but an embrace of this difficulty of reality. The difference between our (Laidlaw and mine) reading of "Jainism is impossible" hinges more on the tone, pitch, and physiognomy of words and what they imply about being awakened to one's existence—making a choice between one set of values versus another simply fails for me to capture that sense of melancholy that surfaces off and on in Laidlaw's ethnography.

Perhaps I can return once more to the Mahabharata and the category of noncruelty that emerges in the text. When the protagonist of the main story, Yudhisthira, is asked what is the highest *dharma* (conduct), he responds that noncruelty is the highest *dharma*. Elsewhere I have argued (Das 2013) that through this and other stories, the text seems to suggest that when principles like *dharma* (righteous conduct) are elevated to become absolute, they themselves become productive of the annihilating violence that the text documents. Thus noncruelty rather than nonviolence is offered as the highest dharma as a scale more appropriate to the human. What the text offers is not a choice between nonviolence and noncruelty as two distinct values but a mode of being that can make it possible for humans to dwell not only with each other but with the animal, plant, and mineral world. In everyday life, the text seems to suggest, we are fenced off from certain experiences—we cannot know with certainty, for example, if we are truly loved, or what past karmas attach to us. Falling into the tempo of skepticism we are capable of unleashing unprecedented violence: through the device

of side shadowing (instead of foreshadowing) the text suggests that our present actions might leave reservoirs of dangerous potentiality that will play out in the future. Thus, in every story the character is imagined as having a different possible self that lives out the consequences of actions that might have originated in a different imagination of the person. Draupadi, for instance, is the daughter of the mighty king Drupad, but her other names (Yagyaseni and Krishna) refer to her dark origins as a residue of a sacrifice that the king (Drupad) had performed for the birth of a mighty son who would defeat his enemies. These dark origins are what work out as she becomes the cause of the great war and an extinction of the kingly lineages whose constant wars have made the earth tired. The melancholy that marks this story comes from the realization that actions leave a trail of consequences so that even the most virtuous person might set off a destruction because we are not the masters of our own actions.

Laidlaw's repeated references to the fact that ethical systems are not in the nature of coherent wholes is very well taken and demonstrated with the help of great ethnographic examples. He emphasizes that cosmologies might appear as coherent and well integrated when they are narrated but not as they are lived. There are various established norms, Laidlaw tells us, that "represent resources that may be drawn on in the continuous and unending conflict between these values, and the way people do this not only vary according to their dispositions and circumstances but they also typically change quite markedly in the course of their lives" (2014: 127). This description does a lot to dislodge the rather naïve morality that assumes an overdrawn contrast between unreflective habit and the interruptions brought be moments of moral breakdown—an implicit assumption about everyday life that I have repeatedly put into question. Yet the language of different norms as "resources" and the person as balancing different norms as he or she makes choices is still tied to a model of rational action that suggests existential discomfort with what is possible but does not quite bring out the full promise of what such lives might entail by way of encountering luck, chance, and other contingencies that shape their lives. What does the propensity to accident tell us about the shape of our moral lives? Laidlaw considers these questions with reference to the limits of the self and the limits of responsibility in the juridical sense but not as parts of a lived reality within this kind of picture of the world. Ahead I offer an example of what this implies for constituting the ethical or moral subject. Laidlaw rightly argues that when notions of rebirth, circulation of souls between animal and humans, and *karma* are taken seriously, or when the dead are incorporated within the domain of kinship, the ethical

subject must extend beyond the lifetime of an individual. He asks, what kind of technologies of ethical self-fashioning might be available for the imagination of the shape of one's life under these conditions? I have doubts that Foucault, on whom Laidlaw relies for thinking of ethics, is generally a good guide on these questions—I hope the reasons will become clear through the example of Manju, and a moral impulse of what demands proximity puts on us.

Manju's eldest son was having an affair with a girl in the neighborhood who was from a different caste. He was also more of a vagabond and a footloose character who could never hold a job for long. In contrast, his younger brother was very sober and stable and contributed consistently to family income. The parents were completely opposed to the prospects of a "love marriage" for the elder son but the boy used all kinds of threats including that of suicide, so they bent to his will. Unfortunately within two days of the marriage the girl ran away with another man with whom she was also having an affair, taking away with her the jewelry that had been given in dowry and also stealing the jewelry that Manju had given her to wear during the wedding. I will not go into the details of the negotiations with the girl's family, the police reports they had to file, the suicidal depression in which the son fell but instead, fast forward to an event one and a half years later. It transpired that the man she had run away with sold all the jewelry. They ran out of cash at the end of the first year having travelled to various places and lived lavishly in fancy hotels. The girl became pregnant and at that point her lover abandoned her. Neither his parents nor her parents were willing to give her refuge. Her parents did support her until the birth of the child but then threw her out of the house. Manju said one evening she found that the girl had come back and was sitting on the doorstep with her infant daughter in her arms. Manju was furious but after a few hours of bearing this disturbing scenario, she invited mother and daughter to come in. As she explained, she could not bear the idea that the woman might have to turn to prostitution and that the infant girl's future would be marked by sexual abuse or prostitution. Since the family had kept the details of the elopement secret from the wider kin though there must have been rumors, Manju created a place for her in the family. Manju's son too said he was reconciled to the fact that in his past birth he had "owed" her and her daughter something— a debt or a restitution for his own bad behavior toward her in an earlier birth—so their conjugal relation was reestablished. From a wayward daughter-in-law the girl became a dutiful wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. Manju said with some ferocity that if her daughter-in-law had given birth to a boy she would not have taken her back for "she should have been punished for what she did."

These are the bare bones of the story, but they will suffice for the moment. It seems clear to me that a retrospective rendering of this story might be able to cast it in terms of Manju making a "decision" to accept her daughter-in-law despite her transgressions, but what she emphasized in her account was the existential pressure she felt at the sight of her daughter-in-law sitting on the doorstep with an infant in her arms, without food, without water, and unable to protect her daughter from a bleak future. If the ethical subject here is the set of relations rather than a individual who is the locus of decision, then a moral life is crafted as much out of the affective force of an attunement to this other who is not wholly other, who could be me, and to whom I may owe a debt from my past life whose nature is unknown in the here and the now. I submit that the usual paths that moral theory takes with its "ought" and its "should" simply do not suffice. The paths to a moral life do not lie here in either rule following or in taking recourse to technologies of self making but rather in the attentiveness through which one ties one's own fate to that of the other.

I did not expect to find an example of noncruelty in the slums in Delhi but just as in the Mahabharata, noncruelty is demonstrated in the story of a parrot who does not abandon a scorched tree though other trees with fruits and flowers are there; or Yudhishthira, who does not abandon the stray dog who attaches himself to him[27] in his last journey to heaven; so Manju could not turn away from the woman and the child who attach themselves to her. The point is that Manju knew that accepting the love child of another man that her daughter-in-law had borne would put pressure on the entire family but a moral response for her was the ability to bear this knowledge and to remain faithful to the contingency of caring for a child whom fate had attached to her. It is clear in the stories of the Mahabharata that no one would have blamed the parrot for abandoning the tree or blamed Yudhishthira for abandoning the dog but each remained faithful to what fate had joined them to. I am inclined to say

---

27. The story of the parrot is that the tree in which he had lived was scorched by the arrow of a hunter and withered away but while others left the scorched tree to make their home in other trees with fruits and flowers, the parrot stuck to it saying that he could not leave the tree where he had spent his life. The other story is of a stray dog that attaches itself to Yudhisthira on his final journey to heaven. When urged to leave the dog so that he could ascend to heaven in his bodily form Yudhithira prefers to forego heaven rather than abandon the dog. Both stories are offered as examples of noncruelty and show a morality premised not on contract but on being faithful to what has been contingently joined to one.

that what Manju demonstrated was the quality of noncruelty as described in the Mahabharata but to put the weight of the ethical in terms of choices made between different norms seems alien to the feel of the event. Why some women like Manju are able to accept such events as what they were fated to bear while others cannot do so is a very difficult issue to resolve.

Laidlaw (2014) responds to my criticisms or friendly amendments by saying that for his Jain respondents, what I describe are sensitivities formed within a Hindu view of life—so the householder's retort to the ascetic rings false within the Jain form of life. I appreciate this clarification and yet I wonder if such criticisms do not ever surface—i.e., come unbidden outside the narrative of the lay Jain being unable to pursue the ideal of an ascetic life privileged by Laidlaw. For instance, for all the respect shown to the ascetic mode, Tulasidas, the author of Ramchiritamanas, one of the many vernacular renderings of the epic Ramayana, cannot refrain from criticizing the ascetic through the worlds of Maina, the mother of Parvati, who is appalled at seeing that as a bridegroom, Shiva comes dressed like a wild ascetic for the wedding. Cursing Narad, the wandering renouncer who had arranged the marriage, she says famously, "*bajnjh ka jaane prasav ki peeda*—how would an infertile woman know the pain of childbirth?" Are such voices of interrogation from the householder's perspective completely absent from the Jain world?

Whatever our differences, I think Laidlaw and I would agree that in both Jainism and Hinduism what we find is a response to the intolerable realization that one cannot live without committing some violence on the world. One description of ethical life or the sense of the ethical as it applies to life as a whole might be to see what kind of responsiveness we show to these conditions of human life both in the project of self-formation and in the way we inhabit the world. In that sense the subject of ethics is not simply an individual but also a whole way of life (see also Diamond 2008).[28]

---

28. This is the reason that one cannot simply pick up some discrete practice such as vegetarianism and take it as evidence that because Jains value vegetarianism, it orients diasporic Jains to embrace animal rights projects (Robbins 2015). We would have to inquire further if the conditions of human life to which vegetarianism is one response (accepting more diminutive concepts such as noncruelty being another), do the values that inform animal rights activism and thus that propel Jains into activism stem from the same picture of the moral word? Or are these two partners in activism responding to different pictures of the world?

Responding to the forms human life takes

In a recent essay Jonathan Lear (2015) emphasizes that if *we* are inhabitants of an unjust social order it is likely that our own possibilities for thought will be tainted by the very injustice we are trying to understand. Philosophical reflection on its own, he says, is limited here in two ways. First, there is the danger that reflection will itself be an illusion of "stepping back" to an impartial perspective (see also Lear 2006). Thus, the crippled nature of our thought will be enacted in reflection rather than addressed by it. Second, in conditions of injustice, he argues, we suffer deprivation in imagination: we fail to envisage possibilities for life and thought. This cannot, of course, be the whole story for it is precisely conditions of injustice that make Gandhi commit to a life in which political mobilization takes techniques of *satyagrah* (lit. insistence on truth though often translated as civil disobedience) as essential to life under colonialism. Yet, is there merit in asking how our thought might get compromised under such conditions of injustice?

Lear illustrates his argument by a detailed consideration of J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Waiting for the barbarians* (Coetzee [1980] 2004). Literary critic Matt DelConte (2007) argues that the four-wall present-tense structure in Coetzee's novel makes it possible to see the events not as rendered retrospectively but in terms of an unfolding self-awareness in which the course of events is not given in advance. For Lear the importance of the novel lies not in its literary qualities alone but in the force with which it implicates the reader in the moral questions it poses. Here is a brief recapitulation of the novel as given in DelConte (2007).

Waiting for the barbarians portrays the ethical awakening of a nameless magistrate, who, after witnessing the brutal torture of "barbarians" by the Empire he serves, begins to recognize his own complicity in the Empire's colonizing agenda. Suffering from anxieties of sexual and political impotence, the aging magistrate, also the novel's narrator, initiates a (mainly physical) relationship with a "barbarian" woman, a member of the tribe that the Empire seeks to vanquish and a victim of its torture. After eventually "releasing" the woman back to her people, the magistrate is imprisoned and tortured by the Empire who suspects him of colluding with the barbarians. Ultimately, the Empire's contingency is shown as most of the outpost's inhabitants flee in fear of a presumed barbarian attack. The novel ends with the magistrate reclaiming—principally by default—his post to a depleted barracks, still unsure of his own relationship to the barbarians and to (literal and figurative) colonization.

The shape of this ethical awakening that DelConte alludes to is the realization by the magistrate of his own complicity in the project of Empire even as he is horrified by the torture. DelConte's main interest is in showing how the four-cornered present tense allows the novel to acquire an open-ended character to engage readers in the visual economy of the difficulty of seeing what is before their eyes, even as the readers inhabit a different time than that of the characters. But he does not ask what the temporality of waiting, signaled in the title and also in the way Coetzee borrows the poet Cavafy's title, might be—and yet as in Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the barbarians," the whole issue is that the barbarians do not come but the waiting has already become a way of living. Is a way of living the same as a form of life?

Anthropologists Pradip Jegannathan (2004) and Ghassan Hage (2009) argue that what defines and sustains such a form of life in which there is no route to go forward or backward is waiting. If fearful anticipation is the main affect of this form of waiting (at checkpoints, in crowds, in cafes, in the school bus), if the barbarian or the terrorist is just one moment away, only it did not happen this time—but it will happen the next time so we better be watchful and suspicious of every object we see lying around that might after all contain a bomb, every string of words we overhear that sound foreign—the world as a whole becomes pregnant with unforeseen dangers. This is simply the other side of the vulnerability and fragility of our world as a whole. Lear makes an important theoretical leap in characterizing waiting itself as a form of life, or the life that Empire embodies.

The significant feature of waiting as a way of life, is that we come to imagine that the potential is always standing at the doorstep of reality, so polite conversation might cover up the fact that the time of not-happening is also the time of happening; a time when Empire is in the phase of preparation—waiting for the attacks to happen, oiling the factories in which weapons are being forged, intelligence operations that are scoping out the enemy territory—our complicity in these acts does not have to be demonstrated to anyone: it is there. Our ordinary talk, polite teatime conversations, and conventions not to discuss politics with guests over dinner—in all this the barbarian (terrorist) is everywhere and nowhere. Those who fall on the side of the barbaric must ask if there will be an end to this mode of warfare on behalf of Empire. As the magistrate can see, Lear argues, Empire is not a linear process: it is a circular one. In the end when the magistrate has himself been tortured for assumed complicity with the barbarians, he can only address one interlocutor:

"No, listen!" I say. "Do not misunderstand me, I am not blaming you or accusing you, I am long past that. Remember, I too have devoted a life to the law, I know its processes, I know that the workings of justice are often obscure. I am only trying to understand. I am trying to understand the zone in which you live." (cited in Lear 2015: 145)

If the notion of waiting as a form of life, made sense in relation to the structure of potentiality and the overriding affect of living in anticipation, then the magistrate at the point at which he reflects the structure of a life lived in accordance with the law, must come to see the opacity of the world he has participated in.

> I did not mean to get embroiled in this. I am a country magistrate, a responsible official in the service of the Empire, serving out my days on this lazy frontier, waiting to retire. I collect the tithes and taxes, administer the communal lands, see that the garrison is provided for, supervise the junior officers who are the only officers we have here, keep an eye on trade, preside over the law-court twice a week. For the rest I watch the sun rise and set, eat and sleep and am content.
>
> When I pass away I hope to merit three lines of small print in the Imperial gazette. I have not asked for more than a quiet life in quiet times. (Coetzee 2004: 7)

But a quiet life and a quiet passing away is precisely what will not be granted to the magistrate for there are no innocent witnesses in world in which Empire creates and then feeds on images of disaster. Is the population of the civilized world that contributes to its maintenance without directly participating in torture fenced off from the zone of life in which the torturer lives? What is the texture of this fencing off?

Said in a different way, I am left to wonder if simply characterizing waiting as a form of life is sufficient specification of its texture. If we understand the form that Empire takes, do we understand the life it creates? I am inclined to think that it is the way life slides into nonlife, or the human into the monstrous that is at stake here. A passage from Cavell (1979) seems to shine a light here.

> We are more or less accustomed to think of this response (to classical tragedy) as made up of pity and terror, as if what we witness is the subjection of the human being to states of violence, to one's own and to others; for example, terror at the causes and consequences of human rage, jealousy, ambition, pride, self-ignorance.

. . . But suppose that there is a mode of tragedy in which what we witness is the subjection of the human being to states of violation, a perception that not merely human law but human nature itself can be abrogated. . . . The particular mysteriousness in Hamlet's motivation may be in persisting in looking through his events for an object of terror. We should try looking at him as a figure of horror to himself. (Cavell 1979: 419–20)

For the magistrate the problem is that the torturer is not a figure of horror to himself; the horror the torturer evokes does not lie in his taking a monstrous shape but in the human shape of things he can still engage in.

"I am trying to imagine how you breathe and eat and live from day to day. But I cannot! That is what troubles me! If I were he, I say to myself, my hands would feel so dirty that it would choke me . . ." (Coetzee 2004: 123–24).

I stated earlier in this lecture that Diamond captures something profound in the idea about the human, as that which is revealed and concealed in a simple exchange of glances. But we might find this common sense precisely at the moment when it is expelled from a form of life—only of that which is the human can we speak of its inhumanity—the brilliance of Coetzee lies in locating that expulsion of the human common sense in the mystery that a torturer can behave like an ordinary human being. In such cases it might be more appropriate to speak not of a form of life but of a form of death that has been produced from the womb of the everyday within the structure of Empire.

I conclude this section with the reflection that what is at stake, then, in the moral is our sense of life as a whole. For many scholars the moral or the ethical is best understood at moments when there is a breakdown of our habitual modes of dwelling in the world (Zigon 2007, 2009) and there is no doubt that sometimes people narrate their lives in this manner. However, to privilege these moments as if it was self-evident that they reflect the ethical in some pure form is to overlook precisely the kinds of complexities that a more sustained reflection on everyday life such as the life of the magistrate reveals. Even if we were never to have participated in torture, or in inflicting direct violence on anyone, the Hindu sensibilities I described earlier, or the life of Empire in which we all presently live, would leave the haunting question of how we are made complicit in the violence that is part of our lives. How would one endure life rather than how one would resolve a moral dilemma in the gripping drama of the dark night of the soul becomes the pressing issue. In the final and concluding section I offer some reflections on the implications of using our imagination to bring

forth a picture of everyday life within which we might seek to find ways of be-
ing with others while accepting the moderate immorality in which everyday life
implicates us.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

My aim in this lecture has not been to put forward an *argument* but to ask how
living with the fragility, vulnerability, joys, and sorrows that everyday life entails
might reveal the contours of our ethical lives. In the process I have engaged
the work of anthropologists and philosophers in a spirit of learning from them
but also detecting the manner in which even when words look similar to the
ones used by scholars in the Wittgensteinian lineage—everyday life, fragility,
agreement, choice, ordinary, ethical, moral, world, natural, social, life, conversa-
tion, habit (for instance)—these are anchored to very different pictures of the
everyday. Within the constraints of writing I have had to organize my reflec-
tions as if there were a linear progression of ideas but in fact one might think of
the different sections as different panels that are simultaneously present as the
narrator moves backward and forward by shining her torch on one for a time
and then moves to anther to come back to the first one again later, much as the
storyteller does in relation to a panel of images in many genres of performance
in India. Nevertheless, it may be helpful here to recapitulate the major concerns
in a schematic fashion.

    First, I have argued that moral concepts do not have sharp boundaries, which
is why I do not begin with some axiomatic statement about the definition of
ethics. Instead, I argue that concepts of ethical, unethical, moral, among others,
force themselves upon us. This is surely because how we are within a form of life
does not draw sharp boundaries between *us* and *them*—the anthropologist and
ways and those on whom we write. One of my friends who is an amil (Muslim
healer) remarked to me that this "anthropology" that I practice was like his
"amiliyat" for both of us were destined to hear stories of human suffering (Das
2015a) This does not mean that cultural differences can be simply elided under
an overarching notion of the human but that like our interlocutors we too can
imagine ourselves as being "us" and as being "them"—i.e., an imagination of the
fact that our lives could have been otherwise. This is a different imagination of
the self in everyday life than that of the judge charged with separating wrong
from right.

Second, I have argued that everyday life cannot be taken as simply given. Instead, the rendering of everyday life depends on what our imagination of the everyday is. If we imagine everyday life as the domestic, then threats to it will be seen in the vocabulary of kinship; if we see it as the place of banal repetition, then the threats might be seen as emanating from a hostile outside or a slow corrosion of the inside. In all such descriptions, notions of what is ethical are intimately tied with the ever-present threat of skepticism—of doubt that what is ethical brings into being what is unethical. This is not a matter of evaluative judgments from the perspective of one who stands outside the flux of life but of the difficulty of knowing or mastering our own experience. We certainly judge the rightness of expressions or the truthfulness of our responses but this is done from within a form of life and the meaning of even a moment can take a lifetime to decipher and come to terms with.

Third, I have reflected on the opacity of our experience as well as the opacity of the world as we discover how the limits of the world and the limits of the subject are coconstituted. This is why we come across such notions as that of one's complicity in a world in which torture, sexual violence, or other forms of injustice permeate life. Even if I have never participated in any of these atrocities, I have not (at least by my lights) led a blameless ethical life. One continues to be haunted by what is one's responsibility in allowing such a state of affairs to persist as I find in literary texts and in many discussions with my interlocutors. (Here I find an affinity with Laidlaw's rendering of the life of the Jains.) I detect this thought in Hindu and Jain notions of the malignancy of life that generates a certain melancholy about the possibilities of claiming an ethical life for oneself. I show how such concepts as noncruelty are generated as more humble counterparts to any grand conceptions of the ethical. The register of the everyday in which the ethical might be imagined as based on a noncontractual morality is that of keeping faith with those that fate has contingently attached us to. This is a picture of obligation that does not derive from rules or contracts but from a sense of what it is to respond to the need of another. Making a space for the other in our form of life requires a kind of awakening from the trance-like character that everyday life can take and into which we might fall. An example I gave was the imaginary of immigrants swallowing up the way of life of their host countries. Concepts such as xenophobia fail to capture the excess in which hate can take the lethal form of violence that violates our idea of life itself (Das 2007). The problematic here is how forms of life also generate forms of death so that everyday life is not seen as a haven from the tribulations of a horrible world.

At the same time it is in the everyday that we might find the work of repair that is constantly engaged whether through creation of ritual spaces, or through silent unremarkable acts of caring or of absorbing the poisonous knowledge that large and small events secrete into our lives.

Finally, I have suggested through the examples I use the singular individuals from both literature and ethnography who I take as figures of thought, and finally through the conceptual distinctions from Sanskrit texts that I bring into my own text, that what is at stake is not the creation of a specialized vocabulary for rendering ethical life knowable but of asking how spaces of possibility might be opened that allow the foreign-sounding discussions to be absorbed into our own pictures of thinking.[29] Here the issue is what will give concepts life, not how can we use concepts to make evaluative judgments either about individual acts or about whole forms of life? I submit that just as no single culture has a purchase over history so I would say that if our modes of thinking are not open to the other (e.g., Indic, Islamic, Amazonian thought) then our concepts too, like our moral lives, might be in danger of withering away.

Meanwhile the final words belong to Cora Diamond (2000).

We may then think that there is thought and talk that has as its subject matter what the good life is for human beings, or what principles or actions we should accept; so then philosophical ethics will be philosophy of that area of thought and talk. But you do not have to think that; and Wittgenstein rejects that conception of ethics. Just as logic is not, for Wittgenstein, a particular subject with its own body of truths, but penetrates all thought, so ethics has no particular subject matter. Rather, an ethical sprit, an attitude to the world and life, can penetrate any world and thought. So the contrast I want is between ethics conceived as a sphere of discourse among others in contrast with ethics tied to everything there is or can be, the world as a whole, life (Diamond 2000: 153).

In my make-believe language (like that of the invented language of the barbarian women), I conclude with the invocation of a powerful

---

29. As with any notion of a "we" the boundaries of this collective first person are left deliberately open—the "we" might expand or contract according to whether I recognize myself in that collectivity. Similarly, I might indeed need concepts to have sharp boundaries when in a court of law or when determining the therapeutic regime for a well-known illness and its protocols for treatment but this is because specificity here responds to a genuine need whereas in other cases boundaries might cut out what might have given one life.

mantra—*ititamamshudhamkritam*—thus all is purified. But as every ritual specialist knows, the residues will acquire a life of their own.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Alam, Muzaffar. 2004. *The languages of political Islam: India 1200–1800.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Al-Mohammad, Hayder. 2010. "Towards an ethics of being-with: Intertwinements of life in post-invasion Basra." *Ethnos* 75 (4): 425–46.

———. 2015. "We can do without the good." *Critique of Anthropology* 35 (4): 17–22.

Al-Mohammad, Hayder, and Daniela Peluso. 2012. "Ethics and the 'rough ground' of the everyday: The overlappings of life in postinvasion Iraq." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (2): 42–58.

Allan, Diana. 2013. *Refugees of the revolution: Experiences of Palestinian exile.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Anscombe, G. E. M. 1958. "Modern moral philosophy." *Philosophy* 33 (124): 1–16.

