Moral Psychology: An Anthropological Perspective

Paolo Heywood

Introduction

It is in many ways the traditional task of anthropology to point out exceptions to rules. Provide us with a generalization about human behaviour, and we will describe to you a far corner of the world in which it does not hold. This has to a large extent been true of our dealings with moral psychology, as I detail below, and it will come as no surprise to many readers that relativism, or at least rhetorical invocations of it, has long been a staple of anthropological approaches to morality.

But as this chapter will describe, recent developments in the anthropological study of ethics have led many anthropologists interested in the subject to reconfigure their understandings of the universal and the particular in relation to morality. It remains a matter of empirical fact that people across the world think differently about what constitutes right and wrong, good and bad, virtue and vice, and anthropologists continue to document that variety. But it is equally a matter of empirical fact that people across the world do indeed think about such things: that they exercise judgement and reflection about courses of action, ways of attributing responsibility, consequences, behavioural norms, and the like. As I outline below, for us to be able to account seriously and scrupulously for the differences between how people think about ethics, many anthropologists have come to believe that we must possess a coherent vision of what ethics actually means and an explanation for how it is that people do all seem to think about how they ought to live, even though they do so differently.

The new anthropology of ethics, in other words, goes against the grain of a great deal of anthropological writing, in that it begins not with a claim about any particular set of people, but with a claim about people more generally. That general claim is about the ubiquity of ethics, in the sense of moral reasoning, rather than about

P. Heywood (✉)
Division of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
e-mail: pph22@cam.ac.uk

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B.G. Voyer, T. Tarantola (eds.), *Moral Psychology*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-61849-4_4

ethics in the sense of any particular set of values: as James Laidlaw puts it, 'The claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is not an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative' (Laidlaw 2014a: 9). What we value, and perhaps even how we value, in other words, will of course differ across time and space; but the fact that we are evaluative will not.

So nor is that general claim a culturalist one, so to speak: it is not an argument about how societies, cultures, ideologies, or other such systems oblige or compel us to behave and to think in certain ways, which would be another staple anthropological position, as I show below. The idea that people evaluate and reflect upon their thoughts and behaviour is incompatible with that sort of position, though it is not, of course, incompatible with the idea that the way in which they evaluate and reflect will be informed by the contexts in which they find themselves.

Exactly how that 'informed by' works however is a problem that continues to be debated (e.g. Englund 2006; Heywood 2015; Humphrey 2007; Laidlaw 2002, 2014a; Robbins 2007, 2009; Yan 2011; Zigon 2007, 2009a, b). A question this chapter will seek to address then is not so much whether certain values or moral beliefs are universal or particular, but the meta question of how best to theorize our capacity to reflect on such values and beliefs—our freedom—as both universal and particular at the same time.

I will begin by explaining some of the problems with earlier approaches to morality and ethics in anthropology and the ways in which what has come to be known as the anthropology of ethics attempts to resolve those issues and then detail some of the distinctive approaches to ethics that have emerged in the last 20 years, before going on to address the problem I outlined above: how do anthropological approaches to ethics and moral psychology reconcile the premise upon which they are largely built—that moral reasoning and reflection are universal capacities—with the idea that those capacities must also in some way or another be contextually inflected?

Problems with Moral Psychology in Anthropology

For anthropologists interested in the subject, it is by now a truism to note (Edel and Edel 2000 [1959]; Faubion 2001a; Howell 1997; Laidlaw 2002; Parkin 1985; Pocock 1986; Wolfram 1982) that prior to the last two decades, and depending on one's point of view, social anthropology either had a great deal to say about morality and ethics or it had nothing to say about them at all. There are two interrelated reasons for this rather paradoxical problem, and the ways in which those reasons come to appear as problematical rather neatly sets the stage for what the examination of ethics and morality means to contemporary anthropology. These two reasons also correlate broadly—if inexactly—with the approaches that American cultural anthropology and British social anthropology have tended to take towards questions of ethics and morality.

Ethics as Social Norms

In its British form, social anthropology was significantly influenced by the sociology of Emile Durkheim, who identified 'society' as an entity existing above and beyond the level of the individuals who compose it; its sanctions, customs, rules, and codes were understood to be expressions of the collective will of those individuals and hence both compelling and desirable (e.g. Durkheim 1906 [1953]; cf. Laidlaw 2002: 312–315; Laidlaw 2014a: 26–33). In this formulation, in other words, 'morality' consists of the system of constraining obligations imposed upon people by their participation in a larger social group. Or, to put the same idea a different way, 'morality' is the term employed to designate behaviour, beliefs, or actions that adhere to or are in accord with social norms. Durkheim would have been most at home in the world of 'antisocial behaviour orders'.

