



Moral Philosophy and the ‘Ethical Turn’ in Anthropology

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Abstract Moral philosophy continues to be enriched by an ongoing empirical turn, mainly through contributions from neuroscience, biology, and psychology. Thus far, cultural anthropology has largely been missing. A recent and rapidly growing ‘ethical turn’ within cultural anthropology now explicitly and systematically studies morality. This research report aims to introduce to an audience in moral philosophy several notable works within the ethical turn. It does so by critically discussing the ethical turn’s contributions to four topics: the definition of morality, the nature of moral change and progress, the truth of moral relativism, and attempts to debunk morality. The ethical turn uncovers a richer picture of moral phenomena on the intersubjective level, one akin to a virtue theoretic focus on moral character, with striking similarities of moral phenomena across cultures. Perennial debates are not settled but the ethical turn strengthens moral philosophy’s empirical turn and it rewards serious attention from philosophers.

Keywords Metaethics · Moral anthropology · Ethical turn · Moral progress · Moral disagreement · Cultural anthropology

1 Introduction

What *is* does not imply what *ought to be*. Social norms might create gender inequalities, but, of course, it does not follow that we should accept these norms. Conversely, we have moral reasons to follow norms against polluting the environment even if no such norms exist.

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Still, when philosophers ponder Socrates' question of how one ought to live and which norms we ought to follow, they are often concerned about what 'our' intuitions are, and what 'one' would say about such-and-such a case. And because people have different views about how one ought to live, it is crucial to learn whether others share 'our' intuitions.

So, before settling into the philosophical armchair to answer Socrates' question comes taking what Bernard Williams' called the "ethnographic stance," the imaginative understanding of a society's ethical concepts (Williams 1986). In contrast to most modern moral philosophy, which starts with basic principles and reasons forward, the ethnographic stance takes observations as its starting points.

Ethnographies ought to be a richly detailed and accurate depiction of people's moral experiences at a particular time in a particular place, dedicated to documenting "empirical particulars" (Ingold 2017). They primarily rely on participant observation, a qualitative research method, that enables researchers "to learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities" (Kawulich 2005). Participation, rather than mere observation, is expected to enable "a conceptual handle on cultural assumptions that are not explicitly discussed" (Boellstorff 2015). In effect, ethnographies of morality yield what philosophers have called "thick descriptions" of morality: contextualised and detailed descriptions of explicit and implicit moral phenomena (e.g. Flanagan 2017). Thick descriptions of morality are for good normative theorising but in an important paper, Darwall et al. (1992) observe that:

[t]oo many moral philosophers and commentators on moral philosophy have been content to invent their psychology or anthropology from scratch and do their history on the strength of selective readings of texts rather than comprehensive research into contexts.

Indeed, calls for a deeper ethnographic understanding of moral life, "using information gathered from the world" (Heller 2019), have lately only gotten louder (e.g. Appiah 2008; Kitcher 2011; Prinz 2007; Flanagan 2017; Anderson 1993).

However, it turns out that until recently few cultural anthropologists have explicitly and systematically taken the ethnographic stance on morality.¹ Although there have been sporadic attempts to get moral anthropology started (Ladd 1957; Edel and Edel 1959; Brandt 1954; Kluckhohn 1951a; Westermarck 1906), they had "little impact in anthropological circles" (Howell 1997a). In 2001, the anthropologist James Laidlaw claimed that "there is no anthropology of ethics" (Laidlaw 2002); others agree that their discipline "never fretted about [morality] much" as a subject of study in its own right (Mattingly and Throop 2018) and, in a review of anthropology's engagement with morality from 1962, Abraham Edel writes (1962):

¹ Anthropologists produce most of the available ethnographies, and an 'anthropology of x' very often relies on ethnographic accounts. There is some debate about the distinction between anthropology and ethnography; cf. Ingold (2017). For the purposes of this report, I will use 'anthropology' to the field of research and 'ethnography' to studies that primarily rely on participant observation.

Morality, in short, is taken for granted [by anthropologists], in the sense that one can invoke it or refer to it at will; but it is not explained, depicted, or analysed.

Consequently, anthropology has been missing from the recent upsurge in empirical investigations of morality (e.g. Doris 2010; Sinnott-Armstrong 2008). Neuroscience and moral psychology uncovered causes and mechanisms of moral judgment on the individual level (cf. Liao 2016); sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and archaeology unearthed the biological origins of (a capacity for) moral thought and behaviour (cf. Ruse and Richards 2017; Morris 2015); and quantitatively orientated social science illuminated prosociality, altruism, and social norms (Bicchieri 2006; Bowles and Gintis 2011; Ensminger and Henrich 2014; Curry 2016). Cultural anthropology, however, and the desired thick accounts of inter-individual moral experience and behaviour are still missing. Against this background, taking the ethnographic stance seems like shady business.

There are several reasons for anthropology's lack of attention to morality. Anthropologists, influenced by Durkheim in Europe (cf. Laidlaw 2002, 2014; Robbins 2007) and Boas in the United States (Kluckhohn 1955), mistakenly assumed, as epitomized by Ruth Benedict, that "morality is a convenient term for socially approved habits" (Benedict 1934). In light of these theoretical commitments, there was just nothing for moral anthropologists to study – the field has been left with a "domain gap" in which morality disappeared from focus (Cassaniti and Hickman 2014).² Moreover, many anthropologists have been in the grips of a normative interpretation of ethical relativism, according to which it would be morally wrong to evaluate or even describe the moral code of another culture (cf. Barker 2007; Tersman 2006).³

This report is concerned with anthropology's recent (re-)discovery of morality. Many cultural anthropologists have taken what they claim is an "ethical turn" and begun to explicitly focus their research on ethics and morality (Lambek 2010a).⁴ They found that normative questions are "hardly confined to the grave debates of

² Earlier anthropological work found morality implicit in or entailed by other concepts. By having studied, for example, the various religious, gender and kinship systems from around the world, anthropology implicitly shed light on morality Parkin (1986); cf. Barker (2007); Cassaniti and Hickman (2014). To illustrate, Evan-Pritchard (1937) never explicitly discusses morality in his ethnography on Azande witchcraft, but treats witchcraft as implying something about the moral world of the Azande when he writes that "it is witchcraft" may often be translated simply as "it is bad" Evans-Pritchard (1937). Others claimed that morality is "epiphenomenal", and something that could either be explained by reference to something else and presumably more profound, such as 'culture', 'discourse', 'social norms', or 'ideology' Laidlaw (2002); cf. Barker (2007); Mattingly and Throop (2018).