———. 1981. "The first person." In *Metaphysics and the philosophy of mind: Collected philosophical papers*, Vol. 2, 21–37. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Asad, Talal. 2015. "Thinking about tradition, religion, and politics in Egypt today." *Critical Inquiry.* http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/thinking_about_tradition_religion_and_politics_in_egypt_today/.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1993. *Toward a philosophy of the act.* Translated by Vadim Liapunov. Edited by Vadim Lapunov and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bäumer, Bettina. 2008. "The three grammatical persons and Trika." In *Linguistic traditions of Kashmir*, edited by Mrinal Kaul and Ashok Aklujkar, 206–22. New Delhi: D. K. Printworld.

Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. 1985. *Habits of the heart.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Benveniste, Émile. 1971. *Problems in general linguistics.* Oxford: University of Miami Press.

Brandel, Andrew. 2015. "Triste Romantik: Ruminations on an ethnographic encounter." In *Wording the world: Veena Das and the scenes of inheritance*, edited by Roma Chatterji, 158–272. New York: Fordham University Press.

Boleyn–Fitzgerald, Patrick. 2003. "Care and the problem of pity." *Bioethics* 17 (1): 1–20.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The logic of practice.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Buch Segal, Lotte. 2015. "Disembodied conjugality." In *Working the world: Veena Das and scenes of inheritance,* edited by Roma Chatterji, 55–69. New York: Fordham University Press.

———. Forthcoming. *No place for grief: Martyrs, prisoners and mourning in contemporary Palestine.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Cavell, Stanley. 1979. *Must we mean what we say? A book of essays.* New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 1987. *Disowning knowledge: In six plays of Shakespeare.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1988. *In quest of the ordinary: Lines of skepticism and romanticism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1994. *A pitch of philosophy: Autobiographical exercises.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 2007. "Foreword." In *Life and words,* by Veena Das, i–ix. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Chatterji, Roma. 2012. *Speaking with pictures: Folk art and the narrative tradition in India.* New Delhi: Routledge.

Cockburn, David. 2014. "Trust in conversation." *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 3 (1): 47–68.

Coetzee, J. M. (1980) 2004. *Waiting for the barbarians.* London: Penguin.

Dale, R. C. 1965. "A clash of intelligences: Sound vs. image in René Clair's 'A nous, la liberté.'" *French Review* 38 (5): 637–44.

Daniel, E. Valentine. 1996. *Charred lullabies: Chapters in an anthropography of violence.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Darwall, Stephen. 2006. *The second-person standpoint: Morality, respect, and accountability.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Das, Veena. 1976. *Structure and cognition: Aspects of Hindu caste and ritual.* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

———. 1983. "The language of sacrifice." *Man,* n.s., 18: 445–62.

———. 1991. "Our work to cry: Your work to listen." In *Mirrors of violence: Communities, riots and survivors in South Asia,* edited by Veena Das, 345–98. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

———. 1998. "Wittgenstein and anthropology." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27: 171–95.

———. 2000. "Violence, knowledge and subjectivity." In *Violence and subjectivity,* edited by Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphele Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds, 205–26. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 2001. "Violence and translation." *Anthropological Quarterly* 75 (1): 105–12.

———. 2007. *Life and words: Violence and the descent into the ordinary.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 2010a. "Engaging the life of the other: Love and everyday life." In *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language, and action,* edited by Michael Lambek, 376–99. New York: Fordham University Press.

———. 2010b. "Moral and spiritual striving in the everyday: To be a Muslim in contemporary India." In *Ethical life in South Asia,* edited by Anand Pandian and Daud Ali, 232–52. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

———. 2012. "Ordinary ethics." In *A companion to moral anthropology,* edited by Didier Fassin, 279–306. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

———. 2013. "Violence and nonviolence at the heart of Hindu ethics." In *The Oxford handbook of religion and violence*, edited by Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson, 15–40. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 2014a. "Action, expression, and everyday life: Recounting household events." In *The ground between: Anthropologists engage philosophy*, edited by Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhrigupati Singh, 279–306. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

———. 2014b. "Adjacent thinking: A postscript." In *Wording the world: Veena Das and the scenes of inheritance,* edited by Roma Chatterji, 372–99. New York: Fordham University Press.

———. 2015a. *Affliction: Health, disease, poverty.* New York: Fordham University Press.

———. 2015b. "Everyday life and its moderate amorality." *Critique of Anthropology*: 4–11.

———. Forthcoming. "Of mistakes, errors and superstition: Reading Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer*." In *The mythology in our language: Remarks on Frazer's* Golden bough *by Ludwig Wittgenstein*, translated with a preface by Stephan Palmié and edited by Giovanni da Col. Chicago: Hau Books.

Das, Veena, and Clara Han, eds. 2015. *Living and dying in the contemporary world.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

DelConte, Matt. 2007. "A further study of present tense narration: The absentee narratee and four-wall present tense in Coetzee's *Waiting for the barbarians* and *Disgrace.*" *Journal of Narrative Theory* 37 (3): 427–446.

Del Bon, Estella, and Vincenzo Vergiani. 2008. "The treatment of the present tense in the Kashmirashabdamrita of Ishvara Kaul: A Paninian grammar of Kashmiri." In *Linguistic traditions of Kashmir: Essays in memory of Pandit Dinanath Yaksha*, edited by Mrinal Kaul and Ashok Aklujkar, 223–70. Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd.

Deleuze, Gilles. 2003. *Deux Régimes de Fous: Textes et Entretiens 1975–1995.* Paris: Éditions de Minuit.

Diamond, Cora. 1988. "Losing your concepts." *Ethics* 98 (2): 255–77.

———. 2000. "Ethics, imagination, and the method of Wittgenstein's Tractatus." In *The new Wittgenstein*, edited by Alice Crary and Rupert Read, 149–73. London: Routledge.

———. 2008. "The difficulty of reality and the difficulty of philosophy." In *Philosophy and animal life,* edited by Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking, and Cary Wolfe, 43–91. New York: Columbia University Press.

Favret-Saada, Jeanne. 2015. *The anti-witch*. Translated by Matthew Carey. Chicago: Hau Books.

Fassin, Didier. 2012. *Humanitarian reason: A moral history of the present.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 2013. *Enforcing order: An ethnography of urban policing.* New York: Polity.

Frazer, James. 1922. *The golden bough.* New York: Macmillan.

Gaita, Raimond. 1990. "Introduction." In *Value and understanding: Essays for Peter Winch,* edited by Raimond Gaita, ix–xi. New York: Routledge.

Goffman, Erving. 1967. *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior.* Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction.

Guillou, Anne Yvonne. 2015. "Traces of destruction and thread of continuity in post-genocide Cambodia." In *Living and dying in the contemporary*, edited by Veena Das and Clara Han, 729–42. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Haag-Bernede, Pascale, 2001. "Conflicting views in the interpretation of Bhartrhari? The case of Madhyamapuruṣa in the Vākyapadīya." *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 82: 233–42.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1990. *Moral consciousness and communicative action*. Translated by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry W. Nicholson. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hadot, Pierre. 1995. *Philosophy as a way of life*. Edited by Arnold I. Davidson. Oxford: Blackwell.

———. 2009. *The present alone is our happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Hage, Ghassan. 1998. *White nation: Fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society.* New York: Routledge.

———. 2009. *Waiting*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

———. 2014. "Eavesdropping on Pierre Bourdieu's philosophers." In *The ground between: Anthropologists engage philosophy*, edited by Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhrigupati Singh, 138–58. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Han, Clara. 2012. *Life in debt: Times of care and violence in neoliberal Chile.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 2014. "The difficulty of kindness: Boundaries, time and the ordinary." In *The ground between: Anthropologists engage philosophy*, edited by Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhrigupati Singh, 71–3. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Han, Clara, and Veena Das. 2015. "Introduction: A concept note." In *Living and dying in the contemporary world: A compendium*, edited by Veena Das and Clara Han, 1–37. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Henn, Alexander. 2014. *Hindu-Catholic encounters in Goa: Religion, colonialism, and modernity.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Henrich, Dieter. 1992. *Aesthetic judgment and the moral image of the world.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Hiltebeitel, Alf. 2001. *Rethinking the Mahabharata.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Humphrey, Caroline. 2008. "Reassembling individual subjects: Events and decisions in troubled times." *Anthropological Theory* 8 (4): 357–80.

Ingold, Tim. 2000. *The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill.* New York: Psychology Press.

Jackson, Michael D. 1987. "On ethnographic truth." *Canberra Anthropology* 10 (2): 1–31.

———. 2004. *In Sierra Leone.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

———. 2014. "Ajala's heads: Reflections on anthropology and philosophy in West African Setting." In *The ground between: Anthropologists engage philosophy*, edited by Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhrigupati Singh, 27–49. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

———. Forthcoming. *Philosophy in a new key.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Jegannathan, Pradip. 2004. "Checkpoint: Anthropology, identity, and the state." In *Anthropology in the margins of the state,* edited by Veena Das and Deborah Poole, 67–80. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

Keane, Webb. 2015. *Ethical life: Its natural and social histories.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Khan, Naveeda. 2012. *Muslim becoming: Aspiration and skepticism in Pakistan.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kleinman, Arthur. 2008. *What really matters: Living a moral life amidst uncertainty and danger.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Laidlaw, James. 2014. *The subject of virtue: An anthropology of ethics and freedom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lambek, Michael. 1981. *Human spirits: A cultural account of trance in Mayotte.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Laugier, Sandra. 2005. "L'importance de l'importance." *Multitudes* 23 (4): 153–67.

———. 2011. "Introduction to the French edition of *Must we mean what we say?*" Translated by Daniella Ginsburg. *Critical Inquiry* 31 (4): 627–51.

———. 2013. *Why we need ordinary language philosophy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lawrence, David Peter. 2008. "Abhinavagupta's philosophical hermeneutics of grammatical persons." *Journal of Hindu Studies* 1 (1–2): 11–25.

Lear, Jonathon. 2006. *Radical hope: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 2015. "Waiting with Coetzee." *Raritan Quarterly* 34 (4): 1–26.

Lempert, Michael. 2013. "No ordinary ethics." *Anthropological Theory* 13 (4): 370–93.

Levi, Primo. 1958. *If this is a man.* London: Penguin.

Lévinas, Emannuel. 1988. "Useless suffering." In *The provocation of Lévinas: Rethinking the other,*" edited by R. Bernasconi and D. Woods, 156–87. New York: Routledge.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1963. "Social structure." In *Structural Anthropology,* 277–323. New York: Basic Books.

Løgstrup, Knud. 1997. *The ethical demand.* Translated by Hans Fink and Alasdair MacIntyre. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1984. *After virtue.* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Mahmood, Saba. 2004. *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mair, Jonathan, and Soumhya Venkatesan. 2015. "There is no such thing as the good: The 2013 meeting of the group for debates in anthropological theory." *Critique of Anthropology*: 1–5.

Malamoud, Charles. 1996. *Cooking the world: Ritual and thought in Ancient India.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Masco, Joseph. 2014. *The theater of operations.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Maskell, Duke. 1985. *Politics needs literature*. Retford, Nottinghamshire: Brynmill Press.

Mattingly, Cheryl. 2014. *Moral laboratories: Family peril and the struggle for a good life.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mookherjee, Nayanika. 2015. *The spectral wound: Sexual violence, public memories, and the Bangladesh war of 1971.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mulla, Sameena. 2014. *The violence of care: Rape victims, forensic nurses and sexual assault intervention.* New York: New York University Press.

Pandian, Anand. 2015. "In the event of an anthropological thought." In *Wording the world: Veena Das and the scenes of inheritance,* edited by Roma Chatterji, 158–272. New York: Fordham University Press.

Perdigon, Sylvain. 2015. "Between the womb and the hour: Statelessness, obligation and the disclosure of the world in a Palestinian refugee community." *Current Anthropology* 56 (1).

Puett, Michael. 2014. "Ritual disjunctions: Ghosts, philosophy, and anthropology." In *The ground between: Anthropologists engage philosophy*, edited by Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhrigupati Singh, 218–32. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ravaisson, Félix. 2008. *Of habit*. Translated by C. Carlisle and M. Sinclair. London: Continuum.

Robbins, Joel. 2007. "Between reproduction and freedom: Morality, value, and radical cultural change." *Ethnos* 72 (3): 293–314.

———. 2010. "Anthropology, Pentecostalism, and the New Paul: Conversion, event, and social transformation." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109 (4): 633–65.

———. 2015. "Ways of finding the good in anthropology." *Critique of Anthropology*: 258–72.

Sainsbury, R. M. 2002. "Concepts without boundaries." In *Departing from Frege: Essays in the philosophy of language*, 71–84. London: Routledge.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1993. *Death without weeping: The violence of everyday life in Brazil.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Selby, Don. 2012. "Patronage, face, vulnerability: Articulations of human rights in Thailand." *International Journal of Human Rights* 16 (2): 378–400.

———. 2015. "Experiments with fate: Buddhist morality and human rights in Thailand." In *Wording the world: Veena Das and scenes of inheritance,* edited by Roma Chatterji, 128–54. New York: Fordham University Press.

Seligman, Adam, Robert Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon. 2008. "Ritual and subjunctive." In *Ritual and its consequences: An essay on the limits of sincerity*, 17–42. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Singh, Bhrigupati. 2014. "How concepts make the world look different: Affirmative and negative genealogies of thought." In *The ground between: Anthropologists engage philosophy*, edited by Veena Das, Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhrigupati Singh, 159–87. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

———. 2015. *Poverty and the quest for life: Spiritual and material striving in rural India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smith, Katherine. 2012. *Fairness, class and belonging in contemporary England*. New York: Palgrave.

Sponberg, Alan. 2001. "Buddhist doctrine of compassion and ecology." *Journal of Global Religious Vision* 2:37.

Talebi, Shahla. 2011. *Ghosts of revolution*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Travis, Charles. 2006. *Thought's footing: A theme in Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Vogel, Shane. 2009. "By the light of what comes after: Eventologies of the ordinary." *Woman and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19 (2): 247–60.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1967. *Zettel*. Edited and translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 1968. *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

———. 1987. *Remarks on Frazer's* Golden Bough. Translated by A.C. Miles, revised by R. Rhees. London: Humanities Press.

Zigon, Jarrett. 2007. "Moral breakdown and the ethical demand: A theoretical framework for an anthropology of moralities." *Anthropological Theory* 7 (2): 131–50.

———. 2009. "Morality and personal experience: The moral conceptions of a Muscovite Man." *Ethos* 37 (1): 78–101.

———. 2014. "An ethics of dwelling and a politics of world building: A critical response to ordinary ethics." *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, n.s., 20: 746–64.

Varieties of ethical stance

Webb Keane

ETHICAL CREATURES

Humans are ethical creatures. They just are the sort of being that is prone to taking ethical stances toward themselves and others (see Laidlaw 2014: 1–4). Their everyday activities are saturated with judgments and values, at least some of which are oriented toward ends that cannot be explained by immediate utility, egoistic gain, or the neutral workings of causal mechanisms. People evaluate their own and others' conduct in this light. This is plausibly the case even for those who defy norms and transgress local values. In some respect, such evaluations underwrite the sense of self and its purposes. Anything this ubiquitous is likely also to work below the level of any individual's conscious awareness most of the time. In its sheer ordinariness, ethics can seem most compelling and convincing when it remains habitual, instinctual, and tacit. Yet ethics is also the topic of endless talk, thought, disagreement, and intentional efforts. It may appear to be most truly ethical when it is the product of conscious reflection and purposeful work.

Faced with these two apparently opposed portrayals of ethical life, anthropologists often ask us to take sides between them (see, for instance, Das 2012 and this volume; Lambek 2010, 2015, and this volume; Lempert 2013, 2015; Robbins 2007; Zigon 2007). One long tradition tends to view ethics as a matter

of rules, obligations, constraints, and other socially recognized norms that people can describe and debate. Another tradition stresses the flow of experience, embodiment, intuitions, and unselfconscious habits, and tends to be suspicious of talk and effort. (This suspicion is hardly confined to contemporary anthropology. For example, it also worried ancient Chinese philosophers; see Slingerland [2007].)

I think it's a mistake to put it this way, a matter of either/or: both perspectives capture something important about ethical life. Much of the time we are in the midst of the action; sometimes, however, we stand apart from it and view it from afar. These stances, and the ability to shift between them, are fundamental human capacities: neither of them is peculiar only to certain kinds of social worlds (like those of hunter-gatherers on the one hand, or techno-science on the other) or historical moments (such as some precolonial condition or else modernity), although one may find more favor ideologically and become more elaborated practically in some contexts than the other. This essay argues that any ethnographic approach to ethics must understand both kinds of stance and the dynamics by which they are implicated with one another. To that end, this essay works with a broad definition of *ethical life* to refer to people's actions and to their sense of themselves and of other people (and sometimes entities such as gods or animals), that are oriented with reference to values and ends that are not in turn defined as the means to some further ends. Of course, as I've suggested, any given individual may act in defiance of those evaluations, but he or she is rarely just indifferent to them.

Elsewhere I discuss some of the universalizing claims that have been made about moral psychology dimensions of ethics and their implications for the purported distinction between nature and culture (see Keane 2016). This essay (which draws from the volume just cited) focuses on the dialectics at play within social interaction, and between everyday interactions and the ongoing reshaping of ethics in its distinctive historical formations. At the heart of these dialectics are what we could call the first-, second-, and third- person stances. I'll have more to say about these in a moment. To start, however, consider this thought experiment posed by one of the founders of philosophical utilitarianism, William Godwin, in the eighteenth century. If a house is burning and I can save either Bishop Fenelon (an important social reformer and defender of human rights) or his chambermaid, but not both, which should I save? Godwin gives an early version of what would become a utilitarian answer. The rational choice is that which results in the greater good overall:

> Supposing the chambermaid had been my wife, my mother or my benefactor. This would not alter the truth of the proposition. The life of Fenelon would still be more valuable than that of the chambermaid; and justice, pure, unadulterated justice, would still have preferred that which was most valuable. (Godwin 1793: 83)

Accordingly, the bishop should be saved because his life has greater social value than the chambermaid's. But what if the maid is also my mother? Should calculations of utility trump the ethics of kinship? Godwin thinks so. But if they do, what kind of person would that show you to be? As the philosopher Bernard Williams remarks, if you hesitate in order to work out the justification for saving your mother rather than instinctively pulling her from the flames, that is "one thought too many" (1981: 18). The point is that saving the bishop is not just based on pure moral reasoning but on taking the objective position of an empirical social scientist. To do so is also to deny the first-person subjectivity, situatedness, and emotional logic of the actor in favor of the third-person stance of someone who views the action from outside.

Ethnographic tradition pushes back against this third-person stance in several ways. One is expressed in Michael Lambek's remark that "one of the virtues of practicing ethnographic fieldwork is that you see how people act in good faith, how they try to do what they think is right in the face of conflict and try to maintain self respect in conditions that work to undermine it" (2000: 318). This succinctly captures a distinctive feature of ethnography, the role we accord to people's self-understanding (an argument developed further in Keane 2003). But of course it also poses a problem. The first-person has its limits. For one thing, the horizons around it may be obscured, the insights it offers clouded. If we privilege people's self-understanding, how can we justify any critical perspective at all that departs from people's self-interested grasp of things? I will argue that one way is to recognize how people's capacity for the third-person stance chronically enters into their actions.

When confronted with the universals of philosophical reason or psychological research, anthropologists commonly insist on the local, the variable, their particularity, and their incommensurability. In that vein, I might give you a story from my own fieldwork in the 1980s and 1990s, on the island of Sumba, a rural Indonesian backwater (Keane 1997, 2007). One of the key structural features of Sumbanese society is asymmetrical marriage alliance. Sumbanese belong to their father's clan. Each clan is allied with certain other clans through marriages. In each generation, new marriages should renew those alliances. The way this

works in practice is that a man is supposed to marry a woman from the same clan that his mother came from. The ideal marriage, because it is the closest way to reproduce your father's marriage, is for a man to marry his mother's brother's daughter (thus a woman should marry her father's sister's son). These alliances are asymmetrical: the worst thing a man could do is reverse the direction and marry a woman from the clan into which his sister should marry. Although clans are large enough, and the ways one defines kin flexible enough that there is some room for individual choice, alliances are a matter of collective interest and are negotiated by teams of elders from the clans involved. Marriage is far too important to be left to the personal preferences of the future husband and wife. It is also too expensive for any individual to sponsor, since the alliance is established through the elaborate negotiation and exchange of valuables like pigs, horses, gold, and ivory, which reinforce ongoing relations of reciprocity and debt between affines. These negotiations and exchanges provide a public stage on which clans display their status, elders their political clout, negotiators their command of poetic speech, and individuals their wealth.

Many Americans to whom I have described the Sumbanese marriage system react strongly. It runs against some of their core ethical values, such as individual autonomy, the free choice of a spouse, the idea of a love match and companionate union, and the elevation of sentiment over material goods in the domestic sphere. It is against this background that I had a conversation with the elderly mother in the family with whom I lived at the time. Having talked often about their own marriage system, a topic Sumbanese find endlessly fascinating, she asked me whom my people are supposed to wed and what goods we use to accomplish it. When I told her it was up to the man and woman themselves, that there were no rules except for the prohibition on incest, and that we do not give goods in order to do it, she was visibly appalled. Thinking about my reply for a moment, she finally exclaimed with shock, "So Americans just mate like animals!"

A conventional way to tell this story is as an illustration of cultural relativism: they have their values and we have ours, and neither should be judged in light of the other. The clash between the two value systems has the salutary effect of denaturalizing what had seemed natural and fundamental to the naïve person on either side. From this denaturalizing effect, one might then draw the conclusion that values are social constructions, each system wholly distinct from, or even incommensurate with, the other (Povinelli 2001). But the idea of cultural relativism has not always fared well. For one thing, the view that

cultures are more or less bounded entities, self-contained, and internally consistent, has been hard to sustain in a world of constant migration, state penetration, mass media, global religions, and so forth. A veiled Muslim woman who is the paragon of virtue in Algeria might find herself the object of moral indignation in France; so too the scantily clad German tourist in Java. Nor are cultural complexity and permeability necessarily just modern phenomena: some would argue that cultural worlds have always been exposed both to "external" influence and "internal" contradictions by their very nature.

Here is another angle: the ethics underlying my Sumbanese friend's reaction is not entirely unrecognizable even to a freedom-loving American. Although the values in each marriage system seem directly opposed to one another, this woman appeals to some other principles that look familiar. She recognizes that different communities have different marriage systems, something true even across the small island of Sumba. After all, that is why she asked me the question. What makes the Sumbanese version distinctly ethical is, in part, the way in which it imposes external obligations and constraints on individual actors, in the name of some larger social good. Sumbanese are well aware that one might yearn to marry someone against the rules—and sometimes people do, although at considerable social cost. Moreover, they tell myths about ancestors whose supernatural powers included the ability to marry without marriage payments, stories whose appeal to listeners includes wish fulfillment. So the sense of constraint is real, and is linked to the sense of being ethical. It limits one's own willfulness. Those limits take concrete form not just in rules but in social interactions with other persons, who matter to one's own self-esteem. That very sense of limitations suggests yet another facet, that to be ethical is to be invested in a way of life, and to live up to some notion of what a good person ought to be. In the language of virtue ethics, it assumes a certain vision of human flourishing. Finally, an American might also recognize this aspect of my friend's remark: being ethical makes you human. To act without restraint is to be an animal.

Cultural accounts have their limits. People contradict one another and individuals themselves are inconsistent, to say nothing of self-deceiving, so whom do we believe? And some ethical insights are innovative or idiosyncratic by local standards. Valentine Daniel (1996: 211–12) reports an incident that occurred in the midst of riots in Sri Lanka, when Sinhalese were hunting down and slaughtering Tamils. A Tamil man was sitting on a bus when the mob stopped it to search for victims. As it happens, a Sinhalese woman was sitting next to him. Without saying a word, she took his hand and held it. Somehow this was

enough for the mob to overlook this one potential victim. Once the bus had passed on to a safe location the woman released his hand, and still without speaking, went on her way. Let's observe two things about this story. First is the wholly relativist point: from their perspective, the killers may themselves have felt they were acting ethically, moved to loyal defense of their community against people seen to be beyond the demands of that loyalty. For ethical inclusions always entail some exclusions as well. So our ethnographic respect for the killers' self-understanding, their own best sense of themselves, should trouble us—but we shouldn't abandon the principle of seeking to understand them in their own terms. Second, however, is this: the woman's act was spontaneous and idiosyncratic. Daniel's narrative gives us no reason to think a cultural account can explain it. But the universal claims of moral psychology won't help much either. After all, the killers were endowed with the same basic psychological endowments as the woman, the same fundamental capacities for empathy, sharing, norm-seeking, and, for that matter, bias.

The Sinhalese woman's intervention points to some key questions for any empirical research into ethics: what are the relations between her gut-level response, on the one hand, and explicit modes of argument and reasoning, on the other? How does either of those articulate with taken-for-granted community norms and their histories that inhabit many cultural explanations of morality? Or with the individual habits and the sense of self that lie at the heart of virtue ethics? Does a naturalistic explanation in affective, cognitive, or neurological terms have any bearing on what happens when people appeal to norms, reason with one another, fault others, or justify themselves—or vice versa? How do we make sense of this woman's apparently instinctive, idiosyncratic, and inventive act?