How effective or not a social system or structure is in its ability to oblige people to abide by its prescriptions is one consequently significant and interesting question. But even as I have just expressed it, it betrays an equally significant and interesting weakness of this understanding of morality: it is—unsurprisingly, given its origins in Durkheimian sociology—fundamentally mechanistic in its view of human behaviour (Laidlaw 2002: 314; Laidlaw 2014a: 28–29). Explanations for people's ideas about what constitutes good or right thought or action are to be sought in the arrangements of society and its component parts, whether those ideas are in accord with social norms (in which case the arrangement is properly functional) or deviate from them (in which case the system is dysfunctional in some sense—as, famously, in Durkheim's study of suicide). As James Laidlaw, one of the anthropologists responsible for our renewed interest in ethics, notes, whilst essentially Kantian in his emphasis on duties and obligations, Durkheim departed from Kant in one very important sense: the task of moral reasoning disappears along with the individual's freedom to reflect on such duties and obligations, whose efficacy no longer depends on the practical will of the subject but on the proper functioning of society as a moral system (Laidlaw 2002: 314; see also Pocock 1986: 8).

So the view of ethics Durkheim bequeathed to social anthropology left us with two serious and related problems: on the one hand, no clear way in which to distinguish between 'moral' and 'social' behaviour, and on the other hand, no language with which to describe people's capacity for moral reasoning or ethical judgment. If morality is simply what 'society' tells you to do, and if whether you do it or not depends simply on whether 'society' is or is not properly put together, then your capacity to think through the value, consequences, or virtue of doing it or otherwise is more or less redundant as far as the analyst is concerned. This is what David Parkin meant when he argued that Durkheim 'so conflated the moral with the social that ethnographers could not isolate for analysis those contemplative moments of moral reflexivity that…so typify human activity and predicaments' (Parkin 1985: 4–5). More recently, it was precisely this blind spot that inspired a number of prominent anthropologists such as Laidlaw to call, more or less at the same time, for the discipline to cease equating the desirable with the normative, in what James Faubion

called an 'objectivist fallacy', of which 'the very definition of ethics as "codes of conduct" is already guilty' (2001a: 83–84).

It is worth also pointing out, with Laidlaw (e.g. 2010a: 370), that even those anthropologists who have preferred to treat instances of 'resistance' to social norms and to attach the adjective 'moral' to domains in which it appears that such resistance occurs are guilty of the same sin. In James Scott's explanation of acts of rebellion on the part of southeast Asian peasants as a kind of 'moral economy' (Scott 1977), or Maurice Bloch and Jonathon Parry's depiction of the 'morality' of various forms of long-term exchange practices (Parry and Bloch 1989), it is in collective opposition to particular social norms that morality is located. But of course 'collective' and 'social' are synonyms, not antonyms, and the only serious difference between this and a more traditionally Durkheimian view of morality is in the moral preferences of the anthropologist it reveals. Both leave, in the end, little or no room for sustained reflection on the part of our interlocutors outside of which particular set of norms they choose to adhere to.

Relativism

The question of whether or not there is anything distinctive about ethics and morality beyond the relationships people possess to social norms is one that American cultural anthropology has also tended to avoid, often by resort to the much-contested notion of relativism. The logical problem with relativism is obvious and has been so since at least Plato's *Theaetetus:* that it is self-refuting to the extent that it itself rests on an absolutist premise—the premise that moral standards only hold value relative to the cultural contexts in which they exist. If that premise is absolutely true, then relativism is self-refuting; if it is not, then it is uninteresting, as parochial as the purported universalisms of which it is critical. Despite this logical problem, however, relativism has long been—and still is in many quarters—a methodological orthodoxy in anthropology (e.g. Geertz 1984), if not in other disciplines. In cultural anthropology, which developed in a somewhat different direction to Durkheimian British social anthropology, this orthodoxy can be traced back to Franz Boas and his students (e.g. Benedict 1935; Herskovits 1972; Mead 1928). In response both to cultural evolutionism as a theoretical perspective—the idea that cultures 'progress' towards a teleological endpoint—and to what they perceived to be a parochial moral universalism in American culture more broadly, they argued that each culture had its own distinct set of customs and norms and that these could not be understood outside of their context. Thus assessing their validity against those of our own is a meaningless and mistaken project. The consequence of this position, if held to consistently, is that the idea of an anthropology of ethics is a fundamentally misguided one, because ethics and morality have no cross-cultural validity as analytic terms, and because where they are referred to as objects in distinct cultures, they are essentially reduced to the customs people live by, as in Durkheimian social anthropology. Here 'morality' equates to 'culture' with the added argument that since 'cultures' are relative so, supposedly, must 'morality' be.