³ See, for further discussion of the history of moral anthropology, Laidlaw (2017) and Laidlaw (2014), as well as Mattingly and Throop (2018).

⁴ The ethical turn is a descriptive project. Anthropology may be "full of moral passion at the moment" Robbins (2014), but the focus of the ethical turn is not on anthropologists trying to be moral, but on anthropologists trying to study morality descriptively. The ethical turn is decidedly non-normative. E.g. Fassin (2012b) writes that the ethical turn "neither condemns so-called genital mutilation and forced marriage nor denounces as imperialist the efforts deployed by feminists to combat them. It takes these moral tensions and debates as its objects of study and considers seriously the moral positions of all sides. A moral anthropology has no moralizing project." The commitment to neutrality is significant, because anthropologists have frequently adopted moral views and defended moral causes, both as explicit theoretical and practical aims cf. Carrithers (2005).



high theorists – they run through the banalest moments of everyday life (Keane 2016) and that ethical questions are central in human lives, across cultural borders (cf. Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2010a):

[E]verywhere human conduct is pervaded by an ethical dimension [and] it is not only academic philosophers who ask questions such as ‘How should I live?’, ‘What is a good life?’, or ‘What sort of person should one be?’

By now, the ethical turn is in full swing. Research explicitly focused on morality and ethics has become the fastest growing subfield within anthropology (cf. Fassin 2014). Several monographs (Keane 2016; Laidlaw 2014; Faubion 2011; Zigon 2008; Lambek 2015), and edited volumes (Fassin 2012a; Fassin and Lézé 2014; Mattingly et al. 2018; Kapferer and Gold 2018; Lambek 2010b; Cassaniti and Hickman 2014; Heintz 2009; Howell 1997b; Lambek et al. 2015), as well as a significant number of research articles set out a research programme for moral anthropology (Keane 2016; Faubion 2011; Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2015; Zigon 2008; Laidlaw 2002; Robbins 2007). Many other ethnographies, too many to mention but a limited selection here, now explicitly address morality (Robbins 2004; Abu-Lughod 2000; Bourgois 2003; Briggs 1999; Hirschkind 2001; Just 2001; Mahmood 2005; Salazar 2006; Widlok 2004; Zigon 2011; Asad 2003). Never did the ethnographic stance on morality rest on surer foundations.

In this report, I aim to introduce to an audience in moral philosophy some notable contributions to the ethical turn. There are at least two general reasons to consider the ethical turn relevant for moral philosophy. Insofar as intuitions are evidence in conceptual analysis supposed to reveal *the* concept of ‘goodness’ or ‘rightness’, rather than some parochial concept of goodness, moral anthropology promises to deliver useful data for normative theorising. The more we know about how people make moral judgments, how they err and change their moral views, to name just a few fields of inquiry, the better able we might hope to become in finding out truths about morality. Moreover, the ethical turn could help to bring moral philosophy to bear on more everyday practical problems. Flanagan (2017) observes that the major practical moral problems seem to be abortion, euthanasia, genetic enhancement, and what to do when there is a runaway trolley about to crash into a group of innocents. Though these problems are significant when they come up, hence reflection is undoubtedly required, they are not everyday problems faced by most people. More mundane problems, such as ordering coffee (Manning 2008) or dressing for work (Bourgois 2003), may have ethical dimensions to them, too, and they arise frequently. The ethical turn promises to capture these problems and thus offer moral philosophy a start to engage with them.

My main aim is to identify the ethical turn’s contribution to a set of central questions within moral philosophy. As with many interdisciplinary projects, it is a significant challenge, particularly at the inception of interdisciplinary dialogue, to identify a common language and common problems between anthropology and philosophy. As Doris and Plakias (2008) noted before the ethical turn:

one source of difficulty [with using anthropological data in moral philosophy] is a shortage of philosophically relevant details in the empirical record: Ethnographers [...] don't always ask the questions philosophers want answered.

To make a start at tackling this challenge, I will focus on introducing several accounts of the ethical turn in respect to some selected questions that occupy moral philosophers in the hope of instigating a dialogue between both disciplines. I will discuss the bearing of moral anthropology for moral philosophy, and metaethics in particular, on questions about *the definition of morality*, *ethical relativism*, *moral progress*, and *debunking arguments in moral philosophy*. There are historical and systematic reasons to focus on these questions. Historically, these are questions on which philosophers have often invoked ethnographic data. Systematically, these are questions where cross-cultural data and thick observations of intersubjective phenomena, as provided by anthropology, are crucial. I will briefly introduce the philosophical problem behind each question at the beginning of each respective section.

I focus on cultural anthropology because this is the field where the ethical turn has taken place and because it has not received much attention in recent moral philosophy. Interdisciplinary attention might, therefore, be particularly beneficial. Other relevant, and profoundly insightful, discussions of morality in related anthropological sub-fields such as archaeology and cognitive and evolutionary anthropology (e.g. Henrich et al. 2010; Henrich 2017; Nisbett and Cohen 1996; Curry 2016; Nisbett 2003) play a more routine role in current moral philosophy (e.g. Appiah 2010) and therefore I will not discuss them in this report. Moreover, I will bracket questions internal to anthropology, such as taxonomical questions of locating 'moral anthropology' in relation to anthropology more generally (e.g. Kapferer and Gold 2018; Cassaniti and Hickman 2014) or discussions of its novelty (e.g. Parkin 1986), because they are of no inherent interest to answer questions in moral philosophy.

In section 2, I introduce and describe the body of literature that constitutes the 'ethical turn' by demarcating its assumptions and aims from earlier attempts to study morality in anthropology. In section 3, I present the dominant approaches to defining morality in the ethical turn, which shows that the ethical turn borrows from normative moral theories like virtue ethics, rather than metaethical ones, to guide its inquiry. Section 4 discusses how anthropology's focus on the intersubjective level can aid theorising about moral progress. Section 5 turns to ethical relativism, the most commonly invoked doctrine in relation with ethnographic findings, and suggests that morality appears to be a variation around a common theme. Section 6 discusses debunking arguments in ethics and how the experimental paradigm might be affected by moral anthropology.

2 The Ethical Turn in Anthropology

The ethical turn is different to earlier treatments of morality in anthropology because it presupposes a more nuanced conception of morality. In this section, I will briefly review the developments leading up to the ethical turn by making a contrast



with a common reception of Durkheim's approach as well as with what I call earlier *comparative list* accounts of morality in anthropology. Comparative list accounts are enumerations of the things, character-traits, or actions that are positively or negatively evaluated by the studied society (and then compared to what the ethnographer thought of as 'our' or 'Western' attitudes). I therefore define the ethical turn by what it is not; which is appropriate given the rapidly developing field that is still looking for unified aims and a common language.

Those familiar with earlier treatments of morality within anthropology may safely skip this section. To preview, the ethical turn extends anthropology's focus beyond a view of morality as socially enforced external constraints on behaviour and, methodologically, by going beyond mere comparisons of value systems (Zigon 2008; Fassin 2012b).

According to many, "the anthropological tendency to treat all of culture or collective life as morally charged left morality as a domain of study woefully under-specified" (Robbins 2007). As noted above, many credit Emile Durkheim's influence in anthropology with this situation (Faubion 2011; Zigon 2007). According to Durkheim, morality consists of behavioural rules which gain their authority from society and individuals merely adopted the rules of society as their own (Durkheim 1995, 2009). Thus, one could study morality by studying how society enforces social rules and there was no need to study morality as a separate (though related) phenomenon. The ethical turn is a contradiction of Durkheim's morality-as-external-rules view. The ethical turn does not exclude submission to externally sanctioned rules from counting as moral, but it studies morality in a broader range of behaviours. Of course, by shedding the Durkheimian mark of morality, the ethical turn must find its own definition. We will turn to the many proposals in the next section.

Earlier comparative list accounts predominantly focused onto the narrow area of deliberate processing of external rules. The ethical turn provides more nuanced insights into processes of self-formation, while also discussing the relation to deliberate consideration of externally sanctioned rules. It is vital to grasp the limitations of comparative list accounts; both to get a better sense of how the ethical turn is unified and to appreciate the significance of the ethical turn. Simple comparative list accounts go back to anthropology's early days, for example, Montaigne's (somewhat anecdotal) observation of cross-cultural differences in attitudes toward cannibalism in *Of Cannibals* (1877).⁵ Montaigne compared 'our' negative evaluation of a practice with a positive evaluation of the same practice in other cultures. However, mere comparisons do not explain why the observed differences arise, nor do they guarantee that the compared things are comparable in the first place (there are familiar issues with translation, cf. Tersman 2006).

More systematic comparative studies are exemplified by Edward Westermarck (1906, 1932, 1897), Kenneth Read's (1955) study of personhood among the Gahukug-Gama of Papa New Guinea, and Richard Brandt's influential study of

⁵ Similar itemisations of valued things were Williams's study of the Orokaiva in Northern Papa New Guinea Williams (1930), as well as Nadel's (1954) study of the Nupe and Meek's comparative study of the values of the Ibo in Nigeria Meek (1937).

Hopi ethics (1954).⁶ However, even though advanced comparative list accounts looked beyond mere comparisons to explain the cause of evaluative differences, they employed various vague and insufficiently precise conception of what was being compared or generalised too hastily (Firth 1953). Richard Brandt, for instance, claims to provide evidence of fundamental moral disagreements between the Hopi and 'us': while the Hopi acknowledge that chicken feel pain, they do not consider that fact a reason not to hurt the chicken (Brandt 1954). Commenting on Brandt's work, Gibbard endorses it as an example of fundamental moral disagreement (Gibbard 2011). However, a closer look at Brandt's account suggests otherwise. Only a few Hopi commit or endorse wanton cruelty against animals, which goes against the 'societally enforced rules' account of morality that Brandt adopted. Indeed, he writes that "most Hopi do feel that it is wrong to make anything suffer if it has not done wrong" (Brandt 1954). Moreover, Brandt notes that Hopi ascribe intentions to animals, which at least makes it possible that punishing wrong-doing, rather than wanton cruelty, is what is going on. If that is what it is, seems much closer to contemporary European mores than endorsing wanton cruelty.

Brandt's account illustrates the limitations of comparative list accounts. Without a thick understanding of the contexts of judgments, comparisons suggests differences where none ought to be found. Moreover, comparative list accounts predominantly focused on deontic categories like permissions and obligations, and evaluations sanctioned on a societal level. The ethical turn, in contrast, aims to go beyond mere comparisons and to capture more than permissions and obligations.

3 Defining morality

Philosophy and anthropology need a descriptive definition of morality, where 'x is moral' is a description rather than a normative evaluation similar to 'x is morally good'. However, even a cursory review of the philosophical literature suggests that an uncontroversial definition of morality is currently beyond reach. Both *formal* criteria, which specify the underlying causal processes of moral judgments, their relation to other evaluative judgments, or their truth-conditions, and *material* criteria, which specify which content values must have to count as moral, are controversial (cf. Wong 2014).

A common theoretical and methodological language becomes increasingly salient to sustain and move forward the anthropological debate (cf. Cassaniti and Hickman 2014). The ethical turn defines morality in two main ways: a virtue-ethics approach inspired by Aristotle, Foucault, and McIntyre, and an interaction-focused approach, inspired by the likes of Austin and Grice.

⁶ In similar vein, John Ladd (1957) among the Navajo of the United States, Clyde Kluckhohn's "comparative theory of value" set in New Mexico Kluckhohn (1951b), (1951a), and Gluckman's study of responsibility (1972) identified underlying causes for evaluative differences.



3.1 Morality as self-formation

The ethical turn primarily looks to normative ethics, rather than metaethics, to define morality. Amongst the common normative theories, virtue theory is the predominant influence on the ethical turn. Morality is defined in reference to the virtue-ethics tradition and conceptualised as *character formation*.

The focus on virtue-theory has done, it seems, because it comes with a conception of morality that is rather undemanding at first sight and thus plausibly found in many studied societies. Laidlaw (2014), for example, argues that ideals for self-realisation are wide-spread, “well beyond the European contexts” of moral philosophical tradition.

Several anthropologists argue that an important part of morality is to develop unconscious dispositions, rather than deliberative, conscious reasoning (Widlok 2004; Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2001; Faubion 2011). These accounts suggest that morality is concerned with adopting a certain type of behaviour to the extent that the behaviour becomes unreflective and habitual. For example, Zigon (2008) writes that morality is “a kind of habitus or an unreflective disposition of everyday social life”. Morality, on this view, is about training oneself in a particular (set of) practice(s) (Widlok 2004), and it can be a type of behaviour used to distinguish oneself from other types of people (Abu-Lughod 2000)

For example, Mahmood (2005) describes the active participation of women in Islamic collective religious life, by conducting classes or prayer assemblies, and how the women willfully and freely aspired to conduct themselves piously, by veiling, for example. Similarly, Hirschkind (2001) recounts the use of cassette tapes of sermons by reformist preachers, also in Cairo. Playing and actively listening to these records, with the aim of developing a certain behavioural disposition, made the practice, according to Hirschkind, an “exercise in ethical self-discipline” (Hirschkind 2001). Both accounts aim at showing that unreflective dispositions can have an ethical dimension, to combat the idea that morality must be deliberative and reflective. According to Mahmood, the willful submission to a pious lifestyle is an expression of ethics insofar as they aspire to inhabit the norms to which they subscribe fully. Ethics is thus “a non-deliberative aspect of one’s disposition” (Mahmood 2005).

These accounts do not imply that ethics is exhausted by unconscious or non-deliberative aspects; they can charitably be read as highlighting a dimension of ethics that may otherwise be missed by a focus on conscious, deliberative aspects. Indeed, as Laidlaw (2014) points out, the very possibility of willfully submitting to a norm presupposes that one can deliberately choose to begin with, even though one may end up losing that capacity in the process.

Zigon (2007, 2008) considers the non-deliberative aspects of morality to play a more central role compared to the deliberative aspects. Ethics, on his view, is merely a means to return to a non-deliberative, habitual way of being. Accordingly, “morality can best be analytically thought of as those bodily dispositions enacted in the world non-intentionally and unreflectively,” whereas moments of deliberative reflection (Zigon refers to the deliberative reflection about morality as ‘ethics’) are exceptional reactions to the failure of habits (2007). For example, a situation where one might get away with cheating might cause such a “moral breakdown” (2007),



where “the need to consciously consider or reason about what one must do only arises in moments that shake one out of the everydayness of being moral” (2007). According to Zigon, deliberation is thus the exception, rather than the norm, in the context of morality.

Others make deliberate, conscious reflection central to their definition of morality. For instance, Robbins (2004, 2007, 2012) emphasises deliberative, conscious choice as a defining factor for morality (e.g. 2004). Similarly, Laidlaw (2014, 2002) argues that ethics is inherently tied to “reflective self-formation” (Laidlaw 2014). Laidlaw thus outlines both formal and material criteria for ethics: formally, reflexivity is necessary for a practice to qualify as ethics, materially, ethics is concerned with self-formation. Though these are the marks of the moral, intrinsic to ethical and universally shared, how self-formation plays out, its goals and methods, are “historically and culturally various” (Laidlaw 2014). Laidlaw thus resists the thought that moral rules must be the same everywhere because the “techniques of self-formation” are not “dreamed up out of thin air” but “found in [an individual’s] culture” and therefore varied (Laidlaw 2014).

Though these accounts differ in their view on how moral judgments are formed (consciously vs unconsciously), they are unified in defining morality as being concerned with the question of what kind of person one ought to be. Two points strike me as highly relevant for the philosophical discussion surrounding the definition of morality. First, when anthropologists of the ethical turn describe the nature of morality, they primarily describe *what to look for* when studying morality in the field (e.g. not written-down rules, but idealised characters). For example, discussions of “virtue” (Widlok 2004), “care” (Garcia 2010), “moral selfhood” of Indonesian Muslims (Simon 2009), the “moral reasoning” of the inhabitants of New Ireland (Sykes 2009), and the “moral sentiments” of the Yap of Micronesia (Throop 2010), and “moral breakdown” of Orthodox Muscovites (Zigon 2007), while Howell and several contributors to her ethnography of moralities suggest that a cross-cultural study of moralities may be best served by focusing on the acting individual’s process of “moral reasoning,” during which choices are made between possible alternative actions (Howell 1997b).⁷

Second, we may take character formation as one area of morality, amongst others, or the exclusive area of morality. The ethical turn offers no explicit answer to this question. I suggest thinking of the ethical turn as supporting the former view, as generating data on a specific area of morality. However, it is less clear that the ethical turn thereby supports some virtue theoretical conception of morality. Consider how the attraction that virtue-theory holds to anthropologists is exemplarily reflected in Laidlaw’s view on moral philosophy (2014). Modern moral philosophy, he suggests, was long dominated by deontology and utilitarianism, and their aspirations at formulating universal and absolute moral principles, up until the intervention by Anscombe (1958), which put virtue ethics back on the philosophical map. The virtue theoretic intervention is credited, in opposition to deontology and utilitarianism, with “an interest in the nature of the moral agent,” and opposed to “isolated and generally

⁷ Indeed, Foucault might have dethroned Durkheim as the leading voice in the ethical turn Mattingly (2012).



de-contextualised (and often contrived) situations of difficult moral choice” (Laidlaw 2014). Moreover, both deontology and utilitarianism are chided for their lack of empirical foundation, allegedly demanding hyper-rationality or mistakenly implying the commensurability of desires (Laidlaw 2014). Deontology and utilitarianism, thus conceived, are iconoclastic and eccentric theoretical constructs, far removed from practical reality and empirical foundation. Virtue-theory, in contrast (Mattingly and Throop 2018), is supposed to

[o]ffer a picture of morality closely bound up with everyday practices of self-cultivation, the elaboration of specific technologies of moral development, and—most important—an insistence on the necessity of developing a virtuous character as the basis for moral action in everyday political and social life.

It is a caricature of deontology and utilitarianism, of course, but it leads to some potential signs for morality being discredited in the ethical turn. We have already seen that the Durkheimian approach that defines morality as a set of externally sanctioned rules has been thrown out at the inception of the ethical turn, along with its alleged Kantian roots. The utilitarian approach does not fare better. Fassin (2014) wonders whether current anthropology “leaves an orphan” consequentialism in their definition of morality. This is striking, because utilitarianism derives obligations and rights from principles, just like deontology does. Its characteristic method of cost-benefit analysis is also often clearly invoked in moral contexts. For example, research by Robert Jackall on “moral consciousness” in the corporate world, shows that cost-benefit calculations play a role in the field; for example, when managers consider the pros and cons of schmoozing up to a colleague that might be of potential use to them in the future (Jackall 1989). We may interpret these considerations from a virtue-theoretic perspective as asking *what kind of person one ought to be*, but just as well from a utilitarian perspective as asking *what one ought to do*. Of course, it is possible to dismiss cost-benefit calculations observed by Jackall as *amoral* or *immoral*, but a only presupposed account of morality could only justify such a dismissal.

3.2 Morality as ordinary interaction

The second major approach to defining morality within the ethical turn takes a cue from ordinary language philosophy, referring mostly to Austin, Strawson, and Grice (Keane 2016; Sidnell 2010; Lambek 2010c; Das 2012). Ordinary language philosophy is committed to the careful linguistic analysis and common sense views about, amongst other things, morality. However, as Sidnell (2010) observes, the ordinary language philosophers “never really did study the ordinary language of ordinary people”. Anthropology to the rescue.

One approach to ‘ordinary ethics’ construes ethics broadly as a part of social life (Lambek 2010a, 2008; Sidnell 2010; Das 2012). These researchers use ‘ethics’ to refer to social evaluation by shared criteria, criteria that are provided by acts



(including speech acts) and rituals (Lambek 2010c).⁸ Ethics, it emphasises, “is among the pervasive constituents of collective life, just as constitutive as power relations or gendered relations” (Faubion 2014).

Since ethics is defined formally, as social evaluation using shared criteria, there are no content-based restrictions for what should count as ethics (Lambek 2010c). Moreover, Lambek contents that “in the ordinary course of events” evaluative criteria are implicit but can become available for deliberation (Lambek 2010c). It is also crucial on this account that criteria are shared publicly and therefore it does not depend on any one person to take something to be ethical for it to count as ethical (Lambek 2015).

Relatedly, Das (2012, 2015) defines ethics as the cultivation of evaluative sensibilities and dispositions in everyday life. As an example of such ordinary ethics, Das describes how Punjabi women in Old Delhi thought it inappropriate to concern their husbands with the quarrels they had during the day (Das 2012). In this case, as in others cited by Das, people are following a norm “in practice”, that is, without first invoking explicit principles that warrant such behaviour (again, this is supposed to show the inadequacy of deontological and utilitarian approaches). Das nicely demonstrates how minute detail to the evaluations aroused by the smallest gestures, implications, winks, and hints can provide insight into the criteria for evaluation. An essential commitment of this approach is to resist excluding some behaviour from counting as ethical for being habitual and unreflective (cf. Das 2012).

Both Lambek’s and Das’s equation of ethics with evaluation in a more general sense may lead to an equivocation that the proponents of the ‘ethical turn’ aspired to avoid. Philosophers often distinguish different types of norms that provide criteria for evaluation: there are moral norms, rules of etiquette, legal norms and laws, as well as codes of conduct specific to groups within the society, such as sports clubs (Gert and Gert 2017). The apparent differences between such different types of evaluative codes require an explanation. Of course, ‘ordinary ethicists’ may argue that there is no basis for rationally distinguishing ethics and other evaluations. For this claim to be convincing, however, an explanation of the error of drawing such a distinction committed not only by philosophers, would be required.

Keane’s (2016) important account is also built on social interactions as the primary area of ethics, and it offers a more detailed definition of morality. Keane builds his account around the concept of an “ethical affordance,” a necessary but insufficient opportunity for people to ethically “evaluate themselves, other persons, and their circumstances” (Keane 2016). Keane’s contribution is so valuable because he makes explicit the conditions for signs get ethical meaning. He extensively relates to current psychological research. Psychology determines that humans can read each other’s intentions and that they have a sense of shared reality; both are ethical affordances in Keane’s view because they enable moral judgment, but do not necessitate it.⁹ His

⁸ The idea that change comes through challenging of otherwise implicit norms, and that moral exemplars carry out this task is frequently defended. Melanesia has been studied quite a lot in this regard, because it provides an “interface” between traditional and modern culture, see Barker (2007).

⁹ See Astuti (2016) and Laidlaw (2016) for critical evaluation of Keane’s combination of psychological and semiotic approaches.



central contribution, however, lies in his observations about the “domain of social interactions” which Keane views as “one mediating step between the panhuman sweep of psychology and the contingent particularities of social history” (Keane 2016). What humans make of the fact that they can read each other’s intentions and that they share one reality is underdetermined and depends on specific cultural, social, and historical circumstances in which they find themselves (Keane 2016). Therefore, he suggests that (2016):

If ethics is a unified category, this unity does not derive from a single shared property... rather, the coherence of ‘ethics’ in any given instance is construed through a social process.

Some examples support Keane’s view. Sumba are prone to see intentions where he would not expect them. Consequently, giving away a damaged gift is interpreted as a sign of bad intentions by the Sumba, whereas it would seem like a mere accident to Western observers (Keane 2016). Even unspoken signs can give rise to ethical judgments. For example, a swaggering walk is seen as uncivil braggadocio in an office environment, with a negative connotation, but as a positive signal of strength and steadfastness on the streets, as Keane documents with several examples from an ethnography of the drug milieu in Manhattan (Bourgois 2003). Even everyday interactions at Starbucks carry normative weight as evidenced by the aroused sensitivity caused by baristas who do not ‘stick to the code’ of the client-barista hierarchy and upset clients by correcting their mistaken orders (cf. Manning 2008). Clothing conventions in investment banking can be interpreted along similar lines (Ho 2009). All examples demonstrate how actions, events, and objects can be signs that afford an ethical interpretation.

Keane thus offers a more detailed version of the ‘ordinary ethics’ idea that many things can be signs with ethical meaning. He also provides us with a formal criteria for defining morality: intention-reading must be a part of it. However, Keane does not say *why* a given sign has ethical meaning, and others do not. While affordances are universal, “the coherence of ‘ethics’ in any given instance is construed through social process” (Keane 2016). Something is therefore recognised as ethical “given a particular social context” (Keane 2016).

The ethical turn’s approach to defining morality is thus very broad. The reviewed accounts suggest plausible criteria that may err on the side of being too inclusive, as they do not readily allow a distinction between moral considerations and other normative considerations such as prudential, epistemic, or aesthetic ones. Should we conclude that there is no clear distinction between these categories? Apparently not, because even though the things, actions, or events designated as ‘moral’ in different societies might differ, Keane and the other proponents of the ethical turn seem to think that there is something that makes something moral (in any given society) as opposed to something normatively loaded in a broader sense. The ethical turn thus far sheds light on many ways to morality but says less about the unifying features of morality.



4 Moral change and progress

The study of moral change and moral progress has recently gained momentum in moral philosophy (e.g. Buchanan and Powell 2018; Musschenga and Meynen 2017; Kitcher 2011). Moral change can occur on the individual level (usually referred to as moral development), but also on a super-individual level, where the abolition of slavery and the suffrage movement are obvious examples. The philosophical debate is primarily concerned with identifying criteria for evaluating a given change as progress, thus opposing 'mere change' views, according to which, say, the abolition of slavery counts as a moral change, but not as moral progress.

Related to the question of criteria for moral progress is the question for the mechanisms of change. The challenge is to understand the relationship between individual moral change and moral change writ large (Buchanan and Powell 2018): social norms affect individual normative beliefs, but individuals sometimes go against accepted social norms to initiate social change (cf. Kitcher 2011; Appiah 2010; Das 2012). When and why does this happen? What are the conditions that spur moral change? Answering these questions will, by extension, help to explain the conditions and mechanisms for moral progress.

The ethical turn provides several hypotheses to explain how implicit, taken-for-granted moral norms become explicit and available for debate. All have in common that they try to explain when and how individuals begin questioning existing norms.

4.1 Breakdown and rituals

Let's return to Zigon's claim that morality is "a kind of habitus or an unreflective and unreflexive disposition of everyday social life" (Zigon 2008). Zigon explains that moments of breakdown occur because the three sources of morality sometimes conflict (Zigon 2007, 2008): institutions, like churches or corporations, public discourse, like the media or families, and embodied dispositions, the habitual ways in which people act without noticing what they are. Thus, on Zigon's view, novel moral habits are born out of an individual's deliberation confronted with a value conflict, with the aim to "once again dwell in the unreflective comfort of the familiar" (2007). Zigon's model portrays moral change as an individual's reaction to changing circumstances (criticised by Keane 2016). People are solitary reasoners in these exceptional cases, and they aim to get back to smooth, habitual sailing. There is no room for an impetus from the individual to start changing the prevailing norms. Insofar as morality is a habit of navigating the world, Zigon's model resembles a Deweyan model of change.

The role of social interactions in moral change stands in better focus in Lambek's (2010c) discussion of the role of rituals in changing moral values. Lambek writes that "in the ordinary course of events, criteria [for moral evaluation] are implicit, internal to judgment itself, but they are also available for conscious discernment and deliberation" (2010c). Such discernment and deliberation occur in the context of rituals. Since social contexts define ethical criteria, for morality to change, social contexts have to change (2010c). The Tsembaga Maring of highland Papua New Guinea, for example, begin war and peace through social rituals (Rappaport 1999);



consequently, acts of aggression are evaluated differently, depending on the applicable criteria. As in Zigon's model, moral change is determined by brief, exceptional episodes that contrast with habitual moral life because it involves deliberation and conscious reflection. In contrast to Zigon, however, Lambek makes room for a social element in these episodes. Lambek's ordinary ethics approach thus identifies a way in which criteria change, but it does not readily explain why those criteria arise.

4.2 Self-accounting and moral exemplars

Challenges by groups of people may also initiate moral change. Keane (2016), proceeding from the view that many moral values are held implicitly, has tackled the question of how values that are implicit can become explicit in a society and then amenable to change. Keane describes how "making things explicit" and making them "readily available to reflective awareness" plays a crucial role in moral change (2016).

Keane's story has two parts: an account of how ethical descriptions work implicitly, and how they can be changed. First, he shows in detail how social interactions depend on a vast number of implicit default assumptions about who one's interlocutor is and what they are on about (2016). Evaluations become explicit when one's default expectations fail. The primary reason for making descriptions explicit is when "one is called to give an account of oneself" and "when people need to allocate responsibility for an action" (2016). When these formerly implicit patterns of interaction become recognisable, they can be the object for debates, reasoning, and discussions (Keane 2016). At the core of this process is ethical reflexivity: when interaction fails to go smoothly, people are forced to give an account of oneself. Second, Keane (2016) briefly identifies a number of sources for new descriptions, such as social conflict or value inconsistencies within a society the availability of new descriptions of actions and personhood.

Again, conscious reflection turns out to be a condition for moral change. In contrast to the approaches exemplified by Zigon and Lambek, Keane acknowledges that a process of problematisation can be used to wilfully induce moral change; by making others aware that existing descriptions (e.g. of a given type of person as less valuable than others) do not apply. Though he raises the question where these demands come from, he does not provide an answer. This omission is connected with the fact that the ethical turn offers little in terms of a distinction of morality compared to other normative categories. Existing norms seem to be challenged by the interest of individuals or groups; the story of moral change may be told in terms of self-interest alone.

Another possible impetus for moral change are exemplars. Humphrey (1997) describes how people place themselves in relation to an exemplar, a person that represents the ideal values of the given society. Humphrey shows that Mongol ethical life consists, alongside elaborate sets of customary rules and reasoned obligations, of ways in which individuals cultivate themselves as ethical subjects in relation to chosen exemplars, who might be living people they interact with or remoter figures they admire from afar or long-dead historical heroes, and whom they chose as a 'teacher' as part of their own personal development. Laidlaw (2014) describes



people's orientation toward exemplars as subjects "cultivating" themselves as ethical subjects, suggesting that moral change might occur by people seeking out new exemplars, adopting their behaviour.

However, Robbins (2018) suggests that exemplars represent a society's most cherished values; they are images of ideal states. Exemplars might thus help people to grasp values, but it is unclear how they would afford change beyond the society's current values. Several cultures with multiple exemplars have been studied, notably Robbins' study of the Urupmin in Papua New Guinea (Robbins 2004, 2007). The Urupmin converted from natural religion to Pentecostal Christianity and Robbins, which resulted in a deep conflict between the two value systems. Importantly, within Urupmin culture, there are different exemplars, some exemplifying Christian values, some exemplifying their traditional ways. As people turn to orientate themselves toward one or the other exemplar, morals may change (cf. Laidlaw 2014; Keane 2016). An interesting question for further research will be why certain people are picked out as exemplars. Of course, if they happen to be ideal images of the group's most cherished values, then the question is just how these values, and not others, became to be so cherished.

5 Moral relativism

The most significant impact of ethnographic research heretofore has been in support of ethical relativism. Philosophers have routinely invoked anthropological findings that supposedly establish what Brandt (1967) called "descriptive ethical relativism", the view that, as a matter of empirical fact, there are deep and widespread moral disagreements across different societies, and these disagreements are much more significant than whatever agreements there may be (cf. Gowans 2018). Undeniably, some cultures engage in practices that other cultures, such as contemporary European-American cultures, would find objectionable. Consider some marriage practices and genital mutilation today, and cannibalism and human sacrifices in Roman or Aztec cultures (cf. Prinz 2007). Hence, not only students in introductory philosophy classes but many anthropologists and professional philosophers believe it to be evident to anyone with an elementary understanding of the history and cultures of the world that descriptive ethical relativism must be true (Gowans 2018; Prinz 2007).

Mackie's influential argument from relativity exemplifies the uncritical acceptance of descriptive relativism (Mackie 1977 emphasis added):

The argument from relativity has as its premise the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community. Such variation is in itself merely a truth of descriptive morality, *a fact of anthropology* which entails neither first order nor second-order ethical views.

From supposed facts of anthropology, a host of different versions of moral relativism were derived (cf. Appiah 2012). Some forms of relativism are normative



doctrines: that one ought not to pass judgments on other cultures or people. Others are descriptive: that the meaning of moral propositions vary according to the appraiser's culture or the agent's culture, or that the truth-conditions of moral proposition vary with frameworks (Krausz 2011; Lopez de Sa 2011; Gowans 2018). The latter doctrine, in particular, appears attractive to many meta-ethicists because it saves the appearances of ordinary moral language (e.g. it appears to be truth-apt), while avoiding the need to defend a theory of universal truth-makers.

The arguably best argument for moral relativism of the latter form depends on an inference to the best explanation: the best explanation of the *descriptive relativism* is that no moral proposition is true independently of any framework (Harman 1996; Wong 1986; Prinz 2007; Velleman 2015). Of course, there are further questions about the legitimacy of inference to the best explanation to establish ethical relativism (e.g. Tersman 2006); here I focus on the descriptive point only: if descriptive ethical relativism is not established, the relativist will not get off the ground.

The ethical turn should shake up the alleged fact of anthropology. Michelle Moody-Adams, in a perceptive review of anthropological research before the ethical turn, claims that "it is difficult (at best) to establish that one has indeed found a genuine instance of fundamental disagreement" (Moody-Adams 1997). Laidlaw remarks that the sources used to establish the fact of anthropology are a "rather eccentric election" (Laidlaw 2014). Indeed, prominent proponents of ethical relativism sometimes do not critically engage with ethnographic data at all, but merely accept descriptive relativism at face value (e.g. Harman 1996).

Some prominent accounts of diverging values may turn out to reveal similarities rather than dissimilar on closer inspection. There is some discussion as to whether there is disagreement about the value of freedom. Based on MacIntyre's (2007) influence on the ethical turn, the 'Western' concept of freedom is taken to be the absence of external constraints on acting, whereas many have observed that some people wilfully and happily accepts such constraints in their lives, for example by veiling (cf. Asad 2003; Abu-Lughod 2000). For example, Mahmood argues that, from a liberal, Western perspective, practices such as veiling must seem as unfree and oppressed, precisely because freedom is usually taken to imply absence of coercion. However, Mahmood argues that reformist Islam values a *different* kind of freedom, and sometimes even suggests that *freedom* itself is not valued positively at all in the Islam piety movement because "the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be presumed a priori (Mahmood 2005). If that were true, then normative theories cannot without controversy assume that a reflective ability to make one's choices is definite of autonomy. And indeed, the piety movement described by Mahmood suggests that alternative notions of freedom are operating.

However, Laidlaw (2014) shows that the conception of freedom criticised by Mahmood and others is the kind of freedom that Isaiah Berlin called negative freedom; the absence of coercion or constraint. Even though some of the practices described by Mahmood (2005) and Hirschkind (2001) aim at purging one's ability to choose alternative paths of action (e.g. by developing pious dispositions so stable that one cannot fail in one's service to God), adopting such an ends state as one's goal requires deliberation about which goals to adopt. Freedom in a negative sense



is thus a precondition for the autonomy exercised by the people studied by Mahmood and Hirschkind. Moreover, the practices described by Mahmood and others can be understood as exercising Berlin's positive freedom: the realisation of one's best or rational self (Berlin 2002). Laidlaw (2014) argues that a positive conception of freedom is at the foundation of the practices of self-formation describes by Mahmood (2005) and others. Laidlaw calls such practices "forms of reflectivity" and acknowledged that they might be "historically and culturally various" (Laidlaw 2014). That is, the aims that one aspires to differ in different societies and cultures, and sometimes there are conflicting aims even within a society. But freedom, akin to Berlin's positive variant, is always crucial. For example, Laidlaw describes how Jain religious believers are aware of the demands for being a good Jain, such as renouncing friends and family and thus of their proper target for self-formation. Jain realise that reaching the target is impossible; they cannot wholly renounce worldly plans and desires, if only because they are committed to providing for their families (Laidlaw 2014).

Another relevant case study concerns the relevance of intentionality for many philosophical conceptions of (moral) agency, responsibility, and consequently moral evaluation. Morality thus understood is challenged by alleged findings that intentionality does not play a role in all moral systems (cf. Velleman 2015). Some societies seem to maintain an "opacity doctrine", the belief that "it is impossible or at least extremely difficult to know what other people think or feel" (Robbins and Rumsey 2008). If some people are unable or at least strongly opposed to ascribing intentions to someone else, then that seems to put pressure on counting intentionality as a building block of morality.

However, as Keane (2016) points out, opacity claims seem to be more about what one should talk about, not what one has access to, for there is clear evidence that people that adhered to an opacity claim had no impaired Theory of Mind (cf. Laidlaw 2014). For example, the Urapmin are adherents of an opacity thesis of this kind, which became problematic for them when they converted to Christianity, which demands explicit discussion of one's intentions in confession (cf. Robbins 2004). As confessions were required of them, they had to weigh up the aversion against revealing one's inner thoughts against the newly adopted requirement of confessing. Though evaluations of intentions differ, Keane (2016) notes that such accounts show how intersubjectivity and intentionality nonetheless play an important role in thinking about morality.

Laidlaw (2014) and Keane (2016) thus show how apparent moral differences can be traced to underlying commonalities: the centrality of reflective freedom and differing affordances, respectively. Of course, merely highlighting these commonalities does not settle the debate about relativism, which, ultimately, leads to a methodological problem. Piecemeal discussions of cultures or pairwise comparison do not seem expedient to provide a basis for inferring the falsity of descriptive relativism. Quantitative approaches based on ethnographic data, as carried out by Oliver Curry and collaborators (Curry 2016; Curry et al. 2018) are promising approaches to settle truth of descriptive ethical relativism.



6 Debunking morality

Finally, moral anthropology promises to enrich the recent debate about debunking arguments in moral philosophy (cf. Sauer 2018; e.g. Greene 2008; Klenk 2018a; Haidt 2001). Debunking arguments differ in their details, but the fundamental question that spurs the debunking debate is how learning about the ultimate and proximate causes of our moral beliefs affects our view of the nature of morality, the reality of moral character, and the reliability, truth, and justification of moral beliefs (cf. Klenk 2018b).

All debunking challenges are intended to rely on descriptive claims about the formation of moral judgments. For example, Greene's (2008) famous challenge to deontology rests on the descriptive claim that deontological moral judgments are formed in areas of the brain associated with emotional processing. Similarly, Street's (2006) challenge to robust moral realism rests on the descriptive claim that evolutionary pressures heavily influence moral judgments. Combined with a normative premise about the proper way to form moral judgments (of the type in question), debunking arguments yield the conclusion that the relevant type of moral judgment is epistemically suspect. Various conclusions have been drawn: from rejections of moral rationalism (which says that moral judgments depend on cognitive, deliberative processes), rejections of deontology, to metaethical conclusions about the reliability of moral judgments.

The ethical turn may affect the plausibility of the normative premise of debunking arguments. To debunk X, people often try to show that X depends on Y and that Y is untenable in light of some descriptive finding. A popular anti-debunking strategy is to argue that X does not rely on Y. For example, debunking arguments of moral rationalism might be countered by re-describing the requirements of moral rationalism as reflective endorsements of a claim rather than requiring cognition to play a role in the formation of the judgment (Sauer 2017). The anthropological literature offers material to support such anti-debunking strategies by suggesting alternative accounts of morality that are compatible with the epistemic premise of debunking arguments.

For example, in Green's (2008) well-known experimental setup, subjects have to decide, for example, whether or not to redirect a trolley that threatens to kill five workers on a railroad track so that it kills a single worker instead. A consistent finding is that seemingly irrelevant influences sway people's moral judgments, such as the order in which different cases are presented. Several scholars have recently attempted to attack these arguments by pointing out the stilted, artificial scenarios as inadequate test cases to make claims about moral judgments in general (Appiah 2008; Anderson 2018). The ethical turn supports this criticism by showing the broad range of ethically relevant situations: dilemmatic scenarios that call for deliberation might be uncharacteristic of ethics and thus inferences about the reliability of ethical judgments, in general, would be threatened.



7 Conclusion & Outlook

Engaging with the anthropological literature on morality is a rewarding exercise. Not least to debunk that other stereotype about anthropological engagement with morality: that taking an ethnographer's stance leads to philosophical blind spots and downright ignorance. For example, in a review of a philosophical treatise on ethical relativism, one philosopher is glad not to encounter the typical mistakes "that one might expect from philosophically unsophisticated types such as anthropologists or college freshman" (Kupperman 1986). Of course, there are many open questions both in regards to the ethnographic methodology as well as the inferences from ethnographic data to philosophical positions. Nonetheless, the moral anthropologists writing today show sensitivity to philosophical nuances and the philosophical literature. Moral philosophers should take it as an invitation to take the ethnographic stance on morality.

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