Perhaps the act simply bore out an implicit syllogism: the Tamil bus passenger is owed what we owe to a human. But in our effort at a wider-ranging understanding, once we bring in ontology—those background assumptions about reality that are implicit in a certain way of life—we find ourselves thrown back at the problem of relativism again. For not everyone agrees on all the same ontological premises. Communities that concur on most aspects of reality (fires need dry kindling, crops need water) may have vastly different answers to the question "what can count as an ethical actor?" In the contemporary West the ethically responsible self is usually—but not always—considered to be bound by birth (or maturity) at one end and death at the other. Not so in the various South Asian theories of karma, based as they are on the doctrine of endless

cycles of rebirth; they teach that individuals suffer the consequences in this life for misdeeds they performed in previous lives, which they cannot recall, but for which they remain, in some sense, responsible (Babb 1983; Doniger 1980). Nor is ethics confined to humans and gods. For instance, in some societies, hunters take their prey to be persons with whom they enter into social relationships of reciprocity, with obligations on both sides (Hallowell 1960; Nadasdy 2007). One need not venture so far: present-day middle-class Americans differ among themselves over such basic questions as the existence of angels, the reality of the immortal soul, the personhood of the fetus, the intervention of God in one's personal life, the responsibilities of corporations, the rights of animals—and of the earth itself. In the midst of alien ontologies, can we discern recognizable ethical intuitions? Is ethical concern something we can recognize even when applied to entities we might consider out of bounds? I think in many ways the answer will be "yes," and that to make sense of why that is so, we cannot rely on philosophical, psychological, or cultural explanations alone.

IDENTIFYING ETHICS

Anthropologists of morality and ethics rarely define their terms, and when they do, there is no consistency across the field (see Keane 2016, Introduction). As a rough heuristic, I take ethics to center on the question of how one should live and what kind of person one should be. But we should take this idea broadly: it's not just a matter of self-cultivation. It encompasses both one's relations to others and decisions about right and wrong acts. The sense of "should" refers to values, meaning things that are taken by the actor to be good in their own right rather than as means to some other ends. This refers to the point where the justifications for actions or ways of living stop, having run up against what seems self-evident—or just an inexplicable gut feeling.

I have found it useful to keep in mind a distinction articulated by Williams (1985). Williams is critical of the dominance of deontology in modern Western philosophy, an approach that emphasizes obligations and blame, and assumes they must be based on a consistent system of highly general principles that should apply to everyone regardless of their identities or circumstances. This emphasis, which he calls "the morality system," obscures other crucial aspects of what he calls "ethics." Ethics concerns a manner of life—not momentary events but something that unfolds over the long term, and that is likely to vary

according to one's circumstances. Ethics is thus less about discrete decisions and the rules that should govern them, than about virtues, which "involve characteristic patterns of desire and motivation" (Williams 1985: 9). Although both ethics and morality say something about what one owes to other people and how one should treat them, they differ in how they portray social relations. Many of the most powerful rules and obligations of the morality system are meant to be universal in application, drawing on principles that transcend any particular context or person, like Kant's categorical imperative. Moral obligations are the sort of things you might contemplate on your own. By contrast, ethics captures the way in which "the agent's conclusions will not usually be solitary or unsupported, because they are part of an ethical life that is to an important degree shared with others. In this respect, the morality system . . . conceals the dimension in which ethical life lies outside the individual" (Williams 1985: 191). This emphasis on the social nature of ethics is one reason why Williams' distinction between the two terms has been especially congenial to researchers working in historically and sociologically complex situations. It attends less to how ethics constrains people than to the ways it facilitates their ability to act and provides them with goals (Faubion 2001; Humphrey 1997; Laidlaw 2014).

But we should not draw the distinction between ethics and morality so sharply that we are forced to exclude some of the phenomena we want to understand. As I read Williams, ethics does include the morality system—it is just a special *kind* of ethics. It conceals but does not eliminate the ways ethics is socially embedded. And the ethnographic and historical records are indeed full of rules and obligations, put in very general terms, invoking or inculcating the third-person stance, which are meant to be internally consistent, like the morality system Williams criticizes. Since these extend far beyond the tradition in Western philosophy that Williams had in mind, we may use the expression in the plural and propose that there are *many* morality systems, of which the tradition Williams attacks is only one example. In certain communities, including many of those governed by formal religious systems, following rules *is* what the virtuous life consists in. Other examples include Imperial China and premodern Europe, where morality was often treated as something people could not be expected to grasp unless they had been instructed by authorities (Brokaw 1991; Schneewind 1988).

If Williams is right to insist we not reduce ethics to a morality system, we should still recognize that the production and inculcation of morality systems are among the powerful historical realities we need to understand. Putting

morality systems in the context of ethics encourages us not to take their existence for granted. Instead, we can ask what circumstances tend to foster or induce the development of morality systems. "Morality" can thus be treated as a special case within ethics. Moreover, I will argue that it works in an ongoing relationship with the everyday, taken-for-granted activities and processes of self-formation characteristic of ethical life.

One way to grasp the link between values and how one should live has been summarized by the philosopher Elizabeth Anderson this way: "value judgments commit one to certain forms of self-assessment" (1993: 3). That is, there is a crucial link between one's sense of self-worth, and the sense of obligation, duty, and right and wrong. Anderson goes on to say that because the meaning that values hold is public, one's sense of self-worth is something that others can grasp as well. The ethical self cannot be just a private matter. I want to argue that the role of others is crucial, not just as objects of one's ethical concerns or acts but for the very recognizability of concerns or acts as falling within an ethical domain altogether.

ETHICS AS AWARENESS

Cutting across the distinction between ethics and morality is another one, that between the tacit and the explicit, those background assumptions, values, and motives that go without saying or are difficult to put into words, on the one hand, and those that easily lend themselves to conscious reflection, on the other. This distinction does not map directly onto that between ethics and morality. Ethical life often involves psychological phenomena that work beneath the level of awareness. People's gut-level responses to certain ethical situations the psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2001) calls "moral dumbfounding," a puzzled inability to give good reasons in support of a strong ethical intuition. Those intuitions can derive from the background assumptions an ethnographer elicits from a community, or the individual gut-level responses that interest psychologists. In either case, when background assumptions are put into words, they undergo changes in both their cognitive and sociological character. As a result, verbal report is at best a poor guide to the sources of people's feelings and decisions, or even to what they know or believe. But ideas and values that are subject to conscious apprehension do have important social and historical roles. For one thing, they are more easily transmitted to distant times and places, in forms such

as doctrinal teachings and codes of conduct. By the same token, they are also rendered more subject to post hoc justifications, to criticism, to instrumental manipulation, and to reform.

If we accept that morality systems and ethics can be treated within a single field of inquiry, then what should we make of the distinction between explicit and tacit, what is put into words, and what remains taken-for-granted or beneath awareness altogether? We might divide the question into two parts: first, what conditions induce explicitness, and second, what are the practical or conceptual consequences of explicitness? To see what is at stake here, let's turn to another contrast. Many definitions of ethics in the Western philosophical tradition turn on a distinction between the causes of an action and the reasons for it. In these traditions, for an action to count as ethical it must be directed or justified in the light of some values recognized as ethical by the actor (Parfit 2011). This requires both some degree of autonomy from natural causality or social pressure (one could have done otherwise) and some quality of self-awareness (one must know what one is doing). Something like this distinction apparently holds even in traditions as far from Western philosophy as South Asian karma. At first glance it may seem mere fatalism to attribute my misfortunes to actions carried out in a previous life that I cannot remember. But in some common views of karma those actions are *ethical* misdeeds because they were carried out by someone who was responsible precisely because, at the time of the misdeed, they had volition and knew their moral obligations.

Even Michel Foucault, an heir to Nietzsche's skeptical quarrel with much of the Western philosophical tradition, holds the fairly conventional view that ethics depends on reflexivity (1985, 1997). In Foucault's view, this reflexivity turns on a capacity for self-distancing, since "thought . . . is what allows one to step back . . . to present [one's conduct] to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals" (1997: 117). Like much of the Western tradition, this takes the relative freedom or autonomy, that which defines an action or stance as being ethical, to be inseparable from heightened self-consciousness in the domain of reasons and justifications (Schneewind 1998).

Challenging this tradition are the apparently corrosive effects of both the natural and the social sciences on Euro-American ethical thought. Since the era of Darwin, Marx, Comte, Quetelet, and Freud, both naturalistic and sociological explanations have challenged the human self-mastery and self-awareness implicit in the morality system. By pointing to forces and causes beyond ordinary awareness, these explanations can seem to debunk the feeling that your

actions are guided by your own conscious purposes. The neurologist and "new atheist" Sam Harris (2012) gives one example. In 2007, two men in Connecticut committed a completely unmotivated rape, murder, and arson. It turned out they suffered from brain malformations that deprived them of any capacity for empathy. Harris writes, "Whatever their conscious motives, these men cannot know why they are as they are. Nor can we account for why we are not like them." Put another way, the third-person stance that reveals mechanical causality simply trumps the first-person point of view, the actor's own grasp of what he or she is doing. Harris asserts that such findings eliminate any role for the concepts of morality or justice. Coming from a very different intellectual tradition, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1988) reaches a parallel conclusion. To see human activity as the product of ideological state apparatuses or neoliberal economics is a "science of unfreedom" (see Laidlaw 2014). As with neuroscience, so too sociology: causal explanations that undermine people's self-understanding and cast doubt on freedom likewise seem to eliminate responsibility, and even (at least for Harris), the ethical domain altogether.

But if people are largely unaware of who they are and why they do what they do, we may ask with Harris or Bauman whether their characters or their actions can really count as ethical at all. The approach I take here is twofold. First, I argue that reflexivity is not a necessary precondition for ethics as such. But it can play a catalyzing role in producing that public knowledge that feeds back into people's un-self-conscious responses to other people and their actions. For people's ethical intuitions may not always be subject to reflection. However, in order to identify certain situations as posing a distinctively ethical question (rather than, say, a question of practical efficiency) or an individual as having a character of a certain ethical kind (subject to judgments about the ends of action themselves), people can draw on those descriptions that are available to them. Those descriptions—some might be summed up in simple words like "lie" or "loyalty," others require more elaborate discussion—are public knowledge: you can expect other individuals to recognize them much as you do. In its fullest form, this public knowledge plays a crucial role in defining for people whether a given act or way of life *is or is not an ethical matter at all*—something the philosopher Anthony Appiah (2008) suggests is the moral question itself. (This is no trivial matter—for instance, the dismissal of social consequences from consideration in some versions of neoliberal economic policy gains some of its legitimacy from decisions about what does or does not count as an ethical matter.) Second, I pay attention to the social circumstances that induce reflexivity. They are crucial to understanding ethics

because they also enter into the dynamics of recognition and self-recognition that underlie the sense of self-affirmation Anderson refers to.

In short, taken as an object of empirical research, ethics is defined neither by rationality nor by special kinds of self-consciousness. Nor should we decide in advance what, in any given empirical case, will turn out to count as ethical. But because ethics draws on a *heterogeneous* set of psychological, cultural, and sociological resources, some account is needed for what *groups them together* as "ethical" for any set of persons in a context. This grouping might not be due to any single essence that they all have in common. Given the heterogeneity of everything that might fall under the rubric of "ethics," it is the existence of *publicly known descriptions* and categories, and their role in people's own ability to reflect on themselves and their situations that helps define the common threads of value running through them. The first-person perspective is often informed by resources that the third-person stance makes available. The latter, in turn, commonly develops through reflections on the experiences of the former.

In order to understand what produces ethical reflexivity, we must look at what happens when all of these are put into play in *social interactions*. For social interactions are the natural home of justifications, excuses, accusations, reasons, praise, blame, and all the other ways in which ethics comes to be made explicit. They always require a self and an other to whom that self owes an accounting.

Many religious and philosophical traditions of moral thought propose that ethics must have a universal and comprehensible basis if it is to make serious claims on people. As I will suggest below, this commonly entails the capacity to take the third-person stance, the perspective of anyone-at-all, standing anywhere-at-all. Empirical research has long posed two kinds of challenge to these assumptions. One is relativist: ethnographers and historians often emphasize dramatic cultural differences against claims about the universality of ethical intuitions. By contrast, psychology and neuroscience often suggest that apparent diversity masks shared human traits (this too invokes the authority of the third-person perspective). But such accounts pose another challenge, seeming to replace judgment with causality. As I have noted, this runs counter to one philosophical position, that ethics cannot just be doing the right thing, but must be doing it for the right reason. Here many philosophers might take sides with the anthropologists in giving a privileged place to the first-person stance of someone in particular, who is in the midst of the action and committed to its outcomes. The relations among these dimensions of human life are neither wholly deterministic nor unidirectional. We also need a concept that will allow

us to grant the reality of certain aspects of humans, as both animals and creators of social history, without forcing us to conclude that these properties necessarily *determine* the results in every case. Here we might speak of ethical affordances.

ETHICAL AFFORDANCES

By *ethical affordance* I mean any aspects of people's experiences and perceptions that they might draw on in the process of making ethical evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not. As defined by psychologist James J. Gibson (1977: 67–68), the affordance of something is that combination of properties in light of what it offers the animal that perceives it. Gibson stresses that although the properties are objective phenomena, they serve as affordances only in particular combinations and relative to particular actors. Thus, "If an object that rests on the ground, has a surface that is itself sufficiently rigid, level, flat, and extended, and if this surface is raised approximately at the height of the knees of the human biped, then it affords sitting-on . . . [but] knee-high for a child is not the same as knee-high for an adult" (1977: 68). Two crucial points in this original definition are, first, that affordances are materially objective features, and, second, they only exist as affordances relative to the properties of some other entity insofar as it is engaged in a particular activity. One's response to an affordance does not depend on cognitive representations. A weary hiker may ease herself onto a rock ledge without conceiving of it as chair-like, or even being aware that she is doing so at all.

Affordance is an alternative to the classic argument from design—that if something functions in a certain way, then that must be its original purpose. What is crucial here is the fact of (mere) potentiality: a chair may invite you to sit, as George Herbert Mead ([1934] 1962) suggested, but it does not *determine* that you will sit. You may instead use it as a stepladder, a desk, a paperweight, a lion tamer's prop, to prop up an artwork, to burn as firewood, to block a door, to hurl at someone. Or you may not use it at all. Affordances are properties of the chair vis-**à**-vis a particular human activity. As such they are real, and exist in a world of natural causality (the material properties of wooden chairs afford the holding down of loose papers or catching fire), but they do not induce people to respond to them in any particular way.

Affordance is summoned forth by agency. I want to argue that this quality of potentiality is a necessary consideration in any empirical approach to ethics,

if we accept two basic propositions: first, that ethics has some naturalistic components, and second, that to be properly ethical, an act or way of living cannot simply be the inevitable outcome of a set of mechanical causes. Not just physical objects but *anything at all* that people can experience, such as emotions, bodily movements, habitual practices, linguistic forms, laws, etiquette, or narratives possesses an indefinite number of combinations of properties. In any given circumstance, properties are available for being taken up in some way within a particular activity, while others will be ignored.

It seems to me that the idea of affordance does a better job of illuminating links between the particularities of social and historical circumstances and the universal cognitive, affective, interactional, and other capacities on which ethical responses draw than do the more traditional versions of cultural construction. It suggests a way to explore their connections without assuming they must lead either to sheer determinism, on the one hand, or to a promethean human capacity—and will—to construct its reality, on the other. Ethical affordances can be found in any feature of human psychology, patterns of face-to-face interaction, or social institutions that can be taken up and elaborated within ethical projects. They are part of what makes it possible for ethics to be both a universal feature of human existence as an animal species and something that has particular social histories.

GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF ONESELF

The process of making things explicit and therefore readily available to reflective awareness, or objectification, draws on people's basic capacity to take a third-person stance, as Adam Smith ([1790] 1976) stressed long ago. But this capacity is not developed in the privacy of individual minds. The third-person stance emerges out of social interaction, whose dynamics afford the development of ethical reflexivity. Judith Butler gives us one version of how this works. She argues that people are called on to make explicit ethical claims in the context of other people's suffering.

> We are being asked by an established authority not only to avow a causal link between our own actions and the suffering that follows but also to take responsibility for these actions and their effects. In this context, we find ourselves in the position of having to give an account of ourselves. (2005: 10)

Notice three aspects of this situation, as Butler describes it. First, giving an account of oneself does not occur spontaneously nor is the speaker the only agent behind this action; there is someone other than the speaker who instigates it. Second, some notion of causality is involved. It follows that as ideas about causality vary across histories and societies (do local ideas about causality include divinities? witches? the will? neurons? viruses? chance? fate?) so too will both the content of the account and whether or not an account is called for. Third, there is the notion of responsibility—an avowed relationship to causality (I caused this to happen)—that implies some further consequences, such as punishment, forgiveness, or, say, a decision that no one is responsible at all.

What I want to stress is that people's self-understanding as ethical beings is most often instigated by the dynamics of interaction. It is those very dynamics that give rise to—indeed, may demand—explicit ethical accounts. I address someone to whom I *owe* an account, whose perspective on my actions matters in some way. Nor is consciousness definitive: there is nothing inherent about people's judgments as such that requires them to be fully self-aware about their ethics or able to verbalize it. And as Butler's scenario suggests, ethical self-awareness can have a retrospective and reconstructive character. But it is important that people do (sometimes) become ethically self-aware and verbal, and do (sometimes) project themselves forward in time as ethical persons—and that is crucial to the ways in which psychology and social history feed into one another. Moreover, the process may lead to ethical discoveries and innovations, as people respond to newly apparent affordances in themselves, and in the ideas, practices, and institutions their context makes available.

Butler's approach is via exegesis of canonical European philosophical texts. But if our task is to gain an empirical understanding across the full range of human experience, we need to look at other kinds of evidence. Here I will turn to research on ordinary social interaction, a granular view of activities that can seem quite banal. But their power lies precisely in their ubiquity, the way they saturate the flow of experience. As the sociologist Harvey Sacks remarks,

> human history *proper* begins with the awareness by Adam and Eve that they are observables. . . . By the term "being an observable" I mean having, and being aware of having, an appearance that permits warrantable inferences about one's moral character. (1972: 281 and 333n1)

To become aware that you are "an observable," in Sack's distinctive turn of phrase, is to find yourself amidst other people, imagining their perspective on you and their evaluations. It is also a feature of that capacity for reflection to which Foucault points in characterizing ethics.

James Laidlaw (2014) picks up on Foucault's point to argue that any anthropology of ethics must work with a concept of freedom. Leaving the philosophical conundrums about freedom to the side for now, consider this basic feature of social interaction: the outcome is never fully in anyone's hands. Take this American undergraduate describing a conversation with her boyfriend:

> I got into an argument, I guess we got into a fight and I didn't even know that we got into a fight, I thought we were just arguing. . . . I thought we were just having a discussion. And he was really mad and he strode off. And I went "wait, are we in a fight?" (Gershon 2010: 400)

As Gershon remarks, "one is not always certain a breakup is taking place, even if you are the one initiating the breakup" (2010: 396). In making sense of what is going on, people are not simply involved in a quest for meaning. They are forming judgments and allocating responsibility. When people try to claim or deny responsibility for their actions, they often do so by defining those actions in ways that will get others to assess them in certain ways and not others. They have stakes in what is going on.

When Butler says that one is called upon to give an account of oneself in an encounter with an accuser, she evokes a scene whose structural parallels run through the ongoing doings of everyday life. Little encounters can be effective in constructing ethical realities precisely because, saturating experience, they are so easy not to notice. Marjorie Goodwin has shown how complex this activity can be, by analyzing the genre of "he-said-she-said" carried out by working class African-American girls in Philadelphia.

> A girl accuses another of a particular infraction: having talked about her behind her back. The offended party confronts an alleged offending party because she wants to "get something straight." . . . [for instance, saying] "And **Tan**ya said that **you** said that (0.6) **I** was showin' off just because I had that **bl:ouse** on. . . . These declarative utterances establish the accuser's ground (warrant) for the accusation, how she learned about the offense. Responses to the accusations are typically denials ("**Uh** uh. I ain't say anything") or accusations about the intermediary party's

work in setting up the confrontation ("Well she lie. I ain't **say** that"). Indeed, within a single utterance a girl can invoke a coherent domain of action, a small culture, one that includes identities, actions, and biographies for the participants within it, in addition to a relevant past that warrants the current accusation, and makes relevant specific types of next actions. (Goodwin 2006: 7)

Here are three distinct ethical offences identifiable with three accusers and defendants: the topic of the original gossip (showing off), the original act of speaking (malicious gossip), and act of passing that speech along (he-said-she-said). These girls are implicitly giving accounts of themselves (as righteous) and of others (as show-offs, gossips, and perhaps traitors). They have ready-to-hand an array of ethical categories they can make more or less explicit about kinds of person and types of action. These are not necessarily subject to prolonged reflection but they are available in the face of accusations: each girl could, if called upon, give an account of herself and of her playmates.

In contrast to Butler, who invokes a Kafkaesque scene in which the speaker is summoned to stand before an overpowering figure of the law, to face judgment and possibly dire punishment, these examples can seem to be quite trivial matters. Yet there is a structural resemblance. One does not simply account for oneself because one is endowed with the spirit of inquiry, or even with the need for meaning as such. Something must instigate the giving of an account. It could be the accusation of an authority, or, say, the religious rituals of confession and absolution. But self-accounting does not require intensely loaded circumstances. It might just arise from efforts to be seen as normal. Sometimes the main risk is simply not being taken seriously. But the power of such maneuvers lies in their very ordinariness and ubiquity. Saturating the ongoing flow of everyday life, they prompt certain kinds of self-awareness, prompted by the need to respond to other people.

DEFINING THE SITUATION AS ETHICAL

Each person responds not just to what the others do but also to the available means of making sense of what they do. The giving of accounts is characteristically provoked when people need to allocate responsibility for an action. This may occur not only in public negotiations, formal accusations, or didactic discourses, but also the ordinary and ubiquitous flow of conversation. In

a characteristically minor key, J. L. Austin (1979) also discusses the giving of accounts when he asks, "When do we excuse conduct?" His response focuses on conversational interaction: "In general, the situation is one where someone is *accused* of having done something, or (if that will keep it any cleaner) where someone is *said* to have done something which is bad, wrong, inept, unwelcome, or in some other of the numerous ways untoward" (1979: 175–76, emphases in the original). Notice the role of speech here. That talk is doing two things that depend on each other. They single out a person or persons as responsible but they also must describe a situation or an action as one that calls for judgments about responsibility, even things it makes ethical sense to have emotional responses to, against the implicit possibility the situation does *not* call for ethical evaluation.

One of Austin's types of excuses involves how one characterizes an action. He points out a distinction in English language usage between justification and excuse. A justification focuses on the action. Confronted with a possible misdeed or transgression, the work of justification depends on redescribing or reclassifying the action so that it is not a wrong. A killing done in battle, which is justified, is not murder (1979: 176–77). An excuse, on the other hand, focuses on the agent: a killing arising from an accident on a wet road, which is unintentional, is not murder (at least in the twentieth-century English society in which Austin writes). So, we can rephrase Austin's remark "it is to evade responsibility, or full responsibility, that we most often make excuses" (1979: 181) to say, descriptions of actions and persons in terms of ethical categories are provoked by accusations. These descriptions may draw on locally available ideas about causality. In societies like Sumba, people are encouraged to view themselves inhabiting a morally saturated universe (see Keane 2014) and are likely to think there are no accidents; even a slippery road might not serve as an excuse. Elsewhere, the agent's intentions might be irrelevant: Oedipus punishes himself for acts he knows he did not intend (Williams 1981). If the action itself is not a transgression, then ethical responsibility can be a moot point. A precondition for the attribution of responsibility is the establishment of what Erving Goffman called a "definition of the situation" (1959), G. E. M. Anscombe "action under a description" (1957), or, Michael Silverstein "metapragmatics" (1993). But categories of action do not simply exist out there in the world. As the philosopher David Velleman puts it,

> We talk about "taking" an action, as if we were picking an apple from a tree, but actions don't antecedently exist in nature, waiting to be picked. What we call

taking an action is actually *making* an action, by *en*acting some act-description or action concept. Which actions we can make depends on which descriptions or concepts are available for us to enact. (2013: 27)

What is key here is to recognize that the giving of reasons and the ethical description of actions are hardly confined to the grave debates of high theorists—they run through the most banal moments of everyday life. That very ubiquity is part of what gives them their power. They are not radically different in kind from more formal activities like debates about justice, or religious catechisms. Nor from the telegraphic metalanguage of a New York crack dealer: "Real crazy. Yeah! Ray's a fuckin' pig; Ray's a wild motherfucker. He's got juice. You understand Felipe? Juice! . . . On the street *that means respect*" (Bourgois 2003: 24, emphasis mine).

In sum, verbal interaction is not merely an arena within which character is established or challenged, recognition offered or denied. It is also the preeminent site where people may demand explicit reasons and accountings of one another or provide them. It is in response to the demands posed by talk that rationalizations and justifications arise. The natural home of argument, reasoning, and justification is not in the individual autonomous mind but in palpable social interactions, whether face-to-face or in more mediated forms—for even doctrinal texts imply an addressee. These practices can result in the objectifications that endow ethics with its historical character, something that endures beyond the momentary situation, but that can also change beyond recognition.

Interactions depend on the participants constructing a shared sense of the reality of the immediate situation (Goffman 1967). Their judgments are the everyday workings of the often unwitting exclusions of class, ethnicity, and gender. As Philippe Bourgois describes a street-wise Puerto Rican crack dealer in New York's El Barrio,

he mobilized violence, coercion, and friendship in a delicate balance that earned him consistent profits and guaranteed him a badge of respect on the street. In contrast, in his forays into the legal economy, Ray's same street skills made him appear to be an incompetent, gruff, illiterate, urban jíbaro to the inspectors, clerks, and petty officials who allocate permits and inventory product, and who supervise licensing in New York City. (2003: 135)

But we do not need to look for gross differences of ethnicity, class, or gender to encounter the role of evaluation in minor aspects of interaction. In a famous

experiment, sociologist Harold Garfinkel had his students spend fifteen minutes to an hour at home with their parents, acting as if they were boarders. In response to the small changes in their interactions, such as extra politeness, the parents commonly reacted in strong terms:

> Reports were filled with accounts of astonishment, bewilderment, shock, anxiety, embarrassment and anger, and with charges by various family members that the student was mean, inconsiderate, nasty or impolite. Family members demanded explanations: What's the matter? What has got into you? Did you get fired? Are you sick? What are you being so superior about? Why are you mad? Are you out of your mind or just stupid? One student acutely embarrassed his mother in front of her friend by asking if she minded if he had a snack from the refrigerator. "Mind if you have a little snack? You've been eating little snacks around here for years without asking me. What's gotten into you?" One mother, infuriated when her daughter spoke to her only when she was spoken to, began to shriek in angry denunciation of the daughter for her disrespect and insubordination and refused to be calmed by the student's sister. A father berated his daughter for being insufficiently concerned for the welfare of others and for acting like a spoiled child. (1967: 47–48)

Here mere matters of appropriateness that undermine the sense that participants agree on the context and the nature of their relationships are deeply unsettling and prompted judgments about character and other aspects of how people ought to value one another.

How do we understand the remarkable animus of the parents' responses to Garfinkel's students? The problem is not merely a matter of messages gone astray. We need to consider as well the ways in which interactions build up a sense of shared reality and establish people's regard for one another. Any given moment in a conversation, one person is interpreting what the other person has said. By this ongoing checking, revising, and re-checking one another over time, people draw on the affordances of semiotic form—timing, pauses, intonation, word choice, et cetera—to build up an implicit description of who they are and what they are doing: that they are joking or serious, quarreling or engaging in banter, gossiping or making plans, that they are friends, business partners, lovers, fellow passengers, bosses, servants, rivals, and so forth. The process of responding to the other person over the time span of the interaction means that the shared reality is not simply a matter of following a template or schema; it is emergent

and subject to reevaluation over the course of the interaction. What the parents in Garfinkel's experiment display is one possible consequence of challenges to that sense of reality: they seem to draw strong *ethical* inferences from apparently superficial *forms* of behavior. For our purposes, two things are important in this approach to interaction: those forms of behavior characteristically anticipate the perspective of the other person, and their realization depends on the response and possible reframing by that other person over a stretch of time. In interaction, people's ethical responses to one another are not just a result of empathy or some other *individual* psychological disposition. They are built up, reshaped, or undermined, in time, between people, and through the mediation of perceptible material forms such as language, bodily deportment, and so forth. There is a continuum from the minor technical glitch—two people starting to speak at the same moment—to the shaming, humiliation, and potential job-loss experienced by men of the Barrio in midtown office buildings, the stigmatization of social outcasts, and even the exclusion of some categories of people from humanity altogether, as in some kinds of slavery or ethnic violence.

The crucial point here is that judgments saturate interaction and take its properties, patterns that serve a diversity of communicative functions—as ethical affordances. Between the extremes of minor glitches in the conversational flow and outright racism, sexism, and the like, are situations like the following, arising from the most ordinary of service encounters: ordering coffee at Starbucks. As linguistic anthropologist Paul Manning (2008) analyzes these encounters, they can become fraught due to contradictions that disrupt the smooth flow of interaction. In its early days, Starbucks projected an aura of high status, due to the complicated—and to many people, unfamiliar—taxonomy of drinks on offer. Problems arise when baristas correct customers who fail to order drinks using the correct terms in the right sequence. From the point of view of the barista, proper ordering is simply a technical matter of making the job go more smoothly. But the correction is what conversation analysts call a potentially threatening "other initiated repair" of the customer's speech. It can seem to customers to be an assault. Some customers seem to be predisposed to this sense of vulnerability because of contradictions built into the situation. The contradictions are multiple: baristas have expert knowledge of the taxonomy but are also structurally subordinate to customers (who are supposed to be "always right"). This contradiction of hierarchies is crosscut by a basic egalitarian ethos governing interactions in middle-class American life that can make the fundamentally unequal nature of service encounters the locus of heightened sensitivities all

around. Studying a website where Starbucks baristas could vent after an irritating day at work Manning found that these sensitivities are expressed in their rants about bad customers:

> Because of the way that Starbucks overlays class anxieties . . . on an already fraught customer-server relationship, some customers treat the attempt at repair to be in itself a face-threatening act of "correction," or will obstinately refuse to cooperate, or will continue to blunder forward in confusion, leading the conversation to a place where the issue is no longer a technical crisis, but a normative one. At such points the most explicit statements of presuppositions about the hierarchical nature of the service relationship will be found, attempts will be made by customers to achieve by stipulation the respect it is felt are due all customers at the expense of the respect which is generally not felt to be due to the server. The recrudescence of the aristocratic memory that haunts all service interactions is the focus here. The basic claim that is being made is that servers in service interactions also are owed the courtesy that is normatively accorded customers in general. . . . Each of these transcripts of about customers is haunted by the normative, but absent, image of ordinary talk between equals. (Manning 2008: 123–24)

Viewed as a problem in ethical life, these encounters reveal an endemic contradiction between a norm of equality that has deep historical roots in a larger American public sphere, and equally powerful norms surrounding anonymous market interactions in consumer society. What could be described in the imposing terms of political culture or moral philosophy here come to a head in ways so trivial as to seem merely irritating or bewildering to the participants—why was that barista so rude? Why are customers such jerks? But it is their very ubiquity and opacity that can give interactions like these their power. They seem merely to reflect reality, the natural qualities of people, in an ethical light. They play out not as conflicts about the technical apparatus of conversation or about normative life in the abstract but as judgments about people's character.

ETHICS OBJECTIFIED

The distinction between first-person and third-person stances invokes two approaches to ethics: on the one hand, as the embedded in the habitual and

un-self-conscious flow of life, on the other hand, as a matter of more or less general norms, principles, or rules that demand people be self-aware. But ethical life is not a matter of one or the other. It involves movement between these perspectives, as well as the second-person stance, address to another person from the first-person position. (In conversation, of course, first- and second-person are mutually implicated since people switch back and forth between them.) The third-person person stance can appear within, and can refer to, life as seen from the first-person perspective of someone who is in the midst of the action. The most obvious form this takes is the naming of features of ordinary interaction within a lexicon of ethical categories made available by a particular language.

To start, consider the idea of *dignity* in English (and related European languages). One of the most famous invocations of dignity in Western thought is Kant's distinction between ends and means:

> In the kingdom of ends everything has either a *price* or a *dignity*. What has a price can be replaced with something else as its *equivalent*; what . . . is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity. . . . That which constitutes the condition under which something can be an end in itself has not merely a relative value, that is, a price, but an inner value, that is *dignity*. (Kant 1996: 84)

This expresses an idea that runs through the Western tradition of ethical thought, that human ethical life must be treated as something that, by its very essence, is a distinct kind of entity from the objects of naturalistic explanation. The latter can be exhaustively treated in terms of mechanical causality or instrumental rationality, but not the former. We can see distant echoes of the Kantian idea even in the demotic and seemingly amoral world of crack dealers in El Barrio:

> Primo's best and cheapest insurance against physical assault was to surround himself with a network of people who genuinely respected and liked him. [But when I mentioned this,] Primo considered somewhat insulting my functionalist interpretation of why he treated his friends and acquaintances so generously. (Bourgois 2003: 107)

Even someone as cynical as a drug dealer, in finding the suggestion that he uses his friends offensive, is nodding to the premise that at least some humans are not supposed to be treated only as instrumental means to other ends.

The moral philosopher Stephen Darwall (2006) argues that the importance of dignity as a moral concept is not just in the first-person sense that "I possess dignity." Rather, what is crucial is the second-person standpoint: I can demand that another person treat me with respect for my dignity. The idea of dignity in his view is fundamentally *interactive*. It follows that the ethics of dignity depends on a semiotics of behavior. One person's dignity must be perceptible to another; it cannot remain an inner quality alone.

Ethnographies, unsurprisingly, are full of descriptions of the resources and strategies that allow people to retain their dignity, even in the face of apparent failures. For example, Bourgois notes that New York crack dealers who have lost their low-level office jobs are likely to see this as resulting from their principled refusal to abandon their dignity. They treat economic failure as a form of self-assertion in the name of deeper values:

> Obedience to the norms of high-rise, office-corridor culture is in direct contradiction to street culture's definitions of personal dignity—especially for males who are socialized not to accept public subordination. . . . They were usually fired from these jobs, but they treated their return to the world of street dealing as a triumph of free will and resistance on their part. (Bourgois 2003: 115)

As one of these men reflected, after being fired, "I got my respect back. . . . The money I make [dealing drugs] is for my personal madness; for my personal drug-addiction and self-destruction. It's something only I could control. No one could tell me what to do with it" (Bourgois 2003: 118).

This man's sense of dignity is based on the aggressive display of masculinity. But we can also see the ethics of dignity at work in a quite different world, that of militantly gay men:

> In those circles where queerness has been most cultivated, the ground rule is that one doesn't pretend to be *above* the indignity of sex. And although this usually isn't announced as an ethical vision, that's what it perversely is. In queer circles, you are likely to be teased and abused until you grasp the idea. . . . This kind of culture . . . has its own norms, its own way of keeping people in line. I call its way of life an ethic not only because it is understood as a better kind of self-relation, but because it is the premise of the special kind of sociability that holds queer culture together (Warner 1999: 35)

Notice that the assault on dignity Michael Warner describes here depends on shaming practices—it still takes place within the domain of self-esteem and its dependence on the respect of others, a domain where we also find dignity.

It may be that even crack dealers and radical queers still take their bearings from the background assumptions of modern Euro-American societies. So let's turn to the concept of *dewa* as I understood it while living on Sumba in the 1980s and 1990s. Several decades earlier, the missionary-ethnographer Louis Onvlee summarized the concept in ways that still rang true in my time. Ndewa (as he spells it) is "that in a man through which he is as he is, . . . his character and to an important degree, also his appointed fate, and that which differentiates one person from others" ([1957] 1973: 211–12). If fate is what distinguishes random events from a biography that has a direction, as Meyer Fortes (1959) suggested long ago, then it may, for example, be heading toward success or failure. We might add that the evaluation of this biography implies some underlying sense of human flourishing. Otherwise, what would count as success or failure? Dewa links that narrative to individual distinctiveness, but not one that is created by the individual alone.

I heard the word dewa used most often when people talked about their interactions with others. In particular, it explains why one does or does not have influence over them. This influence is crucial in a society where the norms of ceremonial gift exchange in marriages, funerals, and other rituals is both hard to enforce directly, yet central to the forging of social relations (Keane 1997). The exchanges that make social relations tend to have a competitive tone to them. Even though marriage negotiations should end with a solid alliance between families, they are often portrayed as a contest. The successful suitor might say his dewa defeated that of his bride's father. When gift exchanges do not go well, it may be due to the disappointed recipient have a "hindered dewa," which rejects others people's generosity. If other people *are* generous to you, that shows the power of your own dewa. This is why you should never turn down even a trivial gift, such as a chew of betel nut or a cigarette; to reject good fortune could block future generosity. This is also one reason petty traders often fail. The ethics of interaction overwhelm the dictates of profit seeking. As one former kiosk owner remarked, "If you give people credit, they'll just feel honored, and won't feel any need to repay the debt" (Keane 1997: 203). In this way, the idea of dewa both acknowledges how dependent people are on one another and yet also ends up assimilating other people's actions to one's own character.

The dewa is manifested not just in the outcomes of interaction but also in one's own bearing. The condition of one's dewa is embodied, and therefore, is perceptible: it is semiotically available to others. At the same time, it palpably registers the effects of those others on oneself. The result of being offended by someone else is a "small dewa," which shows that someone doesn't know his or her "own value." Here's how one man described it to me:

> When we gather, such a person walks timidly, doesn't speak up, like if he comes to our house, he doesn't directly climb up on the veranda where we sit and stick out his hand, but creeps along to the far end and sits there . . . if he makes a con-veyance oration, his enunciation isn't right. Or his clothing isn't suitable. (Keane 1997: 206)

A small dewa can lead to absent-mindedness, fainting spells, or shamelessness, in short, a loss of self-possession. But, like dignity, dewa is not just a matter of individual character. A weak or hindered dewa may come from being embarrassed, startled, or insulted. Sometimes a hindered dewa results from a mismatch between husband and wife. Dewa is most typically the result of interaction gone wrong, which in turn threatens to induce further bad interactions in the future. In these ways, the concept of dewa thematizes the role that other people play in one's *own* sense of self.

This concept, however, is not simply just one way of describing a universal feature of interaction, a local translation of a word we might also find in vernacular English, or the technical vocabularies of philosophy or psychology. Once crystallized as an object of reflection, something that Sumbanese consciously know about the world and can connect to other things they know about their world, it also guides them as they purposefully undertake ethical actions, projected forward in time. Here is an example. A man I call Ubu Kabàlu had been humiliated by a government cattle inspector. In order to "make the spirit return," Ubu Kabàlu sponsored a big feast for all his relations and allies. Feasts normally involve not just hospitality on the part of the host, but gifts from the visitors, such as horses, pigs, valuable textiles, and gold or metal ornaments. So by compelling others to flamboyantly display their respect for him—perhaps something like Darwall's second-person demand for dignity—Ubu Kabàlu was able to restore his dewa from the perilous condition into which it had fallen. Otherwise his weakened dewa might well have damaged his social interactions into the future. Even though the guests involved in the feast were not connected

to the man responsible for the original insult, their recognition had effects on the wounded dewa. For instance, now Ubu Kabàlu can hold himself tall, and expect his dewa to exert greater power over his exchange partners. The idea of dewa takes an aspect of interaction as affordance that it transforms by the act of naming into a knowable object. As such, it enters a constellation of other concepts like the agency of spirits, which gives a distinctive shape to Sumbanese ethical self-awareness and action.

One of the distinctive features of the concept of dewa is the way it allocates intentionality. More strongly than dignity, dewa posits that ethical effects do not need intentional actors. One the one hand, it portrays the giver's generosity as due to the power of the recipient's dewa. On the other hand, it also shows that one person's failings register the effects of others on his or her dewa. The kinds of situations that tend to evoke talk about dewa are ethically fraught—the making or breaking of social relations, and the self-esteem or imputations of character that go with them. But they can also involve merely the loss of composure, given the right circumstances. This is what happened when one elderly lady stumbled while climbing onto her host's veranda during a funeral. This seemingly trivial misstep was taken by everyone to threaten the stability of her dewa, prompting her host to leap up and present her with a fine textile to restore her self-possession.

Consider another lexicalized ethical category. In the 1970s, the Chewong of highland Malaysia were hunter-gatherers living in very small, ideologically egalitarian communities. Sumbanese ideas about dewa reflect lives in which gift exchange mediates hierarchical relations between people who see their lives as guided by ancestral rules. By contrast, Chewong (writing in the ethnographic present established by Signe Howell's monograph) are highly mobile and their social relations have a strongly voluntaristic quality. Individuals have a great deal of choice about whom they associate with, and easily leave one settlement for another. Their ethical language crystallizes some distinctive stances toward the purposes and desires of those around them. For example, the concept of *punén* refers to a condition that leads to attacks by dangerous animals like tigers, snakes, or poisonous millipedes, or their spirits. The condition is triggered by the victim's suppressed desire. One type,

> prescribes the sharing of food and other objects, and prohibits the nursing of ungratified desires. . . . If someone is not immediately invited to partake of a meal which he observes, or if someone is not given her share of any foodstuff seen to

be brought back from the jungle, that person is placed in a state of *punén* because
it is assumed one would always wish to be given a share and hence experience an
unfulfilled desire. (Howell 1989: 184)

Like the Sumbanese concept of dewa, punén thematizes the reflexive and inter-
subjective nature of social interaction. It is based on a fundamental presupposi-
tion, that my possessions prompt desire in others.

> The Chewong take all possible precautions against provoking *punén*. All food
> caught in the forest is brought back and publicly revealed immediately. It is then
> shared out equally among all the households. . . . If guests arrive while the hosts
> are in the middle of a meal, they are immediately asked to partake. If they refuse,
> saying they have just eaten, they are touched with a finger dipped in the food,
> while the person touching says "*punén*." (Howell 1989: 185)

Notice how the consequences of *my* refusal to share rebound not on me but on
the *other* person. The ethics of interaction therefore focuses on protecting oth-
ers against the consequences of their own desires. It is the responsibility of the
owner of the food or object to ward off the danger that desires for it pose to the
other person—something that is provoked in the moment of social encounter.
It is striking that, when not actually sharing the thing in question, the prophy-
lactic is itself ethically reflexive, metapragmatically naming the condition that
is to be avoided.

Chewong seem to inhabit intimate worlds in which, it would seem, there is
a great deal of consensus about what people are like, and what they can expect
of one another. They seem to have no hesitation about imputing desires and
intentions to others on very slim evidence. Theirs is essentially a dispositional
approach to interaction. The presupposed dispositions become a default against
which action or inaction can be evaluated. Like any ethnography, this account
of the Chewong has its limits. In traditional ethnographic style it describes a
collective, autonomous, and relatively timeless ethos. But, granting those limits,
English *dignity*, El Barrio's *respect*, Sumbanese *dewa*, and Chewong *punén* each
objectifies a particular viewpoint on people's ethical vulnerability to one another.

The concepts crystallized in words like English dignity, Sumbanese dewa,
the Barrio's respect, and Chewong punén pose, of course, significant problems
of translation. Each is embedded within the vocabulary, grammar, and pragmat-
ics of a particular language, and linked to a host of other ideas and practices.

We should not assume they denote distinct entities that exist independently of the larger conceptual and linguistic contexts in which they function. They are not simply different names for the same things. Rather, it seems that they direct attention to the affordances of interaction, giving specificity to aspects of experience whose ethical dimensions are otherwise indeterminate. In doing so, they also link them to other experiences and ideas that are also salient within a given community: for instance, whereas dignity might may take some of its conceptual shape from its ties to ideas about the value of individual autonomy, dewa points toward people's mutual dependence. The basic cognitive, emotional, or interactive phenomena are not simply things waiting for someone to name them. But neither are dignity, dewa, and the rest simply cultural inventions created from scratch. They result from histories of objectification that respond to the affordances people have found in human minds, emotions, conditions of social existence, and patterns of interaction.

ETHICS HISTORICIZED

People's ethical projects take up the affordances available to them. People do not just construct or cultivate themselves; they can also make discoveries about themselves. If we grant that humans *do* share certain basic capacities that *are* manifested in particular ethical worlds (see Bloom 2004; Tomasello 1999), then, what exactly does it mean to say ethics has a history? Part of the answer lies in the dynamics of social interaction.

Let's start with the idea of a moral emotion. The philosopher Allan Gibbard (1990) proposes that a feeling like anger is only a *moral* emotion if it is about something that it *makes sense* to feel angry about. Anger about losing a game, thus, is not a moral emotion. That quality of being "about" something is not inherent in some neurophysiological state that might be called "anger." *Anger* viewed as a moral emotion is thus part of a particular vocabulary of ethical concepts, like *dignity*, *respect*, *dewa*, or *punén*. This vocabulary in turn is one way of objectifying something about social interaction and its effects on people. It is one way of making explicit what philosophers call "action under a description" and sociologists call "the definition of the situation." Each term like dignity or dewa takes its meaning from its place within a larger constellation of ethical and psychological concepts, practices, and institutions. These are the contexts within which something does or does not make sense to have a particular moral

emotion about. Identifying one's feelings as having a particular moral object such as righteous indignation or feelings of betrayal will have effects on the resulting emotional experience that cannot be discovered directly in the neurophysiological sources of those feelings.

Granted that self-distancing and the third-person stance are basic human capacities, what brings them into play in any given instance? What might prompt one to "step back" and question oneself? What makes that easier or harder to do? We have already seen part of the answer: certain moments of social interaction fail to flow smoothly, leading to a loss of the sense of shared reality, or for some other reason require people to give one another reasons, justifications, excuses, accusations, or some other explicit account of what is going on, or what kind of persons they are. (Of course one may also step back in response to something more positive, such as a taking up a religious or philosophical practice, or political commitment—as in many of the situations described in Fassin [2012 and this volume].) But where do these accounts come from? Sometimes people are brought to awareness of some contradiction between competing values within a single social world. Sometimes the change arises because coexisting values come to be juxtaposed in new ways, making their incongruities apparent. Or the pressure may be exerted by social conflict, for instance, when members of a less powerful group begin to demand rights from a more powerful one (Anderson 2013). As we will see, objectifications and the reflexivity they facilitate can play a key role in catalyzing the changes that give ethical life a history.

Conscious reflection and explicit talk are not accurate representations of people's motives, goals, or the emotional or cognitive processes these involve. But that does not mean we should dismiss them as simply misleading or false, for they mediate social interactions. Their public availability can afford new developments. For example, explicit ideas are more readily subject to criticism and revision or rejection than more tacit assumptions, precisely because they are more visible. Explicit concepts are more directly subject to people's awareness—a general feature of human cognition, not a particular claim about certain social arrangements or cultural constructions.

Changes in ethical life depend on social conditions that will sustain them. This is why it can be hard to distinguish between ethics and politics: in the slogan of mid-twentieth-century American feminism, "the personal is political." I do not intend to reduce politics to ethics. But there are dimensions of political life that cannot be understood without some grasp of the moral and ethical impulses behind them. As we have seen, this is especially clear in the case of

activists whose political commitments cannot be directly explained in terms of their own self-interests, such as bourgeois intellectuals who fight for the proletariat (Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels), men who defend women's rights (John Stuart Mill), or literati who aspire to emancipate peasants (Ho Chi Minh).

At this point, I want to look at a brief moment in the American feminist movement when the ethical effects of awareness played a central role, the invention and promulgation of the technique of "consciousness-raising." Consciousness-raising was a purposeful attempt to render tacit features of everyday habitual life explicit in order to make them into knowable objects, and therefore things that could be grasped, criticized, and transformed. It gave rise to new terms like "*sexism*," "*sexual harassment*," "*date rape*," "*marital rape*," and "*eating disorder*." Consciousness-raising is interesting for several reasons: it took very seriously the effects of problematizing the habits of everyday life, it succeeded in changing the descriptions and evaluations of actions and persons that were available for many Americans, and as a radical political project it ultimately foundered, in part, on an unresolved tension between subjective experience and objective social analysis.

Consciousness-raising was introduced to a Women's Liberation convention in 1969. Like many radical feminists of this period, the young women who developed the technique had come through the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left but had become disenchanted by their marginality within male-dominated organizations. The technique drew on the "rap sessions" developed in the Civil Rights Movement, published accounts of "speak bitterness, recall pains" meetings in Communist China, and New Left theories, notably those of Herbert Marcuse, whose emancipatory arguments stressed the primacy of consciousness in social change within a Marxist framework (Rosenthal 1984: 312).

What these diverse sources had in common was an emphasis on the socially transformative role of individual awareness and the effectiveness of relatively abstract categories of analysis in making sense of concrete personal experiences. But the process started in the reverse direction, from the personal to the social. The premise was that since individuals lacked the concepts that would reveal their similarities to one another, they thought their difficulties were due to personal inadequacies. Once individuals compared experiences, they would discover common patterns. Generalizing from this, they would then be able to create more abstract categories, like *patriarchy* or *sexism*, which would enable them to connect individual sources of unhappiness to social conditions of oppression. These abstract categories would allow them to see particular experiences as instances of general types.

Because this technique was based on the idea that new categories of analysis would emerge from previously unexamined experience, it tended to encourage participants to draw on the first-person perspective. But the process would not stop at the first-person, since what should emerge from the comparison of personal experiences is a common thread, as women find "that in fact they have all been telling the same story with minor variations" (O'Connor 1969). The categories for this afforded a third-person stance. The emancipatory promise of consciousness-raising lay, in part, in this ability to shift from first- to third-person stances. The consciousness-raising group was

> a place where the members see their experiences mirrored in each other, where they are able to check and reaffirm their perceptions. One woman alone who complains of her oppression can be told she is distorting reality. . . . But when a group of women perceive again and again the same patterns of oppression derived from concrete stories of their day-to-day lives, it is impossible to sweep away their words as distortions. The first stage ends with a collective recognition . . . of some unnamable force that has acted upon them all to make them feel inadequate. (O'Connor 1969)

The process of recognition should lead to the naming of that hitherto "unnamable force."

Having acquired the category of "oppressed group" in contexts where the expression referred to African-Americans or to the proletariat, participants found it could apply as well to women. The result was the development of new group identities that the participants could apply to themselves. Much like the looping effects described by Ian Hacking (1995) for psychiatric disorders, once these categories began to circulate, people could find new ways to recognize themselves in them. They became new ways of being a person and of entering into social relations with others.

Consciousness-raising sessions drew on the ordinary structures of conversational interaction. They depended on the ways in which self and other affirm and recognize one another, developing a shared sense of reality over the course of their interaction. The ethical dimension of consciousness-raising is similarly apparent in Kathie Sarachild's (1978) remark that the discussions touched on "areas of the deepest humiliation for all women," for whatever else humiliation is, it is a feature of the ethics of interaction that reveals the effects of the perspective of others on one's own sense of self. Much of the power of

consciousness-raising lay in the attention it drew to the apparently trivial details of ordinary lives. Talk turned to the dieting, wearing of uncomfortable clothes, and playing dumb that women undertook for husbands and bosses: "We hadn't realized that just . . . *naming the problem* and problems would be a radical action in itself" (Sarachild 1978, emphasis mine). It was a process of making the habitual and taken-for-granted available for inspection and critique by rendering them both explicit and generalizable.

Although the purpose was to stimulate political action, the process began with an ethical transformation through the re-description of everyday life. As the moral philosopher Alison Jaggar (1989: 159) put it, "simply describing ourselves as angry, for instance, presupposes that we view ourselves as having been wronged, victimized by the violation of some social norm." But the norm did not simply exist prior to this discovery process—*the very process of naming the wrong that helped foster the emergence of the norm that the wrong violated.*

Finding a common thread in these stories helped participants shift the locus of responsibility away from themselves: "The most important [goal] is getting rid of self blame. Can you imagine what would happen if women, blacks, and workers . . . would stop blaming ourselves for our sad situations?" (Hanisch 2006: 4). In consciousness-raising we see a kind of exculpation, drawing on ideas about socio-political causality. Its success depended in part on women taking up a third-person stance on their own lives, seeing the particular incidents of "my life" in terms of general categories of what happens to "women as such."

The feminist philosopher Naomi Scheman analyzes one effect of feminist consciousness-raising groups, the discovery by individual participants that they had been "*angry*" for years, taking the feeling to be illegitimate and pathological or without realizing one felt angry at all:

> To discover what we are feeling (our emotions) is not necessarily or usually to discover some new feelings . . . ; rather, it is to discover what all of that means, how it fits in with who we are and what we are up to. It is to put a name to a mass of rather disparate stuff, to situate the otherwise rather inchoate 'inner' in a social world, to join (introspectible) feeling and behavior in a significant way, to note a meaningful pattern. (Scheman 1980: 174)

These feelings preexist the act of naming and identifying them as a certain emotion. What changes, rather, are their cohesiveness and their social standing. In order to function as a moral emotion, the state of we might call "anger" must be

understandable as anger *about* something. In Scheman's story, the members of the group urge one participant to see her anger as justifiable. She learns to re-describe the situation so the emotion becomes a legitimate response. By recon-figuring the ethical world, new conceptual objects are introduced, in the form of new types of person (e.g., *male chauvinist pigs*, *liberated women*) and new act descriptions (e.g., *sexual harassment*). In the process of deciding her feelings are justified, they become part of her self-understanding.

But Scheman points out that the crucial changes are not simply transpiring within the interior life of an individual. First, of course, they emerge through so-cial interaction itself, in the consciousness-raising group. Beyond that, in re-de-scribing the situation, what is being changed is "the picture we are likely to have of what the good life for a woman consists in" (Scheman 1980: 178). The anger becomes legitimate because the woman's current way of living turns out not to be the only one available. New possibilities, new ways of being a woman—what virtue ethics would call new kinds of human flourishing—have emerged.

More than that, the group produces forms of self-awareness that depend on other people: "A frequently remarked feature of such groups is that each wom-an's ability to recognize and change her situation depends on the others doing the same" (Scheman 1980: 180). It would seem this was for two reasons. A par-ticipant recognizes that others have had the same experiences; they transcend any particular subjectivity. She also sees that the others recognize her as some-one whose feelings are justified. These forms of objectified self-understanding affect interactions down the road. Once others know that she is a feminist, they have certain expectations for how she will feel and behave. Those expectations will shape other people's responses to her, which in turn will loop back to influ-ence her own possible actions and interactions.

Scheman is not denying that feelings have a real psychological or physi-ological basis. The question, rather, is what do they amount to: "What makes the whole affair a case of someone's being angry is how it is as a whole similar, in ways we particularly care about, to other cases" (1980: 183). It is being able to take the third-person stance (my feelings are an instance of a general cat-egory) *and* reasserting the first-person stance (those feelings are mine) in a new context. It is not just knowing how the game is played but finding one has a stake in the outcome, a return, in a sense, to the embedded position of the first-person perspective. The criterion for including a particular instance of feelings under the rubric of "anger," in this view, is not its resemblance to other feelings in the abstract (provoked, say, by an incident of road rage, a botched plumbing

job, a lost game of tennis, the face of an armed enemy in battle) so much as it is its resemblance to other situations of sexism, a recognition that depends on objectified ethical categories. In other words, what makes "women's anger" identifiable as such is the fact that "we [feminists] particularly care about" each of them. The identification of anger with the social category of women depends on a political analysis but the way feminists care about it depends as well on an ethical vision of the good life. The politics is inseparable from the idea that a way of flourishing has been denied. It is on the basis of that sense that one's flourishing has been denied or thwarted that the feminist can link one distinct situation to another, and treating both as instances of a single category: "anger."

The various experiences of women that came to be identified under the rubric of "anger" emerged through processes of social interaction that problematized aspects of daily life that had been largely unexamined—Lynn O'Connor's "unnamable force." The outcome was a new self-description tied to an ethical stance. It became possible to say, "I am angry (because that's not the way a good life should be lived)." Like many religious and political movements, consciousness-raising sought ethical revolution through the dynamics of reflexivity, by demanding a shift from habit to awareness, with the hope that awareness would in turn change habits across society.

ETHICAL REFLEXIVITY AND ITS HISTORICAL OBJECTS

In the passage quoted early in this essay, Foucault assumes that to be ethical depends on some freedom of action. It follows that to discover the ethical empirically is to reveal some fundamental distinction between causal determinations of behavior (whether those be, say, biological, psychological, or socio-economic in origin) and people's capacities to act. Foucault proposes that the freedom in question derives from the fundamental human capacity for reflection. Reflection, in turn, depends on self-distancing so that you yourself can be the object of your own inspections. If ethics depends on the freedom that is made possible by reflection, then the fundamental cognitive capacity for self-distancing that all humans possess, and its development through self-other dynamics is an ethical affordance. If self-distancing turns the flow of action into an *object* of thought, then this cognitive process of objectification, the third-person stance it can produce, and the semiotic means that facilitate and sustain it, are devices for ethical life. But only in some modalities: for ethical life is confined neither

to those emotions, intuitive responses, and habits that elude consciousness nor to reflexive self-awareness.

Ethical practices do not necessarily add up to a coherent and consistent whole. What Williams calls a morality system depends on the coordination of what might otherwise be disparate ethical ideas and practices. That coordination is not something to be taken for granted. Yet because morality systems are typically easy to see—they announce themselves through their rituals, disciplines, rules, texts, authorities, slogans, laws, punishments, justifications—they loom large in the historical and ethnographic scholarship. Their visibility makes it easy to forget that nothing guarantees that any given social world will produce a coordinated and explicit morality system, or if it does, that the resulting morality system will actually govern people's ethical lives in their entirety. At the same time, if we react against this bias toward morality systems and insist that ethics is *only ever* a matter of the un-self-conscious habitual practices of everyday life, it becomes hard to account for the empirical existence of morality systems when we *do* encounter them. Moreover, it becomes hard to understand certain kinds of actions, people's purposeful efforts to *change* ethics. For morality systems loom large not just because they are easy to see but also because they play such a large role in history. Morality systems are often shaped by self-conscious people, like political revolutionaries, philosophical radicals, and religious reformers, who stand apart from the taken-for-granted flow of life in order to act upon it.

What morality systems often share is a propulsive movement, as large numbers of people take action in order to transform their ethical worlds, for example as pious reformers or ethical revolutionaries. They are expressions of historical agency. Given the evidence that much of ethical life is instinctual, habitual, fragmentary, contradictory, and does not require anyone's full awareness, how do we make sense of the morality systems that push hard against all these characteristics? What even makes it possible to step outside the flow of life and look at it from a distance, to give it words, to make it coherent, to criticize and reform it? As I discuss elsewhere (Keane 2016, chapter 6), in piety and other moral reform movements (not necessarily religious in character), that demand for consistency is often explained by the inculcation of a God's-eye-view, a strong version of the third-person stance from which the faithful is expected to see the totality of his or her life and impose order on it.

According to Williams, morality systems have a juridical character, and imply the existence of a God-like judge that transcends the plane of human

activity. Ethics, by contrast, involves the growth or cultivation of persons, guided by models or concepts of human flourishing that vary according to the social and historical context. If the quintessential morality system is a monastic order, the paradigmatic ethics is Athenian virtue. Yet some ethical projects of self-cultivation, such as those of Tibetan monks (Lempert 2012) or Jain world-renouncers (Laidlaw 1995) *do* take morality systems as their model for human flourishing. Such morality systems are often marked by a high degree of objectification, producing descriptions of acts (for example, lists of sins) and types of persons (for example, saints) that are readily cognizable. They are like the descriptions that emerge when one must give an account of oneself. In this case, that account may be owed to gods, priests, saints, teachers, revolutionary comrades, and so forth. Morality systems support awareness with a host of semiotic technologies, such as texts, pedagogic techniques, rituals, and institutions to sustain them like law courts, temples, and schools. These produce what we can call *historical objects*. They are objects because they have an explicit character that people can focus on cognitively, much as one might learn a set of rules—subject to what Gilbert Ryle (1946) called "knowing-that," albeit one aimed at producing a "knowing-how." They are historical both because they show persistence and stability and because they are subject to transformations. Rules work in part because they seem to be the same even when they appear in different contexts they allow generalization. One reason they are subject to transformation is because, being explicit objects of awareness they are easier to criticize and defend than the more subtle patterns of un-self-conscious habitual life. This openness to criticism and defense makes ethics available for the purposeful endeavors such as religious revivals, social movements, and political revolutions.

Historical objects are words or practices that make certain aspects of ethical life cognizable because they have semiotic forms that, being durable, can be recognized again and again. Words like "sexism," practices like veiling, and bodily habits like bowing have a degree of solidity in people's experience and can easily draw attention. Like descriptions of kinds of person (honest, sneaky) and kinds of actions (generous, cowardly), whose reappearance in new settings can lend to the flow of events a sense of coherence, they are part of the raw material out of which everyday ethical awareness is made. An important part of ethical history is the way in which aspects of ethical life emerge out of the taken-for-granted background and become historical objects.

Semiotic mediation means that even inner thought, if it is to have any social consequences, is never just cognitive but is inseparable from a host of material

practices. Having books or a system of schools or a monastic system or military orders or yoga poses will inevitably produce different results for ethical life than not having them. However, those consequences are not defined in advance. The existence of historical objects and the technologies and institutions that sustain them does not determine any particular ethical outcome: they afford reflections that may (or may not) catalyze change. Notice the feedback loop that enters into these processes. When people produce historical objects, they are likely to be responding to the affordances they discover in psychological propensities, patterns of social interaction, or existing ideas and institutions. Once those objects become part of the background for particular communities, they in turn offer affordances: ritual practices meant to influence gods may become psychotherapy for atheists, martial arts meant to train fighters might become meditation regimes for literati, universities intended to train clerics for church and court become homes to laboratory scientists and nationalist historians. The idea of affordance acknowledges both naturalistic realism (there is a cognitive and affective "there" there) and historical creativity (Athenian or Confucian virtue and American feminism could each have turned out differently).

FIRST-, SECOND-, AND THIRD-PERSON STANCES

Historical objects invite people to take a third-person stance toward their ethical lives. This is easy to see in the case of institutionalized, textually borne morality systems, like those of the scriptural religions. But the possibility of taking that perspective is a fundamental cognitive capacity. Words like *dignity*, *respect*, *dewa*, or *punén* convey their meanings into an indefinite number of possible contexts, regardless of who "I" or "you" may be. Cognitive and semiotic resources like these seem to be preconditions for the general, potentially context-free, norms so characteristic of morality systems. But they do not operate wholly independently of the first- and second-person stances. These are the terms by which people are compelled to account for themselves to one another—for example, with excuses, accusations, justifications, praise, or blame. In the process of doing so, they can draw on the third-person stance, the point of view that speaks in the generic terms of a given ethical vocabulary. But they do so as someone who takes up, for the moment, the first-person stance in order to address another, as the second-person.

Although feminist consciousness-raising took advantage of the second-person address of face-to-face interaction, the outcome was categories whose

sociological character entails the third-person stance. Words like *sexism* invite individuals to see their first-person, subjective experience from the distant perspective of a sociological category. This, in fact, is part of why the sessions were supposed to be therapeutic, as well as political—the individual realized that what had seemed to be idiosyncratic, subjective experience was not peculiarly her own, in isolation, but one instance of a general type. Rather than being alienating, this typification was meant to absolve her from taking her unhappiness to be either individual psychopathology or a failure of personal responsibility. In the process, a new element entered the social history of the ethical life of the communities where this kind of feminism flourished.

Interaction itself chronically brings into play the third-person stance. It draws on capacities and propensities, such as norm-seeking, conformity, and self-distancing, that are fundamental to child development anywhere. The second-person is someone who addresses me, and whom I address. This is the interactive space within which people find themselves giving accounts: justifying, excusing, accusing, explaining, denying, praising, blaming, and all the other activities in which ethical categories and stances are made explicit. These categories contribute to, and in turn draw upon, a public reservoir of concepts. A hunter recalls a grandmother's reminder to thank the prey for giving itself up to the stalker. A neurologist persuades a jury that the evil act of a killer can be explained by the mechanical effects of a brain tumor rather than the ethical choices of a free agent. All of these acts draw on the third-person stance, not the view from a person who addresses me, but of the observer outside the action. They make use of ideas that, in principle, anyone who shares my vocabulary ought to grasp, even if only to oppose me. This is the public world in which justifications and arguments make a difference.

Justifications and arguments make a difference because they are addressed to other people who can be expected to recognize their implications. One way people make history is by discovering in their arguments aspects that they had not noticed before, or considered relevant, and drawing from them new conclusions. As Lynn Hunt (2007) points out, once the French granted civil rights to Protestants after the Revolution, it became more self-evident why it would make sense to extend them to Jews as well. Or take the idea of fairness, which in some form seems to emerge in early childhood and is one candidate for inclusion on many moral psychologists' lists of universal ethical values (see Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller 1990). According to the Caroline Humphrey, eighteenth-century Mongols took for granted a social world that was crosscut

by deeply felt principles of distinction and hierarchy. Differentiated by clan membership and ranked birth order, no one was equal to anyone else. People of various statuses differed not merely legally but in their very essence; they were considered to be fundamentally incommensurable. Yet Mongols were preoccupied by notions of fairness. What fairness usually meant, however, was treatment in accord to one's given status—to be fair meant granting people their dues in accord with their respective ranks and clans, which were quite distinct from one another. But, Humphrey tells us, this hierarchical concept of fairness could be applied more broadly. Thus in 1788, a minor official named Janggi Ashig complained to his superiors who had enslaved some serfs and confiscated others' livestock, invoking the language of fairness. Humphrey comments that his petition "goes beyond the fairness that would concede that others should have their due" (2012: 315). In effect, Janggi Ashig took up an existing language of fairness and norms and discovered new possibilities in it. Moreover, he depended on this reworking of the available ethical vocabulary to be recognizable to the superiors he is addressing. To account for this requires both second- and third-person perspectives. He faced his superior as someone to be addressed in the second-person, and who in turn might address him. (Here it matters that Janggi Ashig's rank endowed him with a voice, something a serf would presumably lack.) But he counted on something else; the shared vocabulary of fairness and norms will be recognizable to his addressee even if they took new forms and would do so because these were categories that *anyone* who shared their public world should understand, taking the third-person stance of someone outside the interaction.

ETHICAL STANCES, DISTANT AND COMMITTED

The first- and second-person stances are embedded in interaction and are mutually entailing; the third-person stance offers a generalizing view from outside and beyond the action. The tension among these perspectives is exemplified by the challenge posed by William Godwin when he asks whether one should save Bishop Fenelon or the chambermaid from a burning house. In the same passage, considering that the chambermaid might be one's own mother or wife and yet one should still save the bishop, Godwin (1793: 83) remarks, "What magic is there in the pronoun 'my,' to overturn the decisions of everlasting truth?" What could be a more powerful expression of the third-person stance than this, which completely eliminates the first-person perspective grounded in one's immediate

psychological dispositions, personal commitments, and the second-person address to specific others on the grounds of particular relations and commitments, in favor of a matter of rational principle?

The tension among these perspectives is built into everyday life. But by putting the location of the actor into question, it is also one element of the problem of ethical relativism. Godwin was seeking a kind of moral reasoning that would lead anyone at all to the same conclusion. When Williams criticizes him, he implies that the dilemmas of positionality cannot be eliminated. Whatever the builders of normative theories conclude, empirical researchers cannot simply exclude by fiat ethical worlds in which abortion is murder, members of different clans have distinct essences, or individual humans are subordinate to divinities. They cannot expect that the facts will ultimately assure us that all people will define the good in ways we recognize, or that they will eventually converge on values that we can accept. Does this, then, condemn us to some kind of a-moral relativism? I think not, because no one is *only* a natural or social scientist, and no one inhabits solely the third-person stance. Indeed, the third-person stance cannot provide a complete understanding of ethical life, since to take it up *by the same token* excludes the perspective of the first-person. Certainly we can hope that empirical knowledge will widen and multiply the viewpoints and sympathies available to us. But we should not expect that this will lead us to some position so utterly transcendent that it will secure our ethical intuitions once and for all—granting us a supreme authority that no one else could challenge. If such an external and unassailable position were even possible, I suspect one would find oneself like a Tibetan monk or Sumbanese aristocrat watching Americans play baseball—curious, perhaps, even knowledgeable, but unlikely to care how the game turns out. But even this would be just part of the story, since the Tibetan and Sumbanese would have their own games to care about. They too can move between first- and third-person stances. Indeed, that capacity to move back and forth between those perspectives (whether or not that capacity is realized in any instance) seems to be a crucial feature of ethical life. As suggested earlier, sometimes people find themselves in the midst of the action, sometimes they stand apart from it. There is no reason to expect either position to be the final one: the potential for movement between them is an endemic feature of human life.

What empirical research might point out is this: neither the first- and second-person (which are mutually entailing) nor the third-person on its own fully contains everything we have learned about ethical life. Supposing we were to say ethics must favor the former, and anyone would rescue their mother or

wife—even if she is just the chambermaid—at the expense of the bishop. We begin to have trouble accounting for Karl Marx devoting himself to the proletariat, John Stuart Mill to women's rights, Janggi Ashig defending peasants, a Sinhalese woman protecting a Tamil stranger, or, for that matter, the young child protesting that someone has taken the cookie belonging not to herself but to someone else. The self-distancing capacity to step outside of one's first-person position—something that depends on cognitive developments in early childhood—is an affordance frequently taken up in the social history of ethical life. Yet ethnographers are quite familiar with the limits of the third-person stance and the morality systems that promote it. So too are others: psychological research, for instance, reveals that high moral principles are easily undermined in practice. The view from social interaction shows how such principles are crosscut by the constant, inescapable dynamics of respect, recognition, and facework. If the empirical study of ethical life tells us anything, it should be that these tensions are chronic and not likely to be resolved for good one way or the other. People are endowed with psychological capacities and propensities of which they are mostly unaware and over which they have little or no control. They are embedded in social relationships that are crucial to their sense of self-worth. But they are also purposeful agents who respond to the ideas and arguments their social histories have produced and are prone to contributing new ones. Indeed, it may well be that these very tensions and the impossibility of resolving them once and for all help drive them to make new ethical discoveries and inventions.

When people act or live in ways taken to be ethical, those notions concern values or ideas about rightness and wrongness. When other people, in turn, respond to those acts or ways of living, they are guided partly by how they do or do not make sense of those ideas. But making sense of ideas is not the end of the story. Ethical life is not just a matter of knowing the rules of the game, something any idle bystander might accomplish as well. It is being committed enough to that game to care how it turns out. A full account of ethical life should help us grasp that too.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

for their very pleasant, if virtual, company, and the two anonymous reviewers for the press.

REFERENCES

Anderson, Elizabeth. 1993. *Value in ethics and economics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 2013. "Social movements, experiments in living, and moral progress: Case studies from Britain's abolition of slavery." Arthur Allen Leff Fellowship Lecture. Yale Law School, New Haven, CT.

Anscombe, G. E. M. 1957. *Intention*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Appiah, Anthony. 2008. *Experiments in ethics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Austin, J. L. 1979. "A plea for excuses." In *Philosophical papers*, edited by J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, 175–204. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Babb, Lawrence A. 1983. "Destiny and responsibility: Karma in popular Hinduism." In *Karma: An anthropological inquiry*, edited by Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel, 163–81. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bauman, Zygmunt. 1988. *Freedom*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bloom, Paul. 2004. *Descartes' baby: How the science of child development explains what makes us human*. New York: Basic Books.

Bourgois, Philippe. 2003. *In search of respect: Selling crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brokaw, Cynthia. 1991. *The ledgers of merit and demerit: Social change and moral order in late imperial China*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Butler, Judith. 2005. *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Daniel, E. Valentine. 1996. *Charred lullabies: Chapters in an anthropography of violence*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Darwall, Stephen. 2006. *The second-person standpoint: Morality, respect, and accountability*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Das, Veena. 2012. "Ordinary ethics." In *A companion to moral anthropology*, edited by Didier Fassin, 133–49. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Doniger, Wendy O'Flaherty. 1980. "Karma and rebirth in the Vedas and Puranas." In *Karma and rebirth in classical Indian traditions*, edited by Wendy O'Flaherty Doniger, 3–37. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fassin, Didier. 2012. *Humanitarian reason: A moral history of the present.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Faubion, James. 2001. "Toward an anthropology of ethics: Foucault and the pedagogies of autopoiesis." *Representations* 74: 83–104.

Fortes, Meyer. 1959. *Oedipus and Job in West African religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1985. *The use of pleasure*. Vol. 2 of *The history of sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon.

———. 1997. *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: New Press.

Garfinkel, Harold. 1967. *Studies in ethnomethodology*. New York: Wiley.

Gershon, Ilana. 2010. "Breaking up is hard to do: Media switching and media ideologies." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20 (2): 389–405.

Gibbard, Allan. 1990. *Wise choices, apt feelings: A theory of normative judgment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gibson, James J. 1977. "The theory of affordances." In *Perceiving, acting, and knowing: Toward an ecological psychology*, edited by R. Shaw and J. Bransford, 67–82. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Godwin, William. 1793. *Enquiry concerning political justice and its influence on general virtue and happiness*. Vol. 1. London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.

———. 1967. *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

Goodwin, Marjorie. 2006. *The hidden life of girls: Games of stance, status, and exclusion*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Hacking, Ian. 1995. *Rewriting the soul: Multiple personality and the sciences of memory*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Haidt, Jonathan. 2001. "The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment." *Psychological Review* 108 (4): 814–34.

Hallowell, Irving. 1960. "Ojibwa ontology, behavior, and world view." In *Culture in history: Essays in honor of Paul Radin*, edited by Paul Radin and S. Diamond, 19–52. New York: Octagon Books.

Hanisch, Carol. 2006. "The personal is political (1969): The women's liberation movement classic with a new explanatory introduction." Accessed April 23, 2014. http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PersonalisPol.pdf.

Harris, Sam. 2012. "Is free will an illusion? Sam Harris on his new book." *Daily Beast*, March 2. Accessed May 30, 2012. http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/03/02/is-free-will-an-illusion-sam-harris-on-his-new-book.print.html.

Howell, Signe. 1989. *Society and cosmos: Chewong of peninsular Malaysia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Humphrey, Caroline. 1997. "Exemplars and rules: Aspects of the discourse of moralities in Mongolia." In *The ethnography of moralities*, edited by Signe Howell, 25–47. London: Routledge.

———. 2012. "Inequality." In *A companion to moral anthropology*, edited by Didier Fassin, 302–19. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Hunt, Lynn. 2007. *Inventing human rights: A history*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Jaggar, Alison M. 1989. "Love and knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology." In *Gender/body/knowledge: Feminist reconstructions of being and knowing*, edited by Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo, 145–71. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Kant, Immanuel. 1996. "Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals (1785)." In *Cambridge edition of the works of Immanuel Kant: Practical philosophy*, translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor, 37–108. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Keane, Webb. 1997. *Signs of recognition: Powers and hazards of representation in an Indonesian society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 2003. "Self-interpretation, agency, and the objects of anthropology: Reflections on a genealogy." *Comparative studies in society and history* 45 (2): 222–48.

———. 2007. *Christian moderns: Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 2014. "Rotting bodies: The clash of stances toward materiality and its ethical affordances." *Current Anthropology* 55: S312–S321.

———. 2016. *Ethical life: Its natural and social histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Laidlaw, James. 1995. *Riches and renunciation: Religion, economy, and society among the Jains*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 2014. *The subject of virtue: An anthropology of ethics and freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lambek, Michael. 2010. "Introduction." In *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language, and action*, edited by Michael Lambek, 1–36. New York: Fordham University Press.

———. 2015. "On the immanence of the ethical: A response to Michael Lempert, 'No ordinary ethics.'" *Anthropological Theory* 15 (2): 128–32.

Lempert, Michael. 2012. *Discipline and debate: The language of violence in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 2013. "No ordinary ethics." *Anthropological Theory* 13 (4): 370–93.

———. 2015. "Ethics without immanence: A reply to Michael Lambek." *Anthropological Theory* 15 (2): 133–40.

Manning, Paul. 2008. "Barista rants about stupid customers at Starbucks: What imaginary conversations can teach us about real ones." *Language and Communication* 28: 101–26.

Mead, George Herbert. (1934) 1962. *Mind, self, and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. Edited by Charles W. Morris. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nadasdy, Paul. 2007. "The gift in the animal: The ontology of hunting and human–animal sociality." *American Ethnologist* 34 (1): 25–43.

O'Connor, Lynn. 1969. "Defining reality." Mimeograph. Berkeley, CA: Tooth + Nail.

Onvlee, Louis. (1957) 1973. *Over de weergave van pneuma: Cultuur als antwoord*. Leiden: M. Nijhoff.

Parfit, Derek. 2011. *On what matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2001. "Radical worlds: The anthropology of incommensurability and inconceivability." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (1): 319–34.

Robbins, Joel. 2007. "Between reproduction and freedom: Morality, value, and radical cultural change." *Ethnos* 72 (3): 293–314.

Rosenthal, Naomi Braun. 1984. "Consciousness raising: From revolution to re-evaluation." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 8 (4): 309–26.

Ryle, Gilbert. 1946. "Knowing how and knowing that." *Proceedings of the Aristotle Society* n.s. 46: 1–16.

Sacks, Harvey. 1972. "Notes on police assessment of moral character." In *Studies in social interaction*, edited by David N. Sudnow, 280–93. New York: Free Press.

Sarachild, Kathie. 1978. "Consciousness-raising: A radical weapon." *Feminist Revolution* 144: 145–46. Accessed April 20, 2014. http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/wlm.fem/sarachild.html.

Scheman, Naomi. 1980. "Anger and the politics of naming." In *Women and language in literature and society*, edited by Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman, 174–88. New York: Praeger.

Schneewind, Jerome B. 1998. *The invention of autonomy: A history of modern moral philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Shweder, Richard A., Manamohan Mahapatra, and Joan G. Miller. 1990. "Culture and moral development." In *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development*, edited by James W. Stigler, Richard A. Shweder, and Gilbert Herdt, 130–204. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Silverstein, Michael. 1993. "Metapragmatic discourse and metapragmatic function." In *Reflexive language: Reported speech and metapragmatics*, edited by John Lucy, 33–58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Slingerland, Edward. 2007. *Effortless action: Wu-wei as conceptual metaphor and spiritual ideal in early China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smith, Adam. (1790) 1976. *The theory of moral sentiments*. Edited by D. D. Rafael and A. L. Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tomasello, Michael. 1999. *The cultural origins of human cognition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Velleman, David. 2013. *Foundations for moral relativism*. Open Book Publishers.

Warner, Michael. 1999. *The trouble with normal: Sex, politics, and the ethics of queer life*. New York: Free Press.

Williams, Bernard. 1981. *Moral luck: Philosophical papers 1973–1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1985. *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Zigon, Jarrett. 2007. "Moral breakdown and the ethical demand: A theoretical framework for an anthropology of moralities." *Anthropological Theory* 7 (2): 131–50.

Troubled waters
At the confluence of ethics and politics

Didier Fassin

> *What is the real relationship between ethics and politics?*
> — Max Weber, "The profession and vocation of politics," 1919

For more than two thousand years, philosophers have tried to isolate the substance of ethics and morality, whether in terms of foundations or principles. For more than a century, social scientists have in turn also tried to do so, whether they called their object of investigation moral codes or ethical subjectivities. This endeavor has indeed taken numerous forms, both theoretical and empirical, from Aristotle's virtue ethics to Immanuel Kant's ethics of duty, from Adam Smith's moral sentiments to Max Weber's religious ethics, from Edward Westermarck's study of the origin of moral ideas to Émile Durkheim's analysis of the determination of moral facts, from the improbable trolley mental experiment to medieval monks' mystical experiences. Evolutionary biologists, cognitive psychologists, and neuroimaging specialists have even attempted to identify the grammar of universal moral traits that could define human beings and locate a hardwired ethics within their brain.

Latecomers in the field despite early attempts to characterize the moral grounds of the particular social worlds they studied, anthropologists have eagerly

explored it over the past two or three decades—and substantially renewed our understanding of it. As is well known, their inquiry has followed two major paths (Fassin 2014a). The first focuses on the social constraints of morality, the norms imposed by society, the values shared by its members, and the contribution of the moral order to the social order. The second insists, conversely, on the individual dimensions of ethics, the freedom each person has to deliberate and to decide, and the inner experience through which ethical subjects are formed. Thus outlined, the geography of the field, which reproduces the classical opposition between Kantian and Aristotelian philosophies, is certainly reductive, and multiple overlaps between the two approaches increasingly complicate the landscape I just depicted, the alternative between constraints and freedom being, for some, difficult to sustain empirically as well as theoretically. Yet, the distinction that it allows by contrasting the language of morality and the language of ethics, already proposed by Bernard Williams, remains a helpful convention, although it could also be argued that what anthropologists used to call "moral" is now phrased as "ethical" without strong justifications regarding the difference, but merely because of the appeal of the word. As for me, I associate both terms with only minor semantic inflections.

Beyond their diverse and sometimes conflicting views, these delineations of domains alternately named the ethnography of moralities (Howell 1996) or the anthropology of ethics (Faubion 2011) logically have in common to single out what constitutes morality or ethics. It is this postulate that I would like to challenge. Not that I deem illegitimate the efforts deployed by philosophers and social scientists to extirpate their moral or ethical gems so as to be able to examine them, but I want to try instead to study them with their gangue and even in their vein in order to provide a distinct account and comprehension of their social meaning. Morality and ethics are, indeed, always embedded in historical contexts, cultural universes, and social practices. They are often intimately linked with economic and political dimensions. Except when they are inscribed in religious or ideological doctrines in which they may be clearly formulated, their identification by anthropologists or sociologists results from a reconstitution through the study of discourses and practices. Such a differentiation between what is moral or ethical and what is not can be assimilated to a form of purification through which moral codes and ethical subjectivities, for instance, are extracted from the course of human activities. This is a legitimate scientific operation that has made us aware of entire areas and particular issues in social life that were until then largely ignored or disregarded. However, by doing so,

social scientists, in particular anthropologists, have tended to reproduce what philosophers generally do when they isolate moral principles or ethical dilemmas. While this abstract operation might be justified by theoretical reasons as well as from a prescriptive perspective in the case of philosophy, its application to the social sciences leaves unexplored certain moral and ethical dimensions of human action that are empirically and normatively impure. Such an impurity is never as obvious as in the encounter between ethics and politics.

In one of his late interviews, Michel Foucault ([1984] 2001: 1414) thus summarized his intellectual enterprise: "In a certain way, one could surely say that I try to analyze the relations between science, politics and ethics. But I do not believe it would be a quite accurate representation of what I want to do. Rather I seek to contemplate how processes possibly interfere with each other in the constitution of a scientific domain, a political structure, a moral practice." This project, the genealogy of which can be traced back to Nietzsche, becomes increasingly present in Foucault's last two series of lectures at the Collège de France entitled "The government of the self and others." In line with this reflection, it is the interface between ethics and politics as apprehended through the lenses of social science that I want to study. I do not imply that all ethics is political or that politics only has to do with ethics but I believe that the intertwining of the two is a defining issue of the contemporary world that has been understudied.

It is hardly a new concern, though. Almost a century ago, in his famous lecture "The profession and vocation of politics," Max Weber ([1919] 1994: 357) asked, "Is it in fact true that any ethic in the world could establish substantially identical commandments applicable to all relationships, whether erotic, business, family or official, to one's relationships with one's wife, greengrocer, son, competitor, with a friend or an accused man? Can the fact that politics operates with a quite specific means, namely power, backed up by the use of violence really be a matter of such indifference as far as the ethical demands placed on politics are concerned?" The domain where ethics and politics intersect and interact is indeed profoundly influenced by power relations and power games at play. This is not to say that power would be absent from other human activities, including parental, conjugal, or sexual, but it is undoubtedly a dominant trait in the political realm, where it is potentially associated with the legitimate use of violence.

In this essay, I will explore the encounter between ethics and politics through a series of case studies, a method that has been used before (Gutman

and Thompson 2006) but to which I intend to give a more general theoretical content. I will do so by moving from international relations to national issues to local scenes and by drawing mostly from previous studies I conducted in various contexts.

Two methodological difficulties, partially related, arise from the case studies presented and, more generally, from the exploration of the interface between ethics and politics. The first one pertains to the individual aspect of ethics contrasted with the collective dimension of politics. The second one concerns the microsocial level of ethics as opposed to the macrosocial scale of politics. Certainly, these dichotomies exaggerate the characterization of the two fields but the tensions between them do exist in the interpretation of the cases, whether one explores "ordinary life," through love stories across hostile religious groups in India (Das 2010) or linguistic variations in the evocation by a father of the murder of his son in Mexico (Keane 2010), or public life, as I will do in this essay—and it will become clear through the case studies that the boundaries between these two forms of life, ordinary and public, tend to be empirically blurred. How can one study ethical conflicts in the relations between states or nations? How can one approach ethical issues in the civic realm? How can one analyze ethical contradictions within institutions? These are some of the questions I will address.

I will first examine the domain of humanitarian interventions, which is perhaps the most obvious global site of ethical debates, to discuss the three main philosophical theories: ethics of duty, virtue ethics, and consequentialism. I will then analyze the question of civil rights and the moral dilemmas that they may elicit, to distinguish between two ethics: conviction and responsibility. I will finally consider the issue of misconducts within professions and institutions, and their moral justifications by the agents, to illustrate the importance to analyze the full range of values and affects notwithstanding their positive or negative orientation.

Developing and discussing these case studies, I intend to pursue the critical and fruitful dialogue with philosophy that I engaged in several essays, arguing for a respectful and loyal betrayal rather than a mere application of concepts (Fassin 2014b). More specifically, I will appeal to interpretations generally presented as distinct and even incompatible or contradictory to show that when they are considered in actual situations the lines between them tend to become blurred. Such an inquiry on the borders between disciplines and the boundaries between fields means venturing to perilous grounds where epistemologies are not stabilized but where, I hope, the reader will follow me.

ETHICAL QUESTIONING: ON THE LIBYAN CASE

The intervention of French and British forces in Libya, which started with the support of the United States and seven other countries on March 19, 2011, has been considered the first real test for the Responsibility to Protect principle adopted by the United Nations in 2005 (Fassin 2013a). This principle, often abbreviated as R2P, is the response to the massacre of Srebrenica and the genocide in Rwanda, for which the organization had been left paralyzed as it passively watched the massive killings occur. Deemed a major advance in the ethics of international relations, it implies that in cases of genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, the member states of the United Nations have a responsibility to protect the victims using "all necessary measures," from diplomatic pressures to military operations. For its promoters, it radically differs from previous tentative efforts to impose a "right to intervene" or even a "duty to intervene," which would have definitely shaken the principle of state sovereignty inherited from the Westphalian agreement almost four centuries ago: when invoked under the Responsibility to Protect, military intervention is only a last resort after all other options have failed and as populations are in grave danger. For its critics, however, it is a mere continuation of "muscular humanitarianism," in Anne Orford's terms (1999): to declare that all other options have failed and that populations are in grave danger is for her a matter of judgment dependent on strategic interests. Indeed, in the end, the R2P principle legitimates armed action whenever powerful nations decide so.

It was in Libya that the new doctrine served for the first time to engage in warfare. The Security Council adopted Resolution 1973 on March 17, with ten countries voting in favor of the text, while China, Russia, India, Brazil, and Germany abstained. The attack started two days later as the ceasefire announced by the Libyan government was not deemed credible. The announced objective was to impose a no-fly zone over a large part of the country. In Misrata and Benghazi particularly, populations were said to be imperiled by the progression of Muammar Gaddafi's army and its airstrikes. The head of the National Transitional Council announced a catastrophe, predicting half a million deaths if the troops entered the cities held by the rebels. The French president and the British prime minister convinced the leaders of the other countries (members of the Security Council) to back up or at least not oppose the armed operation. Nine days after the beginning of the international intervention, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron jointly rejoiced in a public statement, "hundreds of thousands

of people had been saved from a humanitarian disaster." Despite the vagueness of the meaning of the sentence—were lives actually saved or was a potential disaster avoided?—no better justification could be invoked when resorting to force in the application of the Responsibility to Protect: menaced by their own government, the populations faced a grave danger unless immediate action was taken. The operation was, indeed, not depicted as military but as humanitarian.

The case was, prima facie, relatively simple. Inspired by the Arab Spring that had resulted in the overthrow of two authoritarian presidents by civilian protesters in Tunisia and Egypt, a social movement developed in January 2011 against the corrupted dictator Muammar Gaddafi, who had been in power for more than four decades. As the demonstrations turned into confrontations with the police and as the security forces fired live ammunition against the demonstrators, the unrest rapidly evolved into a civil war. The rebels, who included civilians, defected police and military, and presumably Islamist groups, took control of large portions of the country but the governmental forces soon regained part of the territory lost and marched on the seceding cities. Public relations on both sides tried to depict their respective enemy as involved in killings and torture. The official army was accused of hiring foreign mercenaries and systematically raping women.

In parallel, intense diplomatic activity was taking place under the aegis of France and Britain (in the European Union) to adopt a common position, as well as at Security Council (of the United Nations) in order to avoid the veto of Russia and China. Influenced by the French public intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy who, having gone to Benghazi as a journalist and having met with the leaders of the rebellion, pleaded for a rapid intervention, Nicolas Sarkozy, without even informing his minister of foreign affairs, hurriedly recognized the National Transitional Council as the legitimate government of Libya and, with the active support of David Cameron, personally intervened with the fourteen other heads of state of the Security Council to convince them that a military operation was the only option. Two days later, Resolution 1973 was passed, and the bombings of the allied forces over Libya started. After seven months of ensuing naval attacks and airstrikes, of which the number of casualties remains unknown four years later, the end of the operation was announced as Gaddafi's death was confirmed.

Considered to be the main author of the Responsibility to Protect principle, former Australian minister of foreign affairs Gareth Evans had written in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on March 24, 2011: "The international military

intervention in Libya is not about bombing for democracy or Muammar Gaddafi's head—let alone keeping oil prices down or profits up. Legally, morally, politically and militarily it has only one justification: protecting the country's people from the kind of murderous harm that Gaddafi inflicted on unarmed protesters four weeks ago, has continued to apply to those who oppose him in the areas he controls, and has promised to inflict on anyone against him should his forces recapture Benghazi and other rebel ground." Yet, speaking much less confidently at a conference in Melbourne on July 20, 2012, Evans deplored the loss of consensus behind the principle he had promoted, the result being the absence of international response to the massacres perpetrated at that time in Syria by the army of Hafez al-Assad, a situation comparable in many ways with that encountered earlier in Libya, although the "Gaddafi regime's violence was much less than Assad's," according to the former Australian minister. "Consensus has simply evaporated in a welter of recrimination about how the NATO-led implementation of the Council's Libya mandate 'to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack' was actually carried out. We have to frankly recognize that there has been some infection of the whole R2P concept by the perception, accurate or otherwise, that the civilian protection mandate granted by the Council was manifestly exceeded by that military operation". So, how to explain Evans' disenchantment? Why did the international consensus evaporate? What went wrong with the application of the principle for which he had pleaded?

Before answering these questions—which have to do with the failure of the intervention to live up to the international community's expectations—a preliminary interrogation should be formulated regarding the very grounds of the operation: Was it justified, as the promoters of the Responsibility to Protect principle assumed and as the vote at the Security Council seemed to indicate? The presentation of the situation by the media, many politicians, various non-governmental organizations and, of course, the leaders of the rebels left little doubt about it: a massacre was on the verge of being perpetrated by one of the most brutal dictators of the continent, and only immediate preventive action could avoid it. However, some condemned this bellicose precipitation. Theorist of "just wars," Michael Walzer (2011) wrote in *The New Republic*, as early as March 20, 2011, that the bombing was unjustified because its goals were unclear, the support of the Arab nations was missing, and the conditions of the application of the responsibility to protect were not met since no indication existed that massive killings of civilians would occur. But it is outside the Western

world, in Africa and the Middle East in particular, that the military operation, viewed as prompted by economic interests and imperialist motivations, received the widest opposition from intellectuals as well as the general public.

Strikingly, probably more than in Britain, where the contested intervention in Iraq had left traces among the population, there was broad consensus in France behind the president's bellicose stand, as opinion polls revealed. At the National Assembly, almost all representatives, from Conservatives to Socialists, maintained their support for the right-wing government's military engagement during the whole campaign, the only exception being the Communists. But no less conspicuously, the largest French humanitarian organization, Doctors Without Borders, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, was among the few criticizing the military intervention as "legal but illegitimate" since, according to them, it trivialized the use of force to settle internal conflicts. Analyzing the events at the end of the operations, the former president of the organization Rony Brauman went as far as to declare in *Le Monde* on November 25, 2011, that the supposed column of tanks progressing toward Benghazi and the announced destruction of the port of Misrata by airstrikes had been mere "propaganda" of the National Transitional Council, as were the presumed massacres of civilians, which were never authenticated. Actually, even the allegations of rape serving as a weapon of war (the Viagra boxes provided as proof were too well preserved considering they were said to have been found in charred tanks), of the use of foreign mercenaries (the Sub-Saharan Africans presented as such were actually undocumented migrants), and of the bombing of civilian protesters by helicopters, all accusations that had significantly contributed to the surge of indignation worldwide and the justification of the military operation, were contested by an independent report by Amnesty International in June 2011: no evidence of these claims was found. Although it is impossible to determine precisely what was the situation when Resolution 1973 was voted and what would have been the outcome of the attack against the rebels had the intervention not been undertaken, the decision to overthrow the regime—and not simply to protect the population—seemed to have been made several weeks before the counteroffensive by the French president who had declared that "Gaddafi must go."

Indeed, even those strongly in favor of the military intervention were troubled by its development into a "mission creep," in James Pattison's words (2011), with its main objective the deposition of the Libyan dictator instead of the announced imposition of a no-fly zone. To understand both the decision to intervene and what appeared to have been from the start the real objective of

the operation, domestic considerations have to be taken into account (Chorin 2012). For years, Gaddafi had been demonized in the West: his support of liberation movements blacklisted by the United States had been used as justification for airstrikes on Tripoli and Benghazi in 1986, killing the Libyan leader's daughter; his suspected implication in terrorist attacks against two airplanes in 1988 and 1989 that caused the death of more than four hundred people, many of them British and French, led to international economic sanctions. But in the 2000s, things changed. The regime collaborated with the government of the United States in its war against Islamist terrorism, agreed to compensate the families of the victims of its attacks, and officially renounced its nuclear program, thus after 2004 obtaining a progressive normalization of its relations with Western countries, in particular the European nations eager to access Libya's oil reserves, benefit from promising markets (including weapon sales in the case of Britain), and work out migration control at the southern borders of Europe, a major concern for the Italian government.

Immediately after his election as president in 2007, Sarkozy engaged in negotiations with Libya for the liberation of five Bulgarian nurses and a physician of Palestinian origin accused of having caused HIV infections among children, missioned his wife and his general secretary for secret discussions in Tripoli, and after the deportation of the health workers, expressed his gratitude to Gaddafi (Zoubir 2012). As part of a series of official invitations to European capitals, the Libyan dictator was received in Paris with great pomp for what a *New York Times* reporter called on December 11, 2007 "a reward," quoting the French president's special advisor for foreign affairs as saying that Gaddafi had "a right to redemption." However, Sarkozy had to endure the humiliation of his guest's whims and provocations, such as the installment of his sumptuous tent near the Elysée Palace, the official presidential residence. As this visit by the newly rehabilitated autocrat had caused embarrassment and protests in France, including within the government, and as later media revelations about developments in the friendship between the two heads of state and their close collaborators had generated further abashment, the uncontrollable dictator had fallen into disfavor.

In this context, the prospect of a Libyan Spring was regarded as an opportunity for the increasingly unpopular French president to redress his political mistakes, particularly after he had been criticized for his management of the previous Arab Spring and had to ask his former minister of foreign affairs to resign due to her too-close relationship with the Tunisian autocrat. According

to an analysis published by *Forbes* on March 29, 2011, although factually distinct, domestic considerations were not so different in substance for the British government as Tony Blair's disturbing secret negotiations with Gaddafi in 2007 and 2008 had been made public, as the liberation of the principal perpetrator of the Lockerbie attack for humanitarian reasons in 2009 had caused emotions among the family of the victims, and as the prospective investments of British Petroleum in Libya were considered to be at stake. In sum, the noble humanitarian argument put forward by the French and British leaders as a justification for the attack was not without ulterior motives, which the reorientation of the mission uncovered. The rejection of several hundred refugees fleeing the conflict and the airstrikes, who were stopped and turned back at the southern border of France, later revealed the limits of the president's compassion for the suffering of Libyans.

But still more problematic than this drift, the evolution of the situation on the ground raised growing concerns about the consequences of the intervention both in the short and long term, as discussed by Alan Kuperman (2013). With NATO's operation considered to have increased the duration of the war, the death toll is estimated by some experts to have been seven to ten times greater, with war crimes as well as crimes against humanity perpetrated on both sides, including the killing of Sub-Saharan African migrants accused of being mercenaries of the regime. Perhaps even more preoccupying, four years after the official end of the conflict, the country remains divided into four areas under the control of antagonistic organizations, including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and Libya has become a geostrategic site for rivalries between Muslim governments in the Middle East, with Egypt and Emirates launching air raids against Islamist groups supported by Turkey and Qatar. Furthermore, the spillover of the conflict into the region, in particular Algeria and Mali, has been facilitated by the dissemination of military and militias as well as the scattering of weapons from looted arsenals, leading to the strengthening of rebel and jihadist groups in the Sahel and to further military interventions of France in the region. Ultimately, the Responsibility to Protect principle has been partially discredited, and the fragile consensus formed around it has been broken: governments that had been reluctant to join the military operation in Libya but had accepted not to veto it felt they had been deceived and later systematically opposed similar resolutions, notably in Syria.

How to interpret the Libyan case in light of the relationship between ethics and politics? Humanitarianism has a long genealogy and a short history: the

former can be traced back to the eighteenth century and beyond as a political theology characterized by the alleviation of suffering and the saving of lives in the name of a common humanity; the latter rapidly expands at the end of the twentieth century at the interface between nongovernmental organizations, multilateral agencies, and states as a global policy of compassion and rescue (Fassin 2012). The Responsibility to Protect is both the continuation and the culmination of the humanitarian project from the perspective of international relations, since it substitutes the superior ethical obligation to defend populations whose survival is threatened and whose suffering becomes intolerable for the historic principle of national sovereignty, or rather renders the latter subsidiary to the former in extreme situations. Indeed, the Responsibility to Protect stipulates, first, that states maintain the primary responsibility for the protection of their population, second, that the international community has a responsibility to assist them in fulfilling this objective, and third, that it must consequently use all appropriate means to achieve this goal, including the use of force through the United Nations. According to the new doctrine, sovereignty can therefore be respected as long as the protection of the population is not imperiled by the very sovereign.

The Responsibility to Protect clearly belongs to the Kantian tradition of the ethics of duty. It imposes a moral obligation on each state to protect its own population and, in case of default by one, on the United Nations to act by substitution. For Kant ([1785] 2005: 61–63), an action can be good but have no moral worth if it is done by interest or by inclination or in consideration of its consequences. Only "an action done from duty derives its moral worth, not from the purpose which is to be attained by it, but from the maxim by which it is determined, and therefore, does not depend on the realization of the object of the action, but merely on the principle of volition by which the action has taken place, without regard for any object of desire." Thus, "duty is the necessity of acting from respect for the law." But what is that law, which has no regard for the effects it produces? The answer is, notoriously, the categorical imperative: "I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law." The Responsibility to Protect can thus be viewed as the reverence to the universal law that commands to avoid the suffering and preserve the lives of people threatened by genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Both the formulation of the principle and its application pertain to duty. However, as the Libyan case shows, two elements interfere with the strict ethics of duty as pure reverence for the law.

The first one is what Kant describes as "inclination," of which he gives as an example the fact of helping others for the pleasure felt at the sight of their happiness. In the context of humanitarianism, compassion in front of the distress endured by others is a crucial motive for action and has tactically been used by governments to justify military operations on humanitarian grounds. The Libyan rebels knew it as they produced narratives, testimonies, and images that elicited such response. And the public in the West, including politicians, could not avoid being moved as well as attracted by the spectacle of human affliction. Sincerely or not, such exposition contributed to the legitimation of the intervention in Libya. More generally, in the humanitarian realm, moral sentiments are intricately associated with the moral principles deriving from the universal law: affects and values are closely linked and the desire to act is inseparable from the will to act. But such an observation is not limited to humanitarianism, as Émile Durkheim ([1906] 2010: 36) emphasized in his effort to develop a sociology of moral facts: "Moral rules are invested with special authority by virtue of which they are obeyed simply because they command. Obligation is, then, one of the primary characteristics of the moral rule. In opposition to Kant, however, we shall show that the notion of duty does not exhaust the concept of morality. For us to become the agent of an act it must interest our sensibility to a certain extent and appear to us as, in some way, desirable." In Durkheim's view, if the philosopher can prescriptively decide how one ought to act morally, the social scientist should rather establish descriptively how one does act morally, under the empire of both principles and emotions.

The second addition to the ethics of duty corresponds to "self-interest," as Kant has it, providing as an illustration the merchant who does not overcharge an inexperienced customer because such a breach of trust would have negative effects on his business due to the competitive local market. In the Libyan case, the self-interest of the heads of state or government and their countries certainly played a role in the decision to intervene. As they assessed the situation, the French president and the British prime minister have included the expected benefits of the operation on their respective domestic situation, in terms of personal authority and popularity as well as geopolitical and economic implications for their countries and their companies. These links between morality and self-interest have long been discussed in the social sciences, and Bernard Mandeville's fable of the bees ([1714] 1970) and its paradoxes provoked a scandal in his time. They are also part of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital

([1994] 1998: 85): "Is a disinterested act possible?" he asks, and his answer is that "every field, in producing itself, produces a form of interest which, from the point of view of another field, may seem like disinterestedness" and that, reciprocally, it is always possible to uncover "interest in disinterestedness." No need to be cynical, however, to integrate self-interest in the selective implementation of the responsibility to protect. Again, whereas the philosopher defines a moral act in normative terms, the social scientist contemplates its social logics, including the role of self-interest.

Thus far, only the Kantian ethics of duty has been discussed, even if it has been challenged or enriched from the perspective of the social sciences by inclination and self-interest, that is, appealing to moral sentiments and recognition of realist motivations. Yet, humanitarianism should certainly not be reduced to this paradigm. On the one hand, one cannot discard Aristotelian virtue ethics, among fieldworkers as well as decision-makers, within nongovernmental organizations as well as state apparatuses, in Libya as elsewhere. Most agents do not only act according to what is their duty but also in part according to their intuition and reflection about what is good, as described by Peter Redfield (2013). The principle of the responsibility to protect threatened populations is not exclusive of the sense of feeling responsible with respect to the protection of people who are in danger. The emotional inclination and the rational self-interest do not debar virtuous reflexivity regarding the best action to conduct. One would not grasp the ethical meaning of humanitarianism in its entirety if it were to be restricted to the accomplishment of an obligation, simply tempered by affects and nourished by calculation. Something of an ethics of care is simultaneously at work, at least among some of those involved or simply concerned. But on the other hand, one has also to take into account consequentialist ethics, which evaluates the morality of the act in consideration of its foreseeable effects. These effects, as David Kennedy argues (2004), are often quite remote from what one would guess. In light of what is known about the process of the decision to intervene in Libya, it is clear, however, that the sense of urgency to launch the military operation, for whatever reason or motivation, prevailed over the thorough analysis of what would happen next locally, regionally, and internationally. And in light of what is known about the outcome of the operation in terms of casualties and violations of human rights as well as insecurity and instability in the country and the region, it is obvious that the negative consequences of the intervention, although partially predictable from precedents in Afghanistan or Iraq, were largely overlooked.

Obligation, character, and anticipation, to which can be added sentiment and interest, thus constitute the complex intertwining of ethical threads involved in humanitarianism or, more specifically here, military intervention in the name of the Responsibility to Protect. Rather than a clear delineation of ethics of duty, virtue ethics, and consequentialism, it is the articulation of the three and the relative weight given to each of them that ultimately defines the intersection of ethics and politics. Anthropologists and sociologists who study international relations do not have to choose between the paradigms: based on their empirical research and theoretical interpretation, they must instead attempt to grasp the links, tensions, and contradictions between the logics of duty, virtue, and consequences, which are also affected by emotional impulses, influenced by expected advantages, and ultimately embedded in political stakes. Humanitarian intervention in general and its military avatar in particular are much more than the mere benevolent protection of populations in the name of which they are conducted. But other ways of accounting for the intersection between ethics and politics are possible as revealed by the controversies raised in the aftermath of a dramatic event that took place in Paris.

ETHICAL ALTERNATIVE: ON THE CHARLIE ATTACK

The shooting at *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, followed two days later by the attack on a kosher supermarket, tragically inaugurated 2015 in France. But perhaps more than the acts themselves, it is the collective response they elicited in the population that has received international attention: four million people peacefully marched all over the country under banners reading *Je suis Charlie*, I am Charlie, on January 11, 2015. All political parties had called for the demonstrations, in which only the National Front had been declared unwelcome, with the battle cry: "Against barbarity, let us defend the values of the Republic!" Of these values, two were more specifically at stake: *liberté* and *laïcité*, since the shooting of people associated with the publication violated free speech and the fact that they would have been targeted because of the antireligious content of their work infringed secular principles (Fassin 2015). Indeed, the Kouachi brothers, who had killed twelve persons in the offices of the satirical magazine and nearby, including five famous cartoonists, wanted to avenge the offense of having represented the Prophet Muhammad, and especially of having done so in a debasing manner (for example, naked in the prayer prostration position uttering Brigitte

Bardot's famous line in Jean-Luc Godard's film *Contempt*: "And my butt, do you like my butt?") and in an insulting way toward Muslims (for instance, in tears despairingly complaining: "It's hard being loved by jerks!"). But these provocations were not isolated. They occurred within a broader context of rampant Islamophobia openly expressed in France (Hajjat and Mohammed 2013) and across Europe (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2007) by the far right, part of the right, and beyond. In this context, the two brothers, who had lived through difficult childhood and youth, ended up being prey of the proselytism of Islamist preachers and deciding to perpetrate their deadly attack.

The January 11 march and more generally the *Je suis Charlie* movement, obviously focusing on the assault in the offices of the satirical magazine, tended to overshadow the other killing, that of Jews in a kosher store. Although anti-Semitism was firmly denounced by the government as well as Muslim leaders and painfully experienced by the Jewish communities, the mobilization never explicitly differentiated the murder of individuals for what they do and the murder of individuals for what they are. In a sense, the crimes against the Republic somewhat eclipsed the crimes against humanity. This was probably due to the popularity of the cartoonists, to the absence of precedent of such aggression, and to the sense that values essential to the French nation had been transgressed. In France, liberty and secularism are generally presented as two sacred pillars of the nation, the legacy of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen and the 1905 Law on the Separation of Church and State, respectively. The second of these principles, in particular, had been in the past two decades the object of a voluntarist politics of the French government and parliament targeting what was viewed as a threat posed by Muslims to secular democracy. As shown by Joan Scott (2007), the passing of the law banning the wearing of "signs or clothing which conspicuously manifest students' religious affiliations" in public elementary, middle, and high schools in 2004, and the impassioned controversy that surrounded it, revealed that the "politics of the veil"—since the legislation aimed in fact at prohibiting headscarves—meant much more than a defense of secularism. More generally the radicalization of the promoters of *laïcité* has profoundly modified the spirit of its initial advocates and, according to Jean Baubérot (2014), has "distorted" its very principle.

In fact, after the *Charlie* attack, the defense of liberty and secularism by state officials and civil society, however sincere it was for many, overlooked the numerous breaches already existing in the application of these principles. Indeed, on the side of free speech, denigration of the national flag or anthem,

denial or irreverence regarding a genocide, or calls for the trade boycott of a foreign country have become increasingly prosecuted under the French law, and on the side of secular practices, the state generously subsidizes private education systems for Christians and Jews, the teaching of religion is mandatory in public schools in Alsace Moselle, and the French presidents are granted by the pope the title of sole honorary canon of Saint John Lateran inherited from the ancien régime when France was deemed "the elder daughter of the Church." Thus, not all discourses are protected by the freedom of speech and not all religious groups were imposed the same secular rule, but few commentators noted the double standards used by the state in the application of these foundational principles. Ironically, the mere fact of evoking publicly the unequal treatment of Islam raised suspicion and could even be severely punished—and has been when students have done so in the classroom, paradoxically after they had been invited to express their opinion by their professor. On January 14, the minister of education herself declared at the National Assembly, "these questions about double standards are intolerable to us, especially at school, which is charged with transmitting values." Notwithstanding such contradictions, the creeds of both free speech and secular society benefitted from a broad national consensus in France.

Former member of the *Charlie Hebdo* editorial team and well-known for her repeated criticisms of Islam, Caroline Fourest (2015) was on the forefront of the mobilization for free speech and radical secularism, going so far as to write a two-hundred-page "vindication for blasphemy." One week after the attack, she was invited to speak on British television. During her Sky News interview, to the surprise of the journalist Dharshini David, she suddenly brandished a copy of the satirical magazine showing Muhammad. The broadcast was interrupted and the anchor apologized to the audience, regretting that some viewers "might have been offended" and reminding that her that the channel had made the "decision not to show this cover." In the previous days, the French essayist had made similar attempts on the US cable news networks CNN and MSNBC, but since the interviews had been prerecorded, the image had been blurred before it was broadcast. Referring to the episode on Sky News, Caroline Fourest complained on the French media about the "treason of British journalists" and the "unprecedented violence and absolute hypocrisy" of the censorship of which she had been the victim.

This anecdote is revealing of a broader phenomenon. While in France the medias have chosen to exhibit the cover of the magazine ostensibly and

insistently, in the United Kingdom and the United States they have generally decided not to do so. Many French commentators deemed the latter attitude complaisance, if not pusillanimity. Conversely, on the other side of the Channel and the Atlantic, the former stand was often regarded as uselessly insulting and stigmatizing. In fact, the ideological landscape was less homogeneous than it seemed, and each society was itself divided along these lines, as revealed by the protests of two hundred writers when in New York PEN American Center granted an award for "freedom of expression courage" to *Charlie Hebdo* in May 2015. Similar impassioned debates have taken place worldwide. Mutually exclusive, the two positions—to publish or not to publish—have often discredited each other, the radicals calling their adversaries indulgent of Muslims and the liberals considering their opponents to be intolerant of Islam. How can one provide some "moral clarity" (Shatz 2015) in this debate? Rather than opposing courage and cowardice, as was common in France in the aftermath of the killings, or liberality and bigotry, as was heard in Britain and the United States, I suggest viewing the two positions as alternative ethics.

For Weber ([1919] 1994: 359–60), at the heart of the relationship between ethics and politics lies a conflict between "two fundamentally different, irreconcilably opposed maxims." The first one is the "ethic of conviction," which is absolutist. It is sometimes also translated as the ethic of ultimate ends. The individual who acts in function of this ethic will do so by following the principles of his religion or ideology whatever the cost may be. The second one is the "ethic of responsibility," which is relativist. It pays special attention to the means used. The individual who acts according to this ethic will do so by anticipating the potential effects of the decision made. "If evil consequences flow from an action done out of pure conviction, this type of person holds the world, not the doer, responsible, or the stupidity of others, or the will of God who made them thus. A man who subscribes to the ethic of responsibility, by contrast, will make allowances for precisely these everyday shortcomings." In a context of war, for instance, a "person of very firm socialist convictions" may have to choose between a few more years of conflict leading to a revolution or an immediate peace with a political status quo.

But although his inclination is clearly toward the second option, Weber ([1919] 1994: 361–67) does not caricaturize the opposition: "It is not that the ethic of conviction is identical with irresponsibility, nor that the ethic of responsibility means the absence of principled conviction—there is no question of that." Actually, the alternative is not easy to solve: "No ethic in the world can get

round the fact that the achievement of 'good' ends is in many cases tied to the necessity of employing morally suspect or at least morally dangerous means, and that one must reckon with the possibility or even likelihood of evil side-effects. Nor can any ethic in the world determine when and to what extent the ethically good end 'sanctifies' the ethically dangerous means and side-effects." The implication is that there is no easy solution to this sort of dilemma: "Whether one ought to act on the basis of an ethics of conviction or one of responsibility, and when one should do the one or the other, these are not things about which one can give instructions to anybody." In the end, "the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility are not absolute opposites." Rather, "they are complementary to one another." This optimistic conclusion might not be entirely satisfying, though: there remains something practically unresolvable in this confrontation because the options are intellectually incompatible.

The response to the *Charlie Hebdo* attack provides ample evidence of it: one has to decide whether or not to publish the caricatures of Muhammad. A choice has to be made. More generally, one cannot argue simultaneously for the absolute application of principles in the name of one's conviction and the preferential attention to the consequences of such application in the name of one's responsibility. But in this particular case, there is no perfect symmetry between the two ethics for two reasons: one is theoretical, the other empirical. From a theoretical perspective, the ethics of conviction emphasizes principles of democracy, here freedom and *laïcité*, which supposedly represent its French version named Republicanism, while the ethics of responsibility values the foundations of politics, that is, in Hannah Arendt's terms (2005: 93), "the fact of human plurality" or "the coexistence and association of different men." The latter can be regarded as less specific and more universal than the former. One could say that it is less historically bounded and has more anthropological depth. From an empirical perspective, the ethics of conviction is claimed by dominant groups and selectively applied to dominated ones, since Muslims occupy the lower segment of society and endure various forms of discrimination, as discussed by John Bowen (2015), whereas the ethics of responsibility tends to be inclusive of both groups by acknowledging the historical, cultural, and social context in which principles are formulated. The apparent neutrality of the call for abstract ideals of the former often conceals the actual inequality of their concrete application, to which the latter is more sensitive. One could argue that this asymmetry in power relations has ethical implications. Let us examine the two positions in more detail.

On the one hand, those defending the ethics of conviction invoke free speech and radical secularism, meaning in this case the right to blaspheme, which has become commonplace in France and even, in practice, a duty to blaspheme since even before the *Charlie* attacks refusing to show the caricature of the Prophet was presented as an ethical renouncement. Yet, the actual application of these principles seems to contradict them. First, although it has universal claims, such a posture is weakened by its relative inconsistency: the authorities that speak out for freedom of expression and defense of *laïcité* prosecute activists who manifest anti-Zionist opinions (the French state systematically brings to justice those who advocate for the boycott, disinvestment, and sanction campaign) and generously fund Catholic schools (which welcome one thousand times more students and receive five thousand times more public funds than Muslim schools, despite the fact that Muslims are only five times less numerous than Catholics). Second, although it is allegedly applied to all faiths equally, blasphemy focuses on one of them, whereas others are spared such profanity (if one defines it as irreverence with respect to what is regarded as sacred in a given social group, ridiculing the Prophet could be deemed equivalent to mocking the Holocaust, but the promoters of blasphemy accept the former while condemning the latter). In the end, the double standard and the symbolic domination that it reveals undermine the democratic promise.

On the other hand, those defending the ethics of responsibility invoke the recognition of the sensibility of others, who feel insulted and discriminated by the representation and derision of the Prophet and the risk of generating social disorders, even on a global scale with the possibility of lives lost, and in both aspects, facts proved them true, since many Muslims all over the world were indignant, leading to violent protests and harsh repression. The issues raised by their contradictors against this position are twofold. First, they fear the development of censorship and self-censorship: this concern is legitimate but should be deemed so for all expressions of satire, criticism, and dissidence, whatever their target. Second, they worry about the place granted to religious beliefs by a secular state: this preoccupation is, again, comprehensible but reflects the hardening of secularism in the past decades in France even more than the shift in the public presence of religions. For those who argue in favor of the ethics of responsibility, these two risks, which should certainly not be overlooked, are however counterbalanced by the expected benefits: respect for the dignity of all citizens whatever their faith and integration of the various communities into the national collectivity.

But the analysis of the confrontation between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility, in the case under study, should not be limited to the exchange of arguments on both sides as if it were a pure intellectual dispute. Both historical and political contexts matter. Indeed, the publication of the caricatures occurred at a time when Islam was increasingly represented with negative traits in France and more broadly throughout the Western world and when Muslims were confronted with hostile and provocative attitudes in the European and North American countries where they lived. It was also a time in the history of the Middle East and more broadly the Muslim world when the radicalization of jihadist groups generated violent conflicts and when the sensitization of larger segments of the population facilitated extreme tensions. The cartoonists were conscious of their dangerous game. The preachers played with the frustrations of Muslims. All knew the setting of their actions. It is precisely the consideration of this historical and political background that inclines Weber toward the ethics of responsibility: for him, to be responsible is to take into account the context, from which one can derive foreseeable consequences and decide in favor of the least damageable option.

But precisely because the context is so crucial for the interpretation of these ethical choices and because politics is so intimately linked to ethics in the public sphere, the signification and implication of each ethic vary depending on the circumstances. Whereas the expression of conviction (in the defense of freedom and secularism after the attacks) was consensual and therefore with little risk for those who professed it in France, it sometimes represents the ultimate and dauntless option for those who speak truth to power (by contrast with the cartoonists who mocked an already stigmatized social group). One can think of the Mauritanian engineer Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed, a member of a lower caste of Black African origin, accused of apostasy and sentenced to death for an article denouncing the religious roots of social inequality in his country, or of the Chinese writer Liu Xiaobo, a human rights activist, accused of subversion and sentenced to eleven years in prison for his participation in a manifesto calling for the democratization of his society. Symmetrically, while the invocation of responsibility (against the call for absolute principles) was a way of resisting a largely accepted stance in the French context, it can turn into lenient acceptation of the status quo at whatever cost (by contrast with the uncomfortable position of those who did not associate with the collective momentum). One could evoke European leaders not willing to establish common policies to rescue endangered immigrants in the Mediterranean Sea or to grant asylum to

refugees from African and Middle Eastern countries at war, with the arguments of the need to control borders, prevent xenophobia, limit the expansion of the far right, and maintain the sustainability of welfare programs.

Thus, the meaning of the opposition between ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility depends on the field of forces in which it is embedded. Expressing one's conviction to defend rights against powerful agents is different from doing so against dominated groups. Arguing in favor of responsibility is not the same when one represents the former or protects the latter. This does not imply that criticizing powerful agents is in itself good, or right, and that criticism is necessarily bad, or wrong, when it concerns dominated groups. I am simply arguing that the implications are different as is the signification. The leaks regarding the practices of spying on both domestic and foreign communications by the National Security Agency are a case in point. Whatever one thinks of his deeds, Edward Snowden acted in the name of an ethics of conviction, to shield citizens' privacy and liberty. He did it at the peril of his reputation and even life. One can refer to the "courage of truth," as Foucault ([2008] 2011) analyzes it, using Socrates as an example. And however one judges its response, the Obama administration justified it in the terms of an ethics of responsibility, arguing that maintaining the secret system and charging the whistleblower for espionage were necessary to ensure the protection of the national security. The cost was major infringements of civil and human rights for both the public and the accused, including, for the latter, violations of his right to a fair trial (since the case was to be presented behind closed doors) and to asylum (since pressures were exerted on other governments to avoid its granting). One can read this attitude as a compromise privileging security over liberty and sovereignty over rights, and one will then have to decide, in light of history, whether or not it is what Avishai Margalit (2010) calls a "rotten compromise," giving the 1938 Munich agreement as a powerful illustration of the price paid in such case.

In other words, Weber's heuristic differentiation between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility needs to be assessed in each specific historical and political context, considering more specifically the power relations and power games in which they are inserted. They involve more than idealism, on the side of conviction, and pragmatism, on the side of responsibility. From the perspective of the social sciences, their interpretation cannot be made in the absolute. One has to take into account the structure of domination that is involved and the context in which it makes sense. Actually, Weber's proclaimed preference for the ethics of responsibility over the ethics of conviction should

itself be understood in the historical and political moment of his famous 1919 lecture to the Free Students Union in Munich—that is, in the immediate aftermath of the Spartacist Uprising, which, as a public figure, he had strongly opposed: the revolution ended up in the bloodbath of the government's repression.

Hence, avoiding a value judgment on the two ethics would be probably more faithful to the German sociologist's epistemological principles. It might be preferable to affirm instead the importance of the analytic distinction between them rather than of a normative hierarchy among them. The ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility have different cultural meanings and social implications, and may therefore be evaluated differently depending on the historical setting and the political stakes. This assertion is not only true of Weber's two ethics; it applies to all ethical forms. It does not entail moral relativism but simply the recognition of the necessity for the social scientists to differentiate ethics (rather than rejecting as unethical any stance that does not correspond to one's ethical position) and to contextualize their interpretation (rather than analyzing them in absolute terms). Such precautions become especially crucial when one analyzes what is generally viewed as deviant practices from an ethical perspective.

ETHICAL TENSIONS: ON POLICE MISCONDUCT

Although everyone would agree that it is not a novel phenomenon but rather an old reality only recently acknowledged, problems related to serious malpractice in law enforcement have become prominent over the past decades (Fassin [2013] 2015). In Britain the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993, in France the death of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traore in 2005, and in the United States the killing of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014—only to mention a few events that generated collective awareness and urban unrest in the respective countries where these tragedies took place—have led to uncover more broadly the banality of racial discrimination, physical abuse, and illegal practices among police forces as well as the conspicuous impunity from which perpetrators benefited. Beyond the individual misdeeds, however, the institution and even the state itself have begun to be held responsible for such actions upsetting common moral sense. But how to connect the interaction between officers and their public and the functioning of law enforcement organizations and governmental bodies, and more generally how to link together the microsocial and the

macrosocial is a classic but difficult puzzle in the social sciences (Cicourel 1981). Here, the case is made even more complex since one has to consider how morality and ethics enter the picture, and more specifically, how the agents account for their misbehavior or, conversely, correct it, and how the state contributes to such deviance or, contrarily, regulates it.

An illustration can shed some light on these issues. I take it from the ethnographic research I conducted between 2005 and 2007 in one of the largest French police districts situated in the outskirts of Paris (Fassin [2011] 2013). The 200,000-inhabitant conurbation has unemployment, poverty, and crime rates significantly higher than the rest of the region. The proportion of immigrants is substantially higher than the national average, and minorities are overrepresented in the many housing projects. During a fifteen-month period I have done fieldwork, accompanying in their daily activities uniformed officers in charge of public security as well as plainclothes agents belonging to the anticrime squads. These special units have been created in the 2000s as part of law-and-order policies developed by successive conservative governments. They are normally dedicated to catching criminals in the act but for lack of such cases they tend not to be very different from regular units, except that their members have the deserved reputation of toughness. Most of my observations were carried out accompanying the police during their day and night patrols across the conurbation, generally in cars, sometimes by foot. In order to exemplify ordinary misconduct rather than spectacular misdeeds involving brutality or even cruelty, which I also witnessed, I purposely choose a trivial and banal scene.

One evening, during the 2005 riots, the police were informed that a primary school in a housing project was on fire, probably due to arson. The anticrime squad crew with which I was on patrol immediately headed toward the site where firefighters were already at work to extinguish the blaze under the curious gaze of the residents. A few minutes later, in the parking lot where we stood observing the scene, a small explosion was heard. It was a Molotov cocktail, the origin of which was difficult to determine. Scrutinizing the surroundings plunged into darkness, the officers noticed on the other side of the sports field that bordered the apartment blocks a small group of adolescents hardly distinguishable, some of them wearing light-colored hooded sweaters. They imagined that the culprit was among them and started to chase the shadowy figures, which fled and disappeared. The subsequent search in the neighborhood was not successful. After a while, we resumed the patrol. Three hours passed without any other significant occurrence but as we were driving around several blocks from the

site where the incident had taken place, the officers spotted three adolescents who were quietly chatting in front of an apartment block. They looked of North African origin. The car stopped, the agents harshly asked the youngsters for their documents and forcibly conducted a body search. One of the three, who did not have his papers with him, explained that he lived with his parents two floors above and proposed to run upstairs, possibly with an officer, and get his identity card. The police refused and took him in to the station. The adolescent was wearing a white hooded sweatshirt. Although it was quite common clothing among the youth, this made him a suspect (or rather an easy prey), the arrest of which could be formally justified.

During the transit to the precinct, he was pestered and threatened. If he did not confess his crime, he was told, he would be detained. The adolescent said he did not understand what he was supposed to be guilty of. At the police station, one of the agents checked the national register of reported offenses and found a name similar to his associated with a previous misdemeanor. For a long while he aggressively interrogated the adolescent about his identity and made jokes about his Arab name, Abdelkrim, the last syllable of which is pronounced in French as the word "crime." Obviously, the officer knew that the probability of this random arrest corresponding to the actual culprit was very low and that, were it to be the case, the chance of obtaining a confession was even lower. But he probably had other reasons for keeping the boy at the precinct. Indeed, when the adolescent was finally released, it was the middle of the night, and there was no more public transportation. He had to walk almost three miles back home.

Such practices are not rare. Two official studies of the judicial treatment of minors (Delon and Muchielli 2007) and young adults (Mazars 2006) arrested during the urban unrest show that three-fourths of the former and one-third of the latter were discharged for lack of evidence. With regard to the adolescents, the authors note that most of those accused of resisting arrest were already known to the police, implying that the indictment might have been a form of targeted retribution. In an interview they conducted with a judge, the latter described these apprehensions followed by several hours of detention and harassment as common. This form of arbitrary punishment inflicted on a more or less random basis, depending on whether someone already identified as a troublemaker was at hand, was essentially directed at those whom anticrime squads' agents disparagingly designated as "bastards," a term that was difficult not to interpret in racial terms since it alluded to what most members of the special unit deemed illegitimate national status, most of them being French born in

France but of African ancestry. Although, for the majority, the youths did not end up being sentenced or even arraigned, the mere fact of having them tormented, humiliated, frightened, or simply annoyed sufficed to the police's sense that the alleged offenders had received a just retribution. Indeed, albeit unethical by common standards, these acts, which infringe both legal and deontological norms of their profession, nevertheless receive moral justifications on the part of the officers, who rationalize them with two complementary arguments.

First, the police generally consider their public to be either culprits or accomplices. The expression "their public" is meant to describe the residents of low-income neighborhoods, belonging for the most part to ethnic minorities (that is, blacks, Arabs and sometimes Roma people). They correspond to those designated by John Alan Lee (1981) as "police property," in other words, categories of population that society regards as falling a priori within the jurisdiction of law enforcement organizations and that the authorities therefore leave to the officers' discretionary power. This conflation of entire territories (public housing) or groups (project youths) and their mental association with criminal activities (often mere misdemeanors) have been described in various national contexts of law enforcement, but they are aggravated in the French case by the fact that 80 percent of police forces come from rural areas and small towns and their first posting is always in the most exposed and less valued districts—that is, the disadvantaged neighborhoods located in or around large cities (Pruvost, Coulangeon, and Roharik 2004). Nourished by the discourse of their professors at the academy and of their colleagues in their precinct who often depict the *banlieues* as a "jungle" and their inhabitants as "savages," the sense of alienation experienced by young officers contributes to their lack of discernment: unable to establish differences among the residents of the housing projects, they see them all as probable delinquents and potential enemies. When an offense is perpetrated, people fall into two categories: those who committed it or helped commit it and those whose silence render them complicit. For the police, to arrest an adolescent knowing that there is a very thin chance that he would be the culprit and that, were it to be the case, there would be no way to prove it, is therefore morally justified: he pays not only for his social group but also for the times when he has not been caught while guilty.

Second, such retribution is even more legitimate in their view since they are persuaded that magistrates are too lenient. We arrest criminals and indict them, they say, and the next day, the judge releases them without sentence. Such a belief reinforces their conviction that they should themselves dispense justice

in the street or at the precinct—and not infrequently on their way to the station as well. The complaint about the magistrates' indulgence, which allegedly annihilates the officers' valuable efforts to fight crime, is specific to neither a country nor a time, and Egon Bittner (1980: 26), among others, discussed the phenomenon for the United States several decades ago. Yet, in France, as in most Western nations, data shows the exact opposite. As a consequence of harsher legislation, stricter enforcement and more expeditious judiciary procedures, more accused are sentenced more often and more heavily than has been the case in recent decades (Timbart 2011). But for the officers—who notice the presence in public places of individuals they have arrested but ignore the fate of those who have been incarcerated—judges are never severe enough, and each time the police have a chance to punish either physically or psychologically suspected offenders while they are within their reach they take it.

Thus, because they think they are dealing with a criminal population and because they presume that magistrates show too much clemency, law enforcement officers feel entitled to discipline their public and chastise their suspects, whatever evidence—or lack thereof—they may have against them. Retribution, whether it takes the form of the random punishment of a bystander as exemplified here or of a punitive expedition targeting a whole apartment block as described elsewhere (Fassin 2013b), is therefore regarded by the police as morally defensible. These people got what they deserve, they confidently affirm.

A caveat might be necessary, here. When I happened to present this analysis to scholarly audiences, I had remarkably contradictory reactions: while some would manifest their indignation toward the officers and the way they justified their practices, others would state their discomfort with respect to what they thought was my approval of these justifications, and others still would express their irritation at what they deemed my partiality against the police. None of these reactions adequately reflect my endeavor to account for abuses in law enforcement. To analyze moral justifications is not to express a moral judgment in the form of either condemnation or excuse. It is an effort to render intelligible—including in the agents' own moral terms—acts that appear to be purely unethical. Yet, my auditors' reactions usefully unveiled a predicament to which social scientists are often confronted: the ethical tension between the first and third person—in this case, between the acknowledgment of the moral justifications of the police and the recognition of the moral deviance of their acts.

How to reconcile or simply juxtapose the former and the latter without resorting to Jean-Paul Sartre's simplistic explanation by the "bad faith" or

succumbing to Jean-Luc Godard's provocative definition of objectivity as "five minutes for Hitler and five minutes for the Jews"? If we take seriously the fact that agents generally find moral arguments to explain to themselves and to others what is generally regarded as immoral acts, and if we think it is the social scientists' task to account for such ethical contradiction, how can one proceed to avoid the dual pitfall of mere condemnation and indulgent excuses? To address this quandary, I suggest to proceed through three analytical steps: first, by expanding horizontally the range of what falls under the moral and the ethical; second, by integrating vertically individual actions into their institutional and political background; third, by identifying differences among agents with respect to misconduct.

The first moment consists in including in the analysis of ethical issues moral dimensions that have nothing to do with the right, the good, and more generally the "positive" side of morality and ethics. This is a major conceptual shift since for the most part both philosophers and social scientists precisely define morality and ethics in terms of the right thing to do and the good life to live. Noticeably, however, the Scottish moralists had opened the path and, for instance, in his famous study of moral sentiments, Adam Smith ([1759] 1976) was not only interested in "sympathy," "gratitude," and "amiable and respectable virtues," but also in "hatred," "resentment," and "selfish passions." Neither the anthropology of morality nor the anthropology of ethics have paid attention to what is generally deemed negative dimensions and therefore disqualified. The problem is epitomized by the fact that the only available alternative to Joel Robbins' "anthropology of the good" (2013) is David Parkin's "anthropology of evil" (1985), as if the ordinary forms of "positive" ethics could only be contrasted with extraordinary forms of "negative" morality, not leaving a space for the study of trivial negative expressions. In fact, almost all contemporary anthropology of morality and ethics is turned toward the good.

I would therefore plead for a demoralized anthropology, an anthropology not only focused on the bright side of morality and ethics but considering also their dark or, perhaps better said, dim side. In an insightful and profound analysis of his own moral emotions as he returns to Germany a few years after having been deported to Auschwitz, Jean Améry ([1966] 1980) explained the ethical roots of his "*ressentiment*," using the French word in reference to Nietzsche's famous interpretation of the genealogy of morals. Adapting his reflection to account for the expression of rancor and animosity I encountered in my fieldwork on AIDS in South Africa and policing in France, I have proposed (Fassin

2013c) to distinguish *ressentiment* as related to a historical condition (that of
the blacks who lived through the apartheid), and *resentment* as related to a so-
ciological position (that of the police tasked to do the dirty work of society).
Resentment is nourished, in the latter case, by the sociological proximity of the
officers with their public (they are part of the lower class). The moral distinction
they construct to differentiate themselves from the local population (they see
their activity as the defense of the social order against the dangers represented
by poor neighborhoods and their residents) often serves to cover up or render
acceptable plain racism (most of them are whites and operate in areas where the
majority of the inhabitants belong to minorities of color). But this resentment
is not only self-reproduced; it is also fueled by discourses heard and policies
implemented.

The second stage implies, indeed, to decenter the analysis so as to integrate
individual acts into the broader moral context of the institution, the state, and
society as a whole. The ethical grounds on which agents justify their conduct
are influenced by the moral climate of the time. Political discourses and public
policies, in particular, can legitimate or even encourage deviant practices among
the police (Mouhanna 2011). Since the 1990s, successive right-wing govern-
ments have marginalized and stigmatized immigrants and their children, whom
a minister of the interior labeled as "scum"; harsher legislation has criminal-
ized practices typically encountered in housing projects, such as loitering in the
lobby of apartment blocks; police forces have been given extended prerogatives
in terms of stop-and-frisks and have received special units like the anticrime
squads, in order to exert stricter control over disadvantaged neighborhoods; last
but not least, in the name of performance culture, high quotas of arrests have
been established, which could only be reached by looking for easy prey such as
marijuana users or even by provoking young men to prompt their reactions then
qualified as insulting and resisting the police (these arrests are generally done
via racial profiling in housing projects). Such convergent verbal, legal, organi-
zational, and managerial targeting of certain populations and certain territories
has largely contributed to facilitate or encourage violent, abusive, and discrimi-
natory practices in law enforcement and to entitle officers already inclined to
such practices, even more since the expectation of impunity authorizes the trivi-
alization of deviance.

To account for this moral climate underlying the politics and policies of law
enforcement, I have borrowed but reformulated E. P. Thompson's (1971) classi-
cal concept of moral economy and defined it as the production, circulation, and

appropriation of values and affects with regard to a given social problem (Fassin 2009). This definition takes into consideration both the dynamic of change in the moral space and the agents' capacity to adopt, contest, or manipulate ethical objects. In the present case, what can be called the moral economy of insecurity, as it has developed in past decades with its fabrication of anxiety, anger, and intolerance, its creation of scapegoats, rejection of otherness, exaltation of nationalism, demand for order, expectation of intransigence, and consent to loss of rights, has definitely provided favorable conditions for the development of police misconduct and the generation of a collective ethical anesthesia. Yet, it is clear that even in such noxious context for democracy, not all officers act in the same way.

The third approach consequently enlightens the ethical variations existing within the professional group and its institutional setting. Even when the internal (moral justifications) and external (moral economy) conditions are propitious to deviance, certain individuals commit misdeeds while others do not. There are various ways to interpret such differences. In a classic study, William Ker Muir (1977: 3–4) distinguished two "virtues," which he called "tragic sense" and "moral equanimity," the former having to do with the capacity to "grasp the nature of human suffering," the latter referring to the "contradiction of achieving just ends with coercive means." Such criteria may however evoke the social scientist's idealistic vision more than the reality of police work. In the units I observed, differentiation among officers could be identified along two axes. One axis corresponds to the moral community imagined by the officers, that is, those with whom they considered themselves sharing a common humanity. This moral community could be inclusive, in the sense that it comprised, prima facie, everyone without distinction of color, culture, religion, or class, or be exclusive, in the sense that certain groups or categories were a priori rejected, generally on racial or ethnic grounds. The attitude toward the youths from minorities reflected rather accurately this distinction: civility and correctness in the first case, hostility and contempt in the second one. The other axis indicates the moral obligation the officers felt with regard to the code of conduct of their profession, particularly for the use of force and the respect for the law. This moral obligation could be strong, with what is often described as professionalism, or weak, with aggressive and unlawful practices.

Empirical observation revealed a more frequent combination of exclusive moral community and weak moral obligation (racist and violent officers) than

of inclusive moral community and strong moral obligation (courteous law-abiding officers). Interestingly, the second scenario characterized the few agents who had grown up in urban areas comparable to the ones where they were assigned; by contrast their colleagues raised in small towns and rural areas embodied the first attitude. More rarely, discordant combinations were found: aggressive and unlawful behaviors indiscriminately directed at everyone or, symmetrically, racist beliefs not translated into discriminatory acts. These various configurations, which would of course need to be empirically refined to show how they concretely operate and also how the same individuals can move from one to another, may be interpreted in light of what Foucault ([1984] 1985) describes as moral subjectivities, through which the agents do not content themselves with the implementation of rules or reproduction of norms but develop their own capacity to assess people and situations and act accordingly. In the case of law enforcement, if the conformity to a work model that has often been described by criminologists in terms of police culture is the attitude most frequently encountered, those who are able to escape the habits of their organization, the prejudices of their profession, and the pressure of their peers are of particular interest to analyze how, often in a discreet and almost unnoticeable way, "subjects of virtue," as James Laidlaw (2014) calls them in a different context, are—quietly—constituted.

Anthropological attention to moral deviance—practices that offend common conscience—thus enriches our understanding of ethics by widening the scope of what counts as moral and ethical issues, while leading to uncertain terrains where it is difficult to be simultaneously acknowledging the agents' moral justifications and recognizing objective ethical problems. Rather than trying in vain to solve such predicament, one can take a completely different approach by broadening and differentiating the perspective. On the one hand, moral economies underlie the conditions of possibility of such deviance, as the changing and often conflictive values and affects prevent or facilitate it, combat it, or legitimate it. On the other hand, moral subjectivities reopen the space of the possible for the individuals, who keep a certain leeway with regard to collective norms and rules and can therefore exercise a sort of ethical discretion. Whether they use this language or not, most analysts focus either on the macrolevel of moral economies or on the microlevel of moral subjectivities, as an eternal return of the metaphysical alternative between determinism and freedom. Dialectical thinking may allow for the analysis of the tensions between collective constraints and individual autonomy.

CONCLUSION

Following the path long explored by philosophers, anthropologists have recently attempted to identify the matter of morality and ethics in human action. Although I regard their endeavor as valuable, the approach I have adopted is diametrically opposed: I have considered that such moral or ethical matter cannot be isolated and that methodological reductionism might impoverish our understanding of the moral and ethical issues that are at stake. Rather than considering morality and ethics as a given that anthropologists would uncover, I have thus analyzed moral problems and ethical questions. To the potentially objectifying language of morality and ethics, I resolutely prefer that of moral and ethical issues, which indicates that moral problems and ethical questions emerge from human action and take shape through dilemmas, debates, decisions, conflicts, the interpretation of which remains subject to discussion and negotiation. What is morally or ethically at stake? This is the interrogation I try to address.

The logical consequence of this critical approach is that the moral and ethical realms are not pure—and can only be purified artificially. Emotions, benefits, strategies, ulterior motives, power games, social relations interact with values, principles, and virtues. Nowhere is this complex interaction more visible than where ethics and politics intersect. To analyze the field thus defined, it is, however, necessary to forestall a possible misunderstanding. The language of ethics has been increasingly imported into the political realm over the past decades either to denounce "unethical practices," such as corruption, embezzlement, influence peddling, violent repression, or to promote "ethical practices," notably through legal guaranties and regulatory agencies. Although legitimate and sometimes useful, such a moralizing enterprise is clearly normative as well as largely rhetorical. By contrast, I defend a method that is descriptive and analytical. I do not—or try not to—condemn unethical deeds and foster ethical procedures. I have no intention—at least as part of this academic intervention—to make politicians and political activity better. My more modest objective is to clarify some of the moral and ethical stakes that arise from the practice of politics or within political arenas.

This leads me to treat moral and ethical issues mostly at a collective rather than at an individual level, as is generally the case. I do not ignore, of course, that politics is produced through the action of men and women who are individuals and who, as such, can behave in a way that will be viewed as moral or ethical by

themselves and by others, including the social scientists who comment on their action. But the epistemic choice I make is to grasp moral and ethical issues in fields such as international relations, spaces such as the public sphere, or institutions such as the police. This choice is not arbitrary. It derives from the very object under scrutiny: politics. What distinguishes it from other dimensions of human activity is the centrality of power, and power cannot be described and analyzed only between individuals. How does power intersect with ethics, and how does ethics interfere with power? This is the question that I have attempted to answer.

Interpreted on this basis, the three cases I have studied here—on military intervention, radical secularism, and police misconduct—lead, beyond their singularity, to a series of general observations. First, the ethical foundations of political action result from a complex combination of the various conflictive ethics proposed by philosophers. Indeed, duty, virtue, and utility are theoretically incompatible but empirically reconcilable albeit in tension. Besides, they are inextricably intertwined with affects and interests, tactical decisions, and social forces. In other words, these ethical foundations are heterogeneous both internally and externally. Second, the ethical signification of political stances is contingent on the historical setting, cultural background, and social context. The same act of truth-telling has a different meaning and impact depending on whether it is directed at the powerful or the powerless. Thus, conviction and responsibility do not occupy a fixed place in the ethical realm. However, such relativism should not be viewed as moral, suggesting that all values are relative, but as sociological, asserting that values and the emotions associated with them are not abstract concepts but situated entities that must be grasped in their relation to social positions. Third, the ethical evaluation of political practices has to account for the banality of misconduct and the discrepancy between the normativity of the first and third persons, in other words the aporia of the agents' moral justifications and the observer's moral interpretation. A major implication is the shift away from the common version of the anthropology of morality and ethics to account for the full range of moral sentiments and values, from compassion to resentment, from justice to cruelty, instead of limiting the inquiry to the bright side of morality and ethics. Such an endeavor thus expands the spectrum of relevant moral problems and ethical questions and allows for the interpretation of otherwise incomprehensible discourses or acts merely deemed immoral or unethical.

In the introduction of the collective volume he edited on ordinary ethics, Michael Lambek (2010: 1) raises an important paradox: while "ethnographers commonly find that the people they encounter are trying to do what they consider right or good, are being evaluated according to criteria of what is right and good, or are in some debate about what constitute the human good," in contrast "anthropological theory tends to overlook all this in favor of analyses that emphasize structure, power, and interest." To correct this inconsistency, he intends "to demonstrate the centrality of ethical practice, judgment, reasoning, responsibility, cultivation, and questioning in social life." While I recognize the meaningfulness of this effort, I want to reconnect the two sides. What I have tried here is to envisage the possibility to hold together the sense of the human good and the leverage of the social forces, the recognition of others and the forms of domination, moral judgment and power relations, values and interests—and ultimately to restore an intellectual space of tensions, contradictions, and sometimes aporia: the troubled waters where ethics and politics meet.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Améry, Jean. (1966) 1980. "Resentments." In *At the mind's limits: Contemplations by a survivor on Auschwitz and its realities*, 62–81. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Arendt, Hannah. 2005. *The promise of politics.* New York: Schoken Books.

Baubérot, Jean. 2014. *La laïcité falsifiée.* Paris: La Découverte.

Bittner, Egon. 1980. *The functions of the police in modern society: A review of background factors, current practices, and possible role models.* Cambridge, MA: Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain.

Bourdieu, Pierre. (1994) 1998. *Practical reason: On the theory of action.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bowen, John. 2015. "France after Charlie Hebdo." Forum, *Boston Review*, March 3.

Chorin, Ethan. 2012. *Exit the Colonel: The hidden history of the Libyan revolution.* New York: Public Affairs.

Cicourel, Aaron. 1981. "Notes on the integration of micro and macro-levels of analysis." In *Advances in social theory and methodology*, edited by Karin Knorr-Cetina and Aaron Cicourel, 51–80. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Das, Veena. 2010. "Engaging the life of the other: Love and everyday life." In *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language, and action*, edited by Michael Lambek, 376–99. New York: Fordham University Press.

Delon, Aurore, and Laurent Muchielli. 2007. "Le traitement judiciaire des mineurs: Le cas des émeutiers déférés en novembre 2005." *Questions pénales* 20 (3).

Durkheim, Émile. (1906) 2010. "The determination of the moral facts." In *Sociology and philosophy*, 35–62. Abingdon: Routledge.

Fassin, Didier. 2009. "Les économies morales revisitées." *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 6:1237–66.

———. (2011) 2013. *Enforcing order: An ethnography of urban policing.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

———. 2012. *Humanitarian reason: A moral history of the present.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. (2013) 2015. "Maintaining order: The moral justifications for police practices." In *At the heart of the state: The moral world of institutions*, edited by Didier Fassin et al., 93–116. London: Pluto Press.

———. 2013a. "When humanitarianism turns realistic." *Dissent* (Spring): 99–103.

———. 2013b. "Scenes from urban life: A modest proposal for a critical perspectivist approach." *Social Anthropology* 21 (3): 371–77.

———. 2013c. "On resentment and ressentiment: The politics and ethics of moral emotions." *Current Anthropology* 54 (3): 249–67.

———. 2014a. "Introduction: The moral question in anthropology." In *Moral anthropology: A critical reader*, 1–11. London: Routledge.

———. 2014b. "The parallel lives of philosophy and anthropology." In *The ground between: Anthropologists engage philosophy*, edited by Veena Das,

Michael Jackson, Arthur Kleinman, and Bhirgupati Singh, 50–70. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

———. 2015. "In the name of the republic: Untimely meditations on the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attack." *Anthropology Today* 31 (2): 3–7.

Faubion, James. 2011. *An anthropology of ethics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foucault, Michel. (1984) 1985. *The history of sexuality. Volume 2: The use of pleasure.* New York: Pantheon Books.

———. (1984) 2001. "Polémique, politique et problématisations." In *Dits et écrits*, volume 2, 1410–17. Paris: Gallimard.

———. (2008) 2011. *The courage of truth: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983–1984.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fourest, Caroline. 2015. Éloge du blasphème. Paris: Grasset.

Gottschalk, Peter, and Gabriel Greenberg. 2007. *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the enemy*. Lanham: Rowa and Littlefield.

Gutman, Amy, and Dennis Thompson. 2006. *Ethics and politics: Cases and comments.* 4th edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hajjat, Abdellali, and Marwan Mohammed. 2013. *Islamophobie: Comment les élites françaises fabriquent le "problème musulman."* Paris: la Découverte.

Howell, Signe. 1996. *The ethnography of moralities*. London: Routledge.

Kant, Immanuel. (1785) 2005. *Groundwork of the metaphysic of morals.* Peterborough: Broadview Editions.

Keane, Webb. 2010. "Minds, surfaces, and reasons in the anthropology of ethics." In *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language, and action*, edited by Michael Lambek, 64–83. New York: Fordham University Press.

Kennedy, David. 2004. *The dark side of virtue: Reassessing international humanitarianism.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kuperman, Alan. 2013. "A model humanitarian intervention? Reassessing NATO's Libya campaign." *International Security* 38 (1): 105–36.

Laidlaw, James. 2014. *The subject of virtue: An anthropology of ethics and freedom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lambek, Michael. 2010. "Introduction." In *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language, and action*, edited by Michael Lambek, 1–36. New York: Fordham University Press.

Lee, John Alan. 1981. "Some structural aspects of police deviance in relation to minority groups." In *Organizational police deviance: Its structure and control*, edited by Clifford Shearing, 49–82. Scarborough: Butterworth.

Mandeville, Bernard de. (1714) 1970. *The fable of the bees.* London: Penguin Books.

Margalit, Avishai. 2010. *On compromise and rotten compromises.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mazars, Michel. 2006. "Le traitement judiciaire des violences urbaines: Leçons d'une étude de cas." *Note de veille* 13. Paris: Centre d'analyse stratégique.

Mouhanna, Christian. 2011. *La police contre les citoyens?* Nîmes: Champ social.

Muir, William Ker. 1977. *Police: Streetcorner Politicians.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Orford, Anne. 1999. "Muscular humanitarianism: Reading the narratives of the new interventionism." *European Journal of International Law* 10 (4): 679–711.

Parkin, David, ed. 1985. *The anthropology of evil.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Pattison, James. 2011. "The ethics of humanitarian intervention in Libya." *Ethics and International Affairs* 25 (3): 271–77.

Pruvost, Geneviève, Philippe Coulangeon, and Ionela Roharik. 2004. *Enquête socio-démographique sur les conditions de vie et d'emploi de 5221 policiers 1982–2003.* Paris: Ministère de l'Intérieur.

Redfield, Peter. 2013. *Life in crisis: The ethical journey of Doctors Without Borders.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Robbins, Joel. 2013. "Beyond the suffering subject: Toward an anthropology of the good." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19: 447–62.

Scott, Joan Wallach. 2007. *The politics of the veil.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Shatz, Adam. 2015. "Moral clarity." *The London Review of Books,* January 9.

Smith, Adam. (1759) 1976. *The theory of moral sentiments.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thompson, E. P. 1971. "The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century." *Past & Present* 50: 76–136.

Timbart, Odile. 2011. "Vingt ans de condamnations pour crimes et délits." *Infostat Justice*, Ministère de la Justice, n° 114.

Walzer, Michael. 2011. "The case against our attack on Libya." *The New Republic*, March 20.

Weber, Max. (1919) 1994. "The profession and vocation of politics." In *Political writings*, 309–69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zoubir, Yahia. 2012. "Les États-Unis, l'Europe et la Libye: De la réhabilitation de Kadhafi à son renversement." *L'Année du Maghreb* VIII: 457–69.

Index