There are a number of problems with this perspective, in addition to the fact that it again leaves us with no way of accounting for the ways in which people actually exercise their moral reason beyond doing what they are told to do by their ‘culture’. The main issue is what has elsewhere been called ‘the problem of units’ (e.g. Holbraad and Pedersen 2009): to function coherently relativism implies the entities that are argued to be relative to one another (‘cultures’); yet the idea that the world can be neatly divided into separate spheres that differ from one another in clear and predictable ways has, for fairly obvious reasons, long ceased to be an acceptable position in anthropology (e.g. Fabian 1983; Marcus and Fischer 1986). No ‘culture’ exists outside of history and their histories are necessarily intertwined. But without the premise that they can somehow be distinguished, relativism can only ever be rhetorical. Once you have conceded that cultures as bounded units do not exist, then relativism is always, in Bernard Williams’ terms, too late (Williams 2005: 69; cf. Laidlaw 2014a: 37–38): relativism presupposes separate moral spheres that become ‘relative’ to one another at the moment they in fact relate; if such spheres do not exist however, it is precisely because such ‘relations’ between ‘cultures’ are an ubiquitous, constant process, rather than being the ‘problem’ that relativism purports to solve.

The other main respect in which the relativism usually espoused in anthropology can only ever really be rhetorical is that as a project, it is almost invariably advanced in the service of a critique of our own values, whatever they are alleged to be in any particular case. As Laidlaw notes, there is an obvious contradiction in arguing on the one hand that we cannot judge the moral standards of a society and on the other that such standards are much superior to our own (2010a: 372).

The Anthropology of Ethics

To sum up, mainstream Anglophone anthropology on either side of the Atlantic has until recently effectively barred itself from enquiring seriously into ideas and practices that we might think of as distinctively ethical or moral. That said, there have been notable exceptions to these problematical trends: in a survey of remarkable breadth, Edel and Edel, a philosopher and an anthropologist, chart the cross-cultural variations in a number of moral problems such as incest and in-group aggression, and attempt to shed light on them with discussions of contemporary ethical theories (Edel and Edel 2000 [1959]); Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf’s *Morals and merit* (Von Fürer-Haimendorff 1967), whilst somewhat evolutionist in its overall outlook, nevertheless provides a detailed ethnographic perspective on the central moral problems of a number of South Asian populations, ranging from hunter-gatherers to Brahmins; D. F. Pocock, writing against Westermarck (2000 [1932]), argued persuasively that the demonstrable existence of moralities which do not apply equally to all individuals (e.g. kin and strangers) is not evidence for the impossibility of universal moral judgements nor does it provide us with a licence to rank moralities on the basis of their capacity for extension, let alone to deny some the status of

morality altogether. Instead, he argued, defining the object of moral acts, the person to whom one has particular duties and responsibilities, is itself a matter requiring of 'moral reasoning' (Pocock 1986: 18), the content of which may vary but the quality of which may be subject to comparative analysis (as later anthropologists have done—see below). In addition, edited volumes by Howell on morality in spheres including Argentinian football and a small Northumberland village (Howell 1997) and Parkin on evil in Buddhist, Islamic, Christian, and non-religious contexts (Parkin 1985) added ethnographic and theoretical breadth to what nevertheless remained a still nascent subfield in anthropology.

With the turn of the millennium however came a burgeoning interest in people's capacity to make moral choices on the basis of considered reflection and judgement. Taking their cue from Aristotelian and other forms of virtue ethics (e.g. MacIntyre 1981) and from Foucault's later writings on technologies of the self (e.g. Foucault 1985, 1986), authors such as Laidlaw (1995, 2002, 2014a), Faubion (2001a, b, 2011), and Lambek (2000, 2010, 2015) all called for sustained enquiry into ethics as an autonomous field of anthropological analysis and into the practices by which individuals pursue virtuous ends and form themselves into moral subjects, and a number of authors have since taken up these themes; 15 years later, the anthropology of ethics has carved out a place for itself within the discipline, and its object of concern is a great deal clearer and more specific than when 'morality' was just another word for 'society'.

A key aspect of this shift, in both its virtue ethicist and Foucauldian forms, has been an attention to the concept of freedom (e.g. Laidlaw 2002, 2014a), which has both helped us respond to the problems identified above, as well as revolutionized the way we understand people's relationship to their thoughts and behaviour more broadly. It is what makes the anthropology of ethics more than simply another subdiscipline.

Foucault and Freedom

To introduce the subject, it is worth distinguishing contemporary understandings of freedom in anthropology from earlier treatments of what might look like similar notions: clearly not all anthropologists have understood the relationship between society and the individual in quite as corporatist a manner as Durkheim or Boas and their descendants. A significant amount of ink has been spilled in the latter half of the twentieth century in an attempt to resolve what is often called the 'structure-agency' problem. In contrast to the idea that what we think and do is largely determined by the social contexts in which we find ourselves, a number of theorists have drawn attention to the active roles that people play in shaping their own social contexts (in being 'agentive'), and still others have attempted by various means to collapse the distinction between structure and agency entirely (e.g. Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1990).

The problem with the notion of agency, however, as Laidlaw argues, is that it is 'pre-emptively selective' (Laidlaw 2002: 315) in its treatment of what we might

otherwise call freedom. By its nature (as a pole in the structure-agency dyad), it refers not to any behaviour, choice, or set of reasoning, but *specifically* to forms of these which are in some manner or other transformative with respect to social structure, usually either in producing it or in altering it in some respect. In other words, it can only denote action that the analyst deems important in relation to structure. Since most people do not take up or discard ethical ideas on the basis of the effect such an action will have on 'structure', as a concept agency still fails to provide us with a language with which to account for the vast majority of moral reasoning our interlocutors undertake.

Variants of what is called 'practice theory' are the most prominent examples of attempts to collapse the structure-agency distinction altogether (Bourdieu 1990), yet these too seem rather to swing between the two poles than to dispense with them (Laidlaw 2010a: 373). The basic premise of practice theory is that the world is both constructed by and constructive of what we do in it (hence its status as a purported resolution of the structure-agency problem). The concept of *habitus* was popularized by Bourdieu (1990) as a notion that would purportedly combine the corporeal and cognitive and conscious and unconscious aspects of behaviour. *Habitus* is supposed to be both 'structured' by context and 'structuring' of that context. In that latter sense, it points towards what we might think of as freedom. Yet this very capacity to point to instances in which *habitus* is *either* structured *or* structuring (and indeed most frequently it seems to be the former) is indicative of the fact that the two senses are mutually exclusive.

So if freedom is not agency, or *habitus*, what exactly is it? To contemporary anthropologists of ethics, it is, in the language of Foucault, the practice of taking oneself as an object of work and reflection. Understanding Foucault is crucial to understanding what today's anthropologists mean by freedom and ethics: though familiar to many through his work on power and discipline, in his later writings on antiquity, Foucault developed the analytic of 'techniques of the self', operations and exercises by which people actively constitute themselves as subjects. Such techniques come in a range of different forms—from diary-keeping to dietetics—and those forms and the ends to which they are directed will be drawn from and proposed by the historical and cultural contexts in which people find themselves.

Crucially, Foucault's late interest in ethics and freedom did not entail a rejection or replacement of his early writing on power, in which intersubjective relationships produce, rather than constrain, subjects. In works such as *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality Vol 1* (Foucault 1975, 1976), he famously argued that power is not a repressive imposition on already-existing subjects, but the very thing that makes subjects what they are. But by their nature, such relationships must involve subjects who are free (to varying degrees) to exercise the power that constitutes these relationships, for outside of them there is nothing. The oft-repeated Foucauldian claim that power is everywhere is equally a claim that freedom is everywhere as well. With one term ('subjectivation') Foucault denotes both the ways in which subjects are produced through their interactions and relations with others and through the work they perform upon themselves. Here, in other words, we have a genuine collapse of the structure-agency distinction.

This conception of freedom does away with two commonly held and related assumptions about what freedom must mean, as Laidlaw points out (Laidlaw 2002: 323): first, the notion that to act freely is to act in accordance with one's 'authentic' self, for no such self can exist outside of its broader context—freedom works through such contexts, not against them—and, second, relatedly, that to act freely must mean to act in the absence of constraint, for there can be no situation in which freedom (or power) is not in some manner reciprocal, because context and self are intertwined. Here, in other words, power and freedom are truly two sides of the same coin.

It is worth noting also that this conception of freedom does away with the 'problem' of relativism. It takes for granted both the ubiquity of power relations and thus also the ubiquity of freedom as an aspect of, rather than an opposition to, those power relations. But of course the nature of those relations and the manner in which that freedom is exercised are going to vary. People will always and everywhere be incited and persuaded to think and act in certain ways by the contexts in which they find themselves, as they will always and everywhere consider and reflect on such thought and action as well, but the subject so produced will vary in all of the myriad ways in which ethnographic research suggests subjects indeed do.

Virtue Ethics

Another strand of the contemporary anthropology of ethics comes to similar conclusions but does so by drawing on Aristotelian virtue ethics and, often, its most recent exposition in the work of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1981). In contrast to both deontological and consequentialist approaches to morality, virtue ethics is intrinsically particularistic: where previous moral philosophies such as the former pair sought universal justifications for moral obligations (whether in reason, the laws of God, sentiment, or utility), virtue ethics takes from Aristotle the idea that bridging the distinction between fact and value, between human nature and the ways in which we ought to live, requires a teleological and thus empirically thorough account of what human nature means in any particular instance and, crucially, what it tends towards. Without an account not only of man 'as he is' but also of man 'as he should be', ethics (the means by which you get from one to the other) makes no sense. Furthermore, as ideas about what man should be vary not only with differing 'traditions' (a concept from MacIntyre intended to be much more fluid and historically informed than 'culture') but also with differing practices and narratives, so will the virtues people pursue and the means by which they pursue them. A virtue ethical approach to moral psychology, in other words, requires an 'ethnographic imagination' in order to understand people's behaviours and motivations not with reference to abstract rules and imperatives but to the stories they tell themselves about their lives and how they shape them. As in the case of Foucauldian ethics, this focus on practical reason (or *phronesis* in Aristotelian terms) requires us to account for reflective judgement in a much more complex manner than debates around structure and agency had previously allowed.

Ethics in Ethnography

A number of anthropologists have made productive use of these two frameworks for thinking about reflection, judgment, and freedom. Talal Asad and his students Charles Hirschkind and Sabah Mahmood have been influential in developing an approach to morality and ethics that combines insights from both. Asad (1986, 1993, 2003) puts together MacIntyre's concept of tradition with Foucault's work on disciplinary techniques to show how Islam and other so-called world religions can be understood as discursive combinations of both orthodoxy and practice, thus eliding the problem of whether norms or actual behaviour should take precedence in analysis. Hirschkind and Mahmood both develop Asad's work on Islam through studies of contemporary Cairo (Hirschkind 2001, 2006; Mahmood 2001, 2005), and both make arguments particularly relevant to anthropological debates around the exercise of freedom and the ways in which people make moral choices. Hirschkind describes the ways in which cassette tape sermon audition can be understood as a technology of the self yet inflects this Foucauldian argument with some of Bourdieu's ideas about the importance of the body to action: what cassette sermon audition develops in listeners is not merely a set of cognitive or intellectual virtues in the sense of instructing them in the tenets of Islam, but also a range of affective, embodied traits such as an 'open heart'.

This idea is taken further in Mahmood's study of women's participation in the Egyptian Piety Movement, which is a critique specifically targeted at 'Western' assumptions about freedom. Writing against feminist arguments about agency residing in opposition to norms (see above), Mahmood makes a persuasive and innovative argument for understanding the ways in which her interlocutors strive to inhabit and fully to embody the norms of the Piety Movement as exercises of freedom. Instead of dismissing their reasoning and behaviour as misguided instances of false consciousness, or trying to locate 'resistance' to it, Mahmood attempts to take them seriously as ethical practices. The women she describes have reasoned and clear understandings of the virtues they wish to develop and why they wish to do so. Like Hirschkind though, she emphasizes the embodied aspect of these practices: indeed, the key virtue these women wish to foster in themselves is an automatic, bodily submission to the will of God; in other words, the moral endpoint of their project is that as a project it should cease to be self-willed, becoming instead a corporeal, preconscious reflex. This makes her arguments about freedom somewhat paradoxical: whilst her laudable goal is to depict the moral reasoning of her interlocutors as the exercise of freedom and reflection that it clearly is, she also seems to wish to depict the endpoint of this exercise—the extinction of the will, the very capacity that makes it an example of moral reasoning—as a form of freedom too (Laidlaw 2014a: 268).

This confusion is perhaps a consequence of too closely conflating ideals and actual behaviour. A number of critics have noted that Mahmood and Asad and MacIntyre before her are too much concerned with finding in the latter the coherence of the former. Anand Pandian, for example, working in a Kallar community in South India (Pandian 2008, 2009), argues that MacIntyre's emphasis on the need for

a tradition to be consistent is misguided: Kallars were seen by both colonial authorities and their Tamil neighbours as a 'criminal' caste. In their ethical reasoning and narrative depictions of virtue, they draw on a range of sources from development discourse to classical poetry to articulate a moral vision that encompasses the 'civil' virtues they have long been encouraged to adopt, as well as their relationship to the 'savage' nature both alleged to reside within them and upon which they physically labour as cultivators. They do this without reconciling this range into a coherent whole. Similarly, Samuli Schielke, working, like Mahmood and Hirschkind, in Egypt (Schielke 2009), highlights the ways in which the path to virtue that Mahmood can sometimes depict as simple and direct can actually be deeply complicated. The young Muslim men he describes are necessarily 'ambivalent' in their commitment to Islamic ideals because the lives they lead present them with alternative goals to pursue, such as love or pleasure. This is not simply a question of doubt in the value of piety as a virtue, but, as Laidlaw points out (Laidlaw 2014a: 203–204), a value conflict in which goods that are in many ways irreconcilable place people in the position of having to reason through their ethical decisions.

Other work in anthropology on ethics has drawn more exclusively on Foucault's vision of ethics. Indeed, a striking contrast—in some ways—with Mahmood and Hirschkind's ethnographies are those of James Faubion (2001a, b, 2011), who, drawing on Foucault's work on antiquity, sees the pedagogical relationship as being in many ways the foundation of ethics—it is a microcosm of intersubjectivity and social context. Thus in antiquity the problem of the relationships between older men and younger boys was not that they might or might not be sexual in nature, but that for them to be ethical they must tend towards developing the freedom of the pupil from the teacher, rather than, as in Mahmood's case, extinguishing that freedom. Which is not to say that Faubion's vision of freedom returns us to a vision of the unconstrained individual, liberated from social constraint—this idea, for Faubion as for Laidlaw and for Foucault himself, is an impossible one, presupposing as it does an asocial individual, an entity entirely lacking in intersubjective relations. But for Faubion the opposite pole of that dichotomy—total domination—remains a possibility (Faubion 2014: 439), and in such a situation there can be no ethics in the form of moral reasoning for there is no freedom with which to reason.

The advantage of this position is that it begins to delineate the contours of what is meant by freedom in a manner more precise than we have seen so far. Hitherto we have examined some of the things that freedom cannot mean—such as liberation—but we have yet to look at a case in which freedom, or a capacity for moral reasoning, can be said not to exist. If indeed it is possible to isolate cases in which freedom does not exist, then it must be more than an ubiquitous, free-floating, ever-present aspect of social life.

But is it really possible to do so? Faubion, in fact, does not give us much in the way of actual cases of total domination. He makes use of Foucault's argument that 'a slave has no ethics' (Foucault 1997: 286; cf. Faubion 2001a: 95; Faubion 2014: 441), suggesting that though its historical accuracy may be a matter of debate, it is helpful as an ideal-typical case (Faubion 2001a: 95). These are somewhat strange words of praise though given that we have already dismissed the opposite pole of

our dichotomy—that of total autonomy—at least partly on the basis that it can only ever be an ideal type. Foucault may have been inaccurate in his depiction of ancient Greek ethics; but it in no way logically follows from this that he intended the statement to apply to anything other than that particular concrete case, as indeed suggested by the context of the discussion in which it appears. Indeed, it sounds more as if Foucault is discussing an ideal type of a particular historical period, rather than a concrete historical type, let alone a universal ideal type. But even though he may have been wrong about ancient Greece, that does not mean he was right—or expected to be so—about anywhere else.

My point in raising this issue is to illustrate just how difficult it can in fact be to think of freedom and our capacity for moral evaluation as something other than the opposite of constraint and in a zero-sum relationship to it. Despite the vast differences between their respective positions, both Mahmood's vision of the endpoint of her interlocutors' moral projects and Faubion's conjuring of the 'anethical' slave share the characteristic of being situations in which—supposedly—moral reasoning has been extinguished by a totally dominating structure or system of power. But to imagine such situations as anything other than thought experiments in the manner of moral philosophy, or as unrealizable orthodoxies, is to return us to a conception of ethics in which culture or context is something that limits freedom, rather than one in which they are simply aspects of the same processes of subjectivation.

Another problem anthropologists have encountered in theorizing the relationship between culture and freedom is that of how to understand situations in which cultures, institutions, societies, or ideological systems present us with multiple, rather than singular moral projects. As I noted above, this idea can in some ways be seen as a response to the overemphasis on coherence and orthodoxy in work such as that of Mahmood. Value pluralism, for example, has a long and distinguished history as a concept in moral philosophy and is often invoked in order to make the argument that the obligation to choose between competing sets of values is an ubiquitous feature of human life and thus likewise is our ability to do so. For the purposes of this chapter, I will confine myself to discussing two anthropological examples in which this multiplicity of norms is an important factor, examples that are in some respects contrasting and in others similar.

Jarrett Zigon conceptualizes 'morality' as having a number of distinct sources (social or cultural institutions, media discourse, etc.), which may conflict with one another (Zigon 2007, 2009a). By 'morality' he means sets of normative social values that people follow largely unthinkingly, akin to those an earlier generation of Durkheimian anthropologists would think of as exhausting the dimension of the moral (see above). Zigon, however, wishes to combine this normative sense of morality with what I have been referring to as 'ethics' (a distinction made use of by a number of anthropologists of ethics, following Foucault) in the sense of an evaluative capacity. He does so by arguing that such a capacity emerges in moments of what he calls 'moral breakdown', namely, situations in which what we take for granted (i.e. moral norms) cannot provide us with a straightforward answer to a particular problem or dilemma. In such situations our evaluative capacities become activated, and ethics becomes something upon which we must think and reflect in

order to decide how best to behave. We do so in order to return to the state of unthinking moral automatism that we departed from in the moment of breakdown, though the norms we return to following will nevertheless have been subtly altered by our ethical choices. Though Zigon draws on the work of Foucault in making this argument, he also makes use of phenomenological insights from Heidegger and other continental philosophers in order to describe how this works at the level of the individual and the ways in which our embodied existence in the world can come to appear strange to us at certain moments. Thus he describes the case of a woman in post-Soviet Russia (a classic situation of moral breakdown, according to Zigon) confronted with the problem of whether or not to pay a bribe to a train inspector and the ways in which she steps outside of both Christian and socialist norms in resolving it (Zigon 2007: 145).

Joel Robbins, on the other hand, makes an argument about the multiplicity of values at a societal scale and draws on Weber and anthropologist Louis Dumont. In his work on the Urapmin, a Melanesian people of Papua New Guinea who converted wholesale to Christianity in the wake of colonial contact (Robbins 2004), Robbins portrays a culture in a state of perpetual moral torment. Whilst the Urapmin have adopted the moral and religious values of Christianity such as submission to God's will, their social and economic life, rooted in precolonial models of exchange and reciprocity, requires them to act in contravention of these values on a regular basis—for example, by neglecting their obligations towards one person in order to build a relationship with another. Building on this ethnographic work, Robbins argues—in a manner not entirely dissimilar to Zigon—that anthropology can retain both the Durkheimian notion of morality as a set of rules we follow more or less unreflectively and by obligation and the idea that we possess the capacity to reflect and evaluate, by employing the notion of value spheres: for the Urapmin, for example, there are situations in which traditional, pre-Christian morality obligates you to do one thing; there are equally situations in which the Christian morality they have adopted obligates you to do another; it is when the two conflict that obligation gives way to choice and unreflective action gives way to evaluation and freedom (Robbins 2007).

As I have noted, Zigon and Robbins differ in some fairly significant ways, for instance, in the scale of their focus (societies or individuals) and on whether or not the situations of choice they both refer to can exist within or only between normative systems of morality (Robbins 2009; Zigon 2009b). Yet both take a particular perspective on culture and on our evaluative capacities, in an attempt to resolve the problem of their relation. In both cases our evaluative capacities are activated in situations in which culture as a constraining system of norms is not properly operative, either because of a 'breakdown' or because it provides us with competing options, and thus obliges us to choose between them. Again, in other words, we have an illustration of the difficulties involved in seeing moral psychology and culture as mutually imbricated: both of these examples are attempts to do so; yet both in the end situate our capacity for moral reasoning as existing outside of culture, when it is dysfunctional in some way, thus returning us to the Durkheimian position I outlined at the beginning of this chapter, and turning ethics into something that operates at structural distance from culture, and only at occasional moments

(cf. Heywood 2015). Both Foucauldian and virtue ethicist approaches to moral psychology insist both on the ubiquity and 'ordinariness' of ethical considerations: that they are built into the fabric of everyday life, rather than in contradistinction to it. This is a point heavily emphasized by anthropologists such as Michael Lambek and Veena Das (Das 2010; Lambek 2000) in their discussions of 'ordinary ethics', their point being precisely that our evaluative capacities are routinely and regularly at work, rather than simply at moments of 'breakdown'.

Conclusion

In many ways the problem I have been seeking to illustrate with this chapter is a version of the old nature/culture dichotomy that has troubled the relationship between anthropology and psychology for a considerable period of time. It is the question of the universal and the particular. As is usually the case when this problem is raised, the answer proffered has unsurprisingly been a combination of both: we all possess a capacity for moral reasoning, yet this capacity is of course inflected by the contexts in which it is activated. This is not a particularly surprising conclusion to reach, though as I have sought to illustrate, it has taken anthropology a surprisingly long time to get there. But what I have also sought to highlight are the difficulties involved in sustaining this insight. It is clearly insufficient simply to state that moral psychology and culture are mutually imbricated, as if the statement alone resolves the problem of their relationship. It does not, particularly when that claims conflicts with others made in the course of it being worked out. As I have suggested, if it is really the case that moral psychology and cultural context are not antinomies in a zero-sum relationship, then there should not be situations in which one is entirely determining of the other. We should not be able to say of someone either that they have no ethics, being entirely bound by their context, nor be able to identify a special moment in which they acquire the unconstrained freedom to choose between different sets of norms, the latter having suddenly lost their power to inflect that freedom.

A consequence of the insight that, in the words of a prominent cognitive anthropologist, 'there are no non-cultural bits of us, as there are no non-natural bits' (Bloch 2012: 76; cf. Laidlaw 2014b), is that there is room for serious and sustained cooperation between anthropology and psychology, and of course such cooperation has been ongoing for some time. But, as with solely anthropological applications of this idea, holding firmly to it has implications for what that cooperation ought to look like. If, for example, freedom and a capacity for moral reasoning are categories we wish to take seriously for all the reasons hitherto outlined, then cross-cultural studies of morality as 'determined' by evolutionary adaptation, for example, look likely to be less than helpful. The anthropology of ethics as it currently stands rests on the idea that people possess a capacity for moral reasoning, which they in turn use to reflect, act, and thus shape their moral worlds, and so anthropologists interested in ethics are unlikely to agree that such worlds are solely the product of adap-

tations to the environment. Likewise, and for similar reasons, most anthropologists of ethics will probably feel that the substitution of experimental methods for sustained ethnographic study would be a methodological impoverishment: the moral psychology they are interested in best displays itself in and through everyday life, rather than when elicited in particular research settings.

There is ample reason to think, though, that experimental data and participant observation may be helpfully combined, as they have been, for example, by Tanya Luhrmann in her work on evangelical Christians' relationships with God (e.g. Luhrmann 2012, 2013). Luhrmann has carried out both traditional anthropological fieldwork with a range of Christian churches in the United States, as well as working and writing with prominent psychologists such as Howard Nusbaum on experiments designed to demonstrate, amongst other things, that practicing certain forms of prayer may cause changes in cognitive processing that lead, for example, to an increased vividness of mental imagery and more unusual sensory experiences, including religious ones. Laidlaw, who has also cooperated extensively with cognitively inclined anthropologists, makes the same point about putting the two together when he notes that the relationship between cognitive science and anthropology must be a 'two-way street' (Laidlaw 2014b): the anthropological studies I have described here and their accompanying insights are products not only of the conceptual premise that nature and culture are not distinct and divergent 'causes' of behaviour but also of sustained participant observation and ethnographic research.

It may have taken anthropology some time to discover an interest in moral psychology; but the kind of 'thick description' that anthropological research produces is in many ways ideally suited to investigating the way moral psychology works in particular situations. We have seen in this chapter that some of the most persuasive contemporary accounts of ethics are not those rooted in deontological or other abstract models of moral reasoning but ones in which people's evaluative capacities are scaffolded by the narrative structures of their lives and experiences, by the decisions they have made in the past and their visions for the future. Anthropology's unique methodological approach—living together with people over sustained periods of time and immersing ourselves in their everyday existence as best we can—puts us in an excellent position to make contributions to broader social science studies of ethics.

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