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The Anthropology of Ethics and Morality

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Abstract

Anthropologists have sustained a varied and active engagement with ethics throughout the field's history. In light of this long-standing engagement, what marks the distinctiveness of the current ethical turn? To think in Foucauldian terms, ethics/morality now looms large precisely because it has been problematized. Although there has been a recent outpouring of work on ethics, and a widely shared concern to move beyond overly collectivist accounts, much is nascent. Debates and schools of thought are still emerging. In this review article, we explore several resonate streams of disquiet or inspiration within the discipline that have generated new lines of inquiry. These include (a) emerging debates and confusion around the use of basic terms such as "ethics" and "morality" and their role in debates over ordinary ethics, (b) articulations of an anthropological virtue ethics (and the Foucault effect), (c) increasingly sophisticated treatments of moral experience informed by philosophical phenomenology, and (d) reinvigorated considerations of the political as connected to ethical life.

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INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to introduce a review article on the anthropology of ethics or morality without mentioning a striking fact. In little more than a decade, there has been an astonishing efflorescence of theoretical and ethnographic efforts to describe, recognize, locate, and analytically delimit moral dimensions of human existence. Articles, books, special issues, conferences, and edited collections are multiplying at a rapid pace that shows no signs of abating. New courses dedicated to the anthropology of ethics are increasingly offered at graduate and undergraduate levels.

Despite all this activity and a widely heralded “ethical turn” in the discipline, there is something still nascent and unfinished about the whole enterprise. Certainly, no clear consensus has coalesced about what its most important questions are, what is most crucial to foreground, why it needs its own “turn,” or what terminology one should use when speaking of or analyzing ethical life. Notably, the very terms “morality” and “ethics” have been hotly contested. (For our purposes in this article, we use these terms interchangeably, although in a later section we review why some scholars have insisted on distinguishing them.) At first take, it is puzzling that the conversation about ethics feels so new. After all, as Howell (1997b) notes, “It might be argued that anthropologists have, ultimately, always been studying the variety of social constructions of morality with a more or less explicit aim of eliciting premises for comparative ethics” (p. 6). Even if anthropologists have been studying ethics all along, it is also true that they have never fretted about it so much. Nor have they debated so vociferously about how to approach the ethical features of social life or been so puzzled about what might count as an ethical domain. If there is one thing this turn has done, it has raised questions. Why might this be so? Before returning to this question, it is worth pausing to remind ourselves of the discipline’s important and historic contributions to the topic of ethics.

ANTHROPOLOGY’S HISTORICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH ETHICAL LIFE

Anthropologists have sustained a varied and active engagement with ethics and morality throughout the field’s history. Thinking through the variable normative and evaluative aspects of cultural formations and social institutions was a key thrust of much of this work, the bulk of which argues for the significance of considering the diversity of differing communities’ systems of norms and values. Ethnographic work on differing kinship systems, forms of social belonging, sexual mores and taboos; investigations of legal systems, forms of punishment and social sanctions, gift exchange, economic transactions, and interrogations into varying responses to misfortune were all often shot through with both explicit and implicit moral concerns.

The foundations of the field were clearly shaped by theoretical and ethnographic engagements with ethical dimensions of social life: from Marett’s (1902, 1931), Malinowski’s (1926, 1929, 1936), and Westermarck’s (1917, 1932) early evolutionary and functionalist perspectives to Evans-Pritchard’s (1937) and Kluckhohn’s (1944) classic work on witchcraft and sorcery to Mauss’s [1990 (1923–1924)] analysis of the *bau* of the gift and the “total social fact” to the Boas-inspired configurationalist work on moral sensibilities and *ethos* as developed in the writings of Benedict [1989 (1934)], Mead [2001 (1935)], and Bateson [1958 (1936)].

This early work set the stage for a subsequent spattering of philosophically engaged ethnographic writings that appeared at the midpoint of the twentieth century [Brandt 1954; Edel & Edel 1968 (1959); Firth 1951, 1953; Fortes 1987; Goldschmidt 1951; Hallowell 1955; Ladd 1957; Read 1955], as well as a somewhat larger set of contributions in the 1970s and 1980s that focused attention on the problem of moral emotions and personhood (Bailey 1977, Briggs 1970, Evans

1982, Geertz 1973, Hatch 1983, Jackson 1982, Levy 1973, Lutz 1988, Mayer 1981, Parkin 1985, Pocock 1986, Read 1955, Rosaldo 1980, Scheper-Hughes 1989, Shweder et al. 1987, Parry & Bloch 1989).

These various contributions paved the way for the emergence of an even larger and more theoretically sophisticated body of work on ethics and morality in the 1990s (Asad 1993; Briggs 1998; Brodwin 1996; Csordas 1994; D'Andrade 1995; Delvecchio Good 1999; Farmer 1992; Fiske & Mason 1990; Hollan & Wellenkamp 1994; Howell 1997b; Humphrey 1997; Kleinman 1995, 1999; Lambek 1993, 1996; Mattingly 1998a,b; Parish 1994, 1996; Rapp & Ginsburg 2001; Scheper-Hughes 1995; Shweder 1990; Wikan 1989). A good deal of this work from the 1990s arose in the context of medical, religious, and psychological anthropological research on individual-, family-, and community-level responses to affliction, suffering, violence, trauma, and pain.

The long-standing anthropological attention to ethics was not merely an empirical project of documenting diversity but also a theoretical one that called into question dominant Western conceptions of moral life: its commonsense models of morality. It was in frequent dispute with some of Western philosophy's most cherished moral theories, especially those that could be traced to the Enlightenment. From its earliest days, anthropology has been in a complex, ambivalent, and at times explicitly adversarial relationship with philosophy. For much of the discipline's life, anthropology's discussion of morality has shed critical light on philosophy's universalist ideals, as well as its claims to objectivity and rationality (see Benedict 1934, Boas 1901, Evans-Pritchard 1937, Levy-Bruhl 1926, Mead 1935, Winch 1964; for a useful review, see Good 1994).

THE RISE OF AN ETHICAL TURN

In light of this distinguished history, what marks the distinctiveness of the current ethical turn? Why was Laidlaw prepared to claim in his 2001 Malinowski Memorial Lecture that there “did not exist an anthropology of ethics” (Laidlaw 2002) and—more to the point—why has this been taken so seriously? Laidlaw's essay emerged during a historical moment when, quite independently, a number of anthropologists began to critique anthropology for treating morality and ethics as epiphenomenal, something that could either “be explained by reference to something else and presumably more profound”—e.g., economic or political structures—or was merely dictated by societal norms (Dyring et al. 2018, pp. 17–18).

One of the most pervasive, if contentious, claims advanced within the current ethical turn is that there is a discernable difference between how anthropologists have engaged with morality and ethics before compared with after the turn's inauguration (see Faubion 2001a,b, 2011; Laidlaw 2002, 2014; Zigon 2008, 2011). Before the turn, or at least so the story goes, anthropologists who explicitly wrote about morality and ethics largely assumed the category itself to be self-evident. From this perspective, while the specific practices, assumptions, ideas, beliefs, values, rules, duties, and happenings deemed to have moral significance could vary quite drastically from one community to another, the enveloping category of morality or ethics itself was held to be visible and thus ethnographically traceable.

Much blame has been put on Durkheim. In Laidlaw's (2002) essay, he argued that anthropologists would need to break with a Durkheimian tradition that made it so difficult to describe human ethical possibilities. According to Zigon (2007, 2008, 2014a,b), another influential voice, it was largely a Durkheimian paradigm, which forwarded a repurposed deontological Kantian view of ethics framed in strictly sociological terms, that became the default and thus largely unquestioned approach within the discipline. In the context of Durkheim's sociological efforts to detail the social life of specific “moral facts,” morality was envisioned as inherent in various rules and duties

that are pitched toward a range of socially defined goods that exceeds individual wants or desires [Durkheim 1953 (1906), 1979 (1920), 1961 (1925)].

It is easy to recognize the dangers of oversimplifying this story. Robbins (2007, 2012, 2018), for example, continues to find Durkheim useful in analyzing ethical desire and cautions that we not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Lambek (2015) objects that the portrait of Durkheim is far too reductive because for him “rules exist not simply to . . . enforce social order but to produce a kind of self-transcendence that makes human freedom possible or that is, in effect, human freedom” (p. 6; see also Yan 2011). And yet, it is surely the case that, to think in Foucauldian terms, ethics/morality figures large in our contemporary landscape precisely because it has been problematized. Most anthropologists writing about ethics today share the view that it is important to move beyond theories of morality that are strongly collectivist, but there is still no agreement about what a movement beyond Durkheim’s “moral facts” should look like. There is, as Robbins (2012) puts it, a “frontier-like quality of discussion” that many find “productive and exciting.”

Anthropologists currently draw on a broad array of scholarly traditions, and as a result the ethical turn has become an enormously fertile area for rapprochement with other disciplines. While it is possible to tell a story about its rise by looking to how our own disciplinary history helped precipitate the current problematization of ethics, it is equally clear that explicit attention to ethics has prompted an interest in expanding the intellectual terrain of anthropological thought. This expansion has precipitated the cultivation of interdisciplinary conversations, especially with philosophy and psychology (Cassaniti 2014, Cassaniti & Hickman 2014, Hickman 2014, Keane 2016, Shweder & Menon 2014). Keane, for example, borrows from several disciplines to find a path out of moral determinism. He introduces the concept of “ethical affordance,” which he develops in conversation with linguistic and cultural anthropology, linguistics, history, philosophy, and especially psychology. An “ethical affordance,” as he defines it, can be distinguished from a precondition. A precondition has a deterministic cast, but an affordance suggests something more open ended, in the manner of an “opportunity,” that may propel people to ethically “evaluate themselves, other persons, and their circumstances” (Keane 2016, p. 31).

In this review, we concentrate particularly on dialogues with philosophy. Anthropologists have long borrowed from other disciplines, of course, including philosophy. But the intensity of this philosophical engagement has perhaps never been as concentrated or as prominent. It is not surprising that a number of anthropologists have defined their work as a form of philosophical anthropology (Das et al. 2014; Ingold 2011; Jackson 2013b, 2014; Mattingly 2010, 2014, 2017, 2018a,b; Throop 2012a,b, 2018b; Zigon 2007, 2017). To put things schematically, three philosophical frameworks have been most influential thus far in the ethical turn: (a) ordinary language philosophy and a focus on ordinary ethics, (b) phenomenology and an emphasis on moral experience, (c) Foucauldian and neo-Aristotelian traditions of virtue ethics.

While a frontier atmosphere may still prevail, these various engagements with philosophy have helped to inform some definite trends and points of departure. These seem to have emerged from the convergence of several resonate streams of disquiet or inspiration within the discipline that have generated new lines of inquiry around ethics, some more developed than others. We identify four primary ones that we take up in the sections that follow: (a) emerging debates and confusion around the use of basic terms such as “ethics” and “morality” and their role in debates over ordinary ethics, (b) articulations of an anthropological virtue ethics (and the Foucault effect), (c) increasingly sophisticated treatments of moral experience informed by philosophical phenomenology, and (d) reinvigorated considerations of the political as connected to ethical life. In the conclusion, we additionally note the emergence of newly forming ontological claims that link ethics to potentiality and the excessiveness of experience.

EMERGING DEBATES AND TERMINOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES: THE MORAL ORDINARY AND THE ETHICS/MORALITY QUESTION

There has been increasing recognition, best articulated originally by Laidlaw (2002), that the subject of ethics has lacked explicit debates about what constituted it, such as could be found for other canonical anthropological topics such as religion, kinship, or law. Since Laidlaw's complaint, the scene has changed considerably. Contestations continue to be sharpened as individual scholars work to articulate more fully formed ethical frameworks, contrasting their positions from influential alternatives within the discipline. Several recent publications, especially some in book-length form and edited collections, dedicate substantial space to detailed commentaries that seek to clarify terms in explicit comparison with others (Fassin 2012; Faubion 2011; Heinz 2009; Keane 2016; Lambek 2010b, 2015; Lambek et al. 2015; Laidlaw 2014; Mattingly 2014; Mattingly et al. 2018; Zigon 2008).

Perhaps the most visible debate concerns the question of where the ethical is to be found, especially quarrels over the status of the ordinary in informing ethical life (Faubion 2011; Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2010b, 2015, 2018; Lempert 2013, 2015; Zigon 2014a,b, 2017). This debate over where to locate ethics has been accompanied by challenges over terminology, especially over whether "ethics" needs to be distinguished from "morality." Put baldly, for those advocating a distinction, "morality" concerns the "social constraints of morality" and "the norms of society" (Fassin 2015, p. 176). Ethics, on the other hand, is often reserved for more reflective moments. For Laidlaw (2014, 2018), for example, the ethical sphere includes the capacity to engage in some sort of second-order reflection on the norms themselves, a reflective act that requires one to step out of the scene of action. Although many anthropologists have expressed uneasiness with Laidlaw's adoption of freedom as a key term because of its particularly Western (and Kantian) associations (Das et al. 2014; Keane 2015, 2016; Lambek 2015), or think the dichotomy between freedom and convention is too overdrawn, most would acknowledge that there needs to be some room for conscious reflection in any ethical framework.

Zigon's (2008, 2011) notion of the "moral break down" is an influential example of a framework that depends on a strong distinction between morality and ethics. Some, such as Zigon (2014a,b, 2017), who are most keen to differentiate morality (as a societal structure of norms that operates more or less unconsciously) from a conscious sphere of ethics, have challenged advocates of ordinary ethics because they worry that the ethical is again collapsed into the social. Robbins (2016) issues a challenge to ordinary ethics from a different vantage point. His worry is that the apparent rejection of any form of transcendence from the ordinary seems to exclude an important ethical domain: religious experience. He engages Das's claim that ethical work "is done not by orienting oneself to transcendental, agreed-upon values but rather through the cultivation of sensibilities *within* the everyday" (Das 2012, p. 134, original emphasis, cited in Robbins 2016, p. 770). Robbins contends that dismissals of domains such as religious ones exclude crucial aspects of ethical life, especially a community's reflection on codified and consciously articulated ideals and values. An emphasis on the tacit features of ethical life, he argues, seems to sideline religion as an important site of ethical work.

Those advocating ordinary ethics have been concerned to address some of these problems. How is it possible to defend an account of ethics that is both broadly shared in a relatively untroubled way and yet calls on some notion of reflexivity? For those who contend that ethical life is pervasive and ordinary, it has been especially important to solve the puzzle of how ethics can be reflective (or at least have an unremarkable potentiality for reflexivity) and yet not typically be in conscious awareness. A corollary problem is how to address the obvious fact that people may be self-deceiving (Keane 2016). One possible solution relies on the important notion that ethics are, in some sense,

public (Lambek 2015, 2018). Thus, even if explicit ethical stances may be out of awareness of a particular person at the individual level, they are nevertheless available because they are shared and known within a community (Keane 2016, p. 244). As Keane puts it, even if people are not necessarily consciously acting, they could, if necessary, back up their ethical intuitions with ethical descriptions that others within their community will be expected to also condone, understand, agree with, or at least recognize as ethical positions.

Das (2015) offers another answer, directly challenging the picture of ordinary life “as the residual category of routine and repetition” (p. 54). “The everyday,” she counters, “is taut with moments of world-making and world-annihilating encounters that could unfold in a few seconds or over the course of a lifetime” (p. 54). Anthropological works that resonate with this portrait of everyday ethical precarity include studies of child-rearing in China (Kuan 2015), obesity in Denmark (Grøn 2017), village resettlement in postwar Uganda (Meinert 2018), ordinary ethical dilemmas arising in Chinese communities (Stafford 2013), family life and drug addiction in New Mexico (Garcia 2010), urban poor in Santiago, Chile (Han 2014), frontline community mental health workers in the US Midwest (Brodwin 2013), and suicide epidemics in the Canadian arctic (Stevenson 2014).

Other points of debate have also been raised. For example, there have been challenges to Foucauldian-inspired ethics or “discursive virtue ethics,” an approach that has been particularly influential within the recent ethical turn (Mattingly 2012, 2014). (We return to the issue of Foucault in a subsequent section.) Yet, another source of contention concerns what counts as an ethical subject (Faubion 2011, Laidlaw 2018). Do only humans, or particular types of humans, qualify? What are the criteria to use when identifying such an entity? What responsibilities are owed to ethical subjects? These abstract questions come to life in ethnographic studies of, for example, the precarious ethical status of research animals among laboratory technicians (Sharp 2017, Svendsen et al. 2017), infants in neonatal intensive care units (Svendsen et al. 2017), or people with severe intellectual impairments such as dementia (Taylor 2017).

Not all lines of inquiry or theoretical perspectives are framed in the manner of a debate in which interlocutors try to unseat one position in favor of another. Ethical positions may also be presented as partial or even complementary answers to questions that could be addressed in other ways. Even when quarreling with other positions, many insist that they are not offering “the” anthropology of ethics but one take on the topic, “an” anthropology of ethics, as Faubion (2011) puts it. For instance, in the recent collection *Moral Engines: Exploring the Ethical Drives in Human Life*, the editors explicitly set out to bring together three distinct but complementary approaches to the question of “ethical drives”: those foregrounding sociocultural dynamics and structures, those foregrounding moral experience, and those emphasizing the ontological roots of the ethical (Dyring et al. 2018). Notably, Durkheim [1953 (1906)] offers an early articulation that, in some ways, resonates with this move toward complementarity. He claimed that the different versions of morality proposed by moral philosophers were “only mutually exclusive in the abstract. In fact they only express different aspects of a complex reality, and consequently all will be found in their various places when one brings one’s mind to bear. . . [on that] complexity” (p. 62).

ARTICULATIONS OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIRTUE ETHICS (AND THE FOUCAULT EFFECT)

The investigation of moral cultivation is certainly not a new topic for anthropology. Notably child socialization studies have long examined how morality is socially learned and negotiated (e.g., Ochs 1988). But it has been given new life and has been broadly reframed, in large part through Foucault’s influential examinations of the ethics of Greek and Roman antiquity, which introduced virtue ethics

to a wide audience beyond philosophy. One might even plausibly claim that Foucault has dethroned Durkheim as the central voice informing current discussions of morality (Mattingly 2012), even if, increasingly, other voices are also coming to take center stage. The remarkable influence of Foucault's (1982, 1986, 1988, 1997, 2005) genealogical analyses of the history of ethical self-formation cannot be underestimated. Foucault offered powerful conceptual tools for examining how moral virtues were cultivated. His analytic approach has prompted analyses of moral life in a wide range of societies. To give just a sense of this ethnographic diversity, subjects of these Foucault-inspired analyses include small communities in the Pacific (Robbins 2004, Throop 2010), drug rehabilitation programs in Russia (Zigon 2011), women's Islamic piety movements in Egypt (Mahmood 2005), Jain religious followers in India (Laidlaw 2014), and evangelical Christians in the United States (Faubion 2011).

Why has Foucault's work been so compelling? He has offered a path out of a quandary. As noted earlier, one challenge for anthropologists has been determining how to introduce some notion of "freedom" (to momentarily adopt Laidlaw's terminology) even while continuing to investigate how societal norms and bodily practices powerfully shape moral becoming. Foucault's late work on the ethics of care attempts to do this. In turning to the ethics of Western antiquity, Foucault introduced many anthropologists to a very different portrait of moral practice than modernity provides. The ancients offered 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.

The anthropological turn to virtue ethics has also developed in concert with other voices, in particular moral philosophy's Anglo-American revival of virtue ethics (especially Aristotle's) that occurred during the middle of the twentieth century. Here, the voices of Anscombe, Williams, Foote, Taylor, Murdoch, and Nussbaum have been important resources. MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) and his explication of Aristotelian ethics have played an especially influential role in connecting virtue ethics to tradition (Asad 2003, Lambek 2008, Mahmood 2005) and to moral reasoning and action (Lakoff & Collier 2004; Lambek 2010a,c, 2015; Mattingly 1998a,b, 2014).

One of the attractions of Aristotle's ethics is his emphasis on complexities of action itself (Aristotle 2003). Cultivating virtue is required because of the demands of action. In his teleological account of action, Aristotle was concerned with potentiality (Cavell 2004). Aristotle regarded *praxis* as directed, most importantly, to the human cultivation of a good life. This particular view of the good life is thus one that is necessarily enacted [see also Arendt 1998 (1958)]. As such, it is full of frailty and uncertainty because no amount of rules, norms, or even wisdom can preclude the challenge of judging the good in the particular circumstances in which action must be taken (Mattingly 2014, p. 10; see also Lambek 2015, pp. 122–23).

Mattingly (2012, 2014) has made the case that despite many points of convergence between neo-Aristotelian and Foucauldian virtue ethics, there are some crucial points of disagreement that should not be overlooked. Perhaps most telling is the matter of the "self." Neo-Aristotelians in moral philosophy tend to draw on virtue ethics to promote a "thick moral psychology" and a biographical integrity to moral selves that they found lacking in deontological and utilitarian schemes (Hursthouse 1999, MacIntyre 1981). Foucault-inspired virtue ethics scholars in anthropology, by contrast, have been leery of attention to any such biographical self, fearing that this approach commits them to some sort of individualism. The present article is not the place to rehearse this debate in more detail, but it is worth mentioning because it also intersects with anthropology's skepticism about the Western humanist tradition (see Mattingly 2012, 2014, for more extended discussions; cf. Mahmood 2018, Wentzer & Mattingly 2018).

Beyond these debates, comparative explorations of virtue ethics are generating theoretically sophisticated conversations between Western and non-Western ethical and philosophical traditions. For example, when Pandian (2009, p. 16) considers the “life of virtue” among Tamil individuals in South India, he calls on Tamil literary, moral, and religious traditions to offer a genealogy of how an interior self is cultivated in ways that cannot be captured by Western traditions of thought. Kuan (2015) brings together Western virtue ethics, exemplified by moral philosopher scholars such as Taylor, Nussbaum, and Williams, and Confucian traditions of ethical cultivation to explore how Chinese parents seek to instill virtues in their children. Although there is nothing new about the anthropological project of contrasting Eurocentric moral theories with those anthropologists find in their local settings, recent works involve a more explicit theoretical project of conceptual comparison and, often, a nuanced reading of philosophical texts.

MORAL EXPERIENCE AND THE INFLUENCE OF PHILOSOPHICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

A newly invigorated phenomenological tradition (see Desjarlais & Throop 2011) has been gaining steam over the past decade or so, sparking both theoretically sophisticated and ethnographically rich explorations of moral experience (Zigon & Throop 2014a,b). Some of these contributions include efforts to trace the complex forms of moral responsivity that are entangled in the lived experience of socialization and family life (Geurts 2002, Rydstrom 2003, Shoet 2017), religious practice (Corwin 2012; Csordas 2009, 2013; Lester 2005; Luhrmann 2012; Seeman 2015), migration (Jackson 2013a, Willen 2014), addiction (Garcia 2010, 2014; Zigon 2011, 2014a,b), political marginalization (Al-Mohammad 2010, 2015; Mattingly 2014; Stevenson 2014; Throop 2014b), illness and disability (Black 2015; Kleinman 2006; Mattingly 2010, 2014), personhood (Kleinman et al. 2011, Pandian 2010, Parish 2014), and death and dying (Desjarlais 2014, 2016; Flaherty 2017). A basic assumption guiding such phenomenological anthropological work is the idea that the being of human beings is intimately intertwined with others—events, objects, and the world—in a non-trivial way. To this end, the partial, perspectival, situated, affective, embodied, horizon-defined, and defining modes that characterize our existence as humans, as well as their shifting articulations, and the forms of revealing and concealing that are necessarily associated with such shifts, are foregrounded (Dyring et al. 2018; Jackson 2005, 2013a,b; Throop 2003, 2009, 2010; Wentzer & Mattingly 2018; Zigon 2009).

A number of scholars contributing to phenomenological anthropological analyses of morality and ethics have sought to draw attention to the first-person stance of the embodied experiencing subject who is always-already a relational being: the person for whom, from whom, and toward whom, existence (ethical and otherwise) emanates. Here again, terminological dangers arise, so it is important to be clear about what is—and is not—entailed in the concept of the phenomenological first person. As philosopher Wentzer notes, the first person has ontological primacy within the phenomenological tradition because of the premise that no third person perspective can serve as the ground or starting place for humans in virtue of the kinds of beings we are (Wentzer 2012). We do not experience ourselves, ontologically, as being mere tokens of a type. Said differently, phenomenologists resist reducing human existence and experience to mere social fact, the arbitrary product of particular social or discursive histories. If there is something universal about human existence, they argue, it is a condition that is at once excessive, uncertain, and emergent.

Notably, the first person, understood in this phenomenological way, does not refer to some singular isolated individual and his or her inner experience. Rather, it speaks to an ontological claim about the primacy of our human sense of what Jackson (2005) describes as a kind of fusion or enmeshment with other social beings and even our physical environments. It stresses

the embodied qualities of this engagement, modes of mutual attunement, and “being-with” (Al-Mohammad 2010; Zigon 2007, 2014a,b). Moral experience, taken up in this phenomenological line, discloses how we find ourselves enmeshed in the world—and the way the world places demands on us to which we must respond. Phenomenological anthropological work on moral experience foregrounds distinctively situated horizons and limits of life as lived. It highlights our fragility, precarity, vulnerability, and finitude. It reveals ethical life as a condition marked by ontological indeterminacy and ethical overload (Wentzer 2012, Wentzer & Mattingly 2018).

Phenomenological approaches to moral experience are also deeply concerned with the ethical entailments of the second-person perspective. For instance, a number of contributors to phenomenological anthropological analyses of moral experience have generatively drawn from Emmanuel Levinas’s reflections on the ethical demand that another being places on us (see Benson & O’Neill 2007; Kleinman 1999; Throop 2010, 2014a; Zigon 2007). Levinas predicates his ethics on the foundational “openness of being” and the injunction to shift from typified understandings of other beings that reduce the other to the self-sameness of the one who typifies them to a responsive orientation that “lets them be” [cf. Heidegger 2010 (1926)]. That is, Levinas’s call is to respect the unassumability of another’s existence as a being who is in the world independent “of the perception that discovers and grasps them” (Levinas 1998, p. 16). In Levinas’s view, experiencing the other’s singularity and unassumability arises through a responsiveness to the plenitude and uniqueness of the other being. Accordingly, the moment of confronting another, which may evoke in us disquiet, bewilderment, uncertainty, and confusion, is precisely the moment that Levinas deems to be the existential foundation of ethics (Waldenfels 2002, p. 63).

In short, it is the focus on experience—on life as lived—that gives primacy to first- and second-person positions in phenomenology. The insistence on doing so, even when also critically engaged with third-person theoretical perspectives, is part of a much bigger and longer story, well beyond the purview of this review article. We simply note that it can be traced to a long lineage of philosophical challenges toward claims of objective knowledge of a reality “out there.” Phenomenological philosophy from Edmund Husserl [1962 (1913)] and Martin Heidegger [2010 (1926)] onward has sought to examine relations of situated coexistence that destabilized simplistic subject-object and self-other distinctions. Resonating with William James’s (1904a,b) radical empiricism and writings on “pure experience,” anthropologists inspired by phenomenological analyses of moral experience thus necessarily examine the spaces between subjects and between those subjects and the world itself (Jackson 1989). It is precisely for this reason that these studies seek to investigate a variegated range of intermediary experiences (see Throop 2009) that dynamically shape ethical and moral aspects of life.

In sum, the focus on moral experience shifts attention away from readily made boundaries between individual and world, self and other, thought and thing, ego and alter. It brings us instead to an interrogation of the fluctuating processes by which and through which such distinctions are intersubjectively and intercorporeally constituted and made meaningful.

REINVIGORATED TREATMENTS OF THE POLITICAL: MORALITY, ETHICS, POLITICS

One of the driving forces motivating some of the earliest contributions to the ethical turn was not only a concern to distinguish ethics/morality from normative social values but also to differentiate it from the realm of the political (see Robbins 2013). In some early efforts to think about ethics in relation to politics just prior to the turn, morality was often distinguished from politics in the sense that morality was what motivated or grounded political critique. For writers such as Scheper-Hughes (1995) and Farmer (1992, 1999), what was clearly at stake in discussions of

morality was an effort to respond to economic and political systems that marginalized, harmed, and violated particular individuals, groups, or communities. The struggle to highlight forms of structural violence, oppression, and stigmatization was thus framed as a morally grounded response to political conditions that engendered deep-seated and long-lasting inequities both within and between various communities, nations, and regions (e.g., the Global North versus the Global South). In the context of such contributions, however, morality was understood largely as tied to an imperative to “do good” or seek “justice” by “speaking truth to power” (Scheper-Hughes 1995) and to respond to the social “fault lines” of inequality (Farmer 1999). This was a call, in short, for the discipline’s active engagement in issues deemed of moral and political concern.

In contrast with such an approach, some of the earliest and most influential contributions to the ethical turn explicitly sought to carve out a space to think of an ethics/morality that rendered it *analytically* distinct from the political. For a number of these scholars, ethics/morality is distinguished from the political to the extent that it is taken to arise precisely when the “reflexive practice of freedom,” personal or otherwise, is at stake (see Faubion 2001b, p. 101; see also Laidlaw 2002 and Lambek 2000; cf. Zigon 2007). Here, the political (much like the social) is portrayed as arising from fields of power that configure, in largely deterministic ways, the range of possibilities that can be taken up by particular social actors. (This portrayal is part of what is at issue in debates surrounding ordinary ethics.)

As the influential work of Mahmood (2005) on the gendered politics of piety in Egypt reveals, however, relations between ethics, freedom, power, and politics are themselves configured by the diverse genealogical traditions within which such concepts arise, gain legitimacy, are enacted, and/or are contested (see Asad 1993, Hirschkind 2006). Challenging a view of politics as framed in a particular lineage of feminist theory that links agency and freedom to resistance, Mahmood draws from Islamic philosophical renderings of virtue ethics in an effort to better understand why Egyptian women in the mid-1990s were “returning” to traditional Islamic values and practices—values and practices that were otherwise understood as problematically patriarchal and thus significantly diminishing or limiting their freedom. In dialogue with Foucault (1986, 1988) and Butler (1997), Mahmood makes an effort to rethink relations between ethics, freedom, power, and politics by building on, and yet complicating, the so-called paradox of subjectivation—the paradox that arises when the act of submitting oneself to norms itself potentiates possibilities for agency. What results for Mahmood is the development of an understanding of agency that is defined not by resistance or autonomy but instead by active struggles to cultivate particular gendered dispositions and virtues.

Where Mahmood moves through ethics to critically rethink the politics of agency, Ticktin (2006, 2011) and Fassin (2008, 2011, 2015) have sought in their allied work on humanitarianism and the politics of care to explore the point of articulation between morality and politics by tracing the dynamic interplay between them. In contrast with earlier work that attempted to ground political critique in moral assessments, Fassin and Ticktin trace the ways that moral imperatives motivate political regimes and vice versa. Fassin (2012) phrases this goal succinctly as the effort “to seize morals at the point it is articulated with politics” (p. 12). For the most part, the “morals” in question here are those associated with forms of compassion, empathy, and care that arise in response to various humanitarian and human rights crises. In this account, morality is thus largely (although not exclusively) taken to “engage and reproduce a set of power relations” that insidiously undergird various forms inequality, marginalization, and violence (Ticktin 2011, p. 20). The analytic goal of this work is thus to trace the ways that morality is politically mobilized by various institutions and persons.

Drawing from what are at times compatible intellectual traditions but disparate ethnographic contexts, Pandian (2009) and Stevenson (2014) have also sought to further an analysis of the

interrelations between politics and ethics through critically interrogating what Pandian (2009) terms “the moral armature of colonial power and. . .[local] traditions of moral conduct” (p. 15). While deeply concerned with the ways that politically configured forms of violence are sustained by moral imperatives of the sort that Ticktin and Fassin analyze, Stevenson’s and Pandian’s approaches also differ to the extent that each makes a unique effort to think through how the ethical may yet still exceed its specific political emplacement.

For instance, in Stevenson’s analysis of the Canadian state’s biopolitical deployment of forms of “anonymous care” in the face of historically distinct but equally devastating tuberculosis and suicide epidemics in Inuit communities, a locally discernable ethics of uncertainty, attending, and listening is theoretically marshalled to open possibilities for imagining “an alternative way of responding to ‘the call of the world’” (Stevenson 2014, p. 8). For Pandian, who describes the variable intersections “between the moralizing legacies of modern state reformism and the fragmentary echoes of south Indian moral tradition” as manifest in marginalized agrarian Kellar communities in Tamil Nadu, it is instead the always complex and uncertain process of moral self-fashioning that ensures that the “making of moral subjects is. . .never easily deduced from the plans that people have for their own lives or from the goals projected upon them by others” (Pandian 2009, p. 224).

Stevenson and Pandian are certainly not alone in such efforts to politically situate and yet still distinguish particular ethical and moral modes of being. A short list of other works shows how lively this topic is: Das’s (2007) examination of ethical becoming and political violence in the aftermath of war in India; Garcia’s (2010) historical ethnography of the transgenerational effects of dispossession, melancholia, addiction and family care in Hispana/o communities in northern New Mexico; Willen’s (2014) critical phenomenology of “inhabitable spaces of welcome” among undocumented migrant workers in Israel; Bialecki’s (2016) tracing of the differing political horizons afforded by efforts at prayerful, ethical self-fashioning in contemporary charismatic Christian communities in the United States; Dave’s (2012) work on ethics and activism in queer-identifying communities in India; Zigon’s (2011) consideration of moral/ethical life in a church-run drug rehabilitation program in St. Petersburg, Russia, and his more recent work interlinking an ethics of dwelling with a politics of world building in the context of the globally diffuse situation known as the Drug War (Zigon 2017); Throop’s (2014b) discussion of the way that moral moods may be attuned to and thus disclose aspects of contemporary political conditions in Micronesia; Brodwin’s (2013) work on everyday ethics in the context of frontline community psychiatric practice in the US Midwest; and Mattingly’s (2014) uncovering of “an indigenous hermeneutics of critique” in her ethnography of moral becoming and struggle in African American communities in Southern California. Each of these works, in its own way, examines how ethical modes of being, while tethered to particular political and economic conditions, also exceed those conditions. Such explorations of how political possibilities and moral worlds generatively intertwine suggest ways that the ethical turn also provides new resources for considering the political (see Schertz 2014, Segal 2016).

CONCLUSION: DESTABILIZING DISCUSSIONS AND ONTOLOGICAL PROVOCATIONS

One of the most interesting features of the ethical turn has been its many subversive attempts to destabilize received anthropological ideas and concepts. The ethical is a privileged site for this destabilization in part because the stakes of ethics are so high. As Kleinman (1999) remarked, examining the moral features of experience reveal how “ordinary people are deeply engaged stake-holders who have important things to lose, to gain, and to preserve” (p. 362). One destabilizing move problematizes everyday life as an ethical domain. Far from being a site

of culturally well-articulated obligations or the imposition of normative moral orders that create docile subjects, scholars have empirically documented ways that the ethical can pose excessive demands that render lived experience uncanny. Profound at-stakeness can be accompanied by uncertainty, even alienness, as a number of anthropologists (especially phenomenologically inspired ones) have sought to illuminate. The ethical is very often fraught with elusive disturbance and alterity. To offer some very recent examples, Louw (2018) speaks of a “haunted ethics” in her examination of the complexity of moral emotions among Uzbek Sufis; Grøn (2017) explores the “alterity” of obesity for Danes, who have come to experience their own bodies as alien; Kuan (2017) reveals how affective ethical alterities arise in experimental family therapies in China; and Throop (2018a) finds that regret experienced in Yapeese communities is linked to possible worlds and possible lives that they never lived. Even apparently mundane everyday acts can be the vehicle for unexpected moments of forgiveness, as Meinert (2018) discovers in postwar northern Uganda.

The destabilization of anthropological concepts has also arisen with debates over terms and topics that have traditionally preoccupied moral philosophers far more than anthropologists: Is ethics an ontological feature of the human condition that is, in some way, universal despite its variable sociocultural manifestations? Is ethics a matter of transcendence, or is it purely immanent? What is the role of human freedom in ethical life? Should the ethical be understood in terms of normative rules and codes, in the ordinary potential for self-evaluation, or in broader and more sweeping language? Is it about addressing the question of the good itself, of what is worthy to pursue, what makes life worth living?

The infusion of topics such as these in current discussions leads us to conclude by sketching a final set of questions: Why does contemplation of ethics seem to invite philosophical inquiry? What is at stake in emphasizing the underdetermined nature of ethical life, as so many recent contributors do? What does it mean to portray the human as characterized by potentiality or possibility rather than actuality? What does it mean to claim that there is an excessiveness to the ethical demand such that it cannot be reduced to following prescriptive norms or rules? These are not only philosophical but more specifically ontological questions. Anthropologists have always found it important to justify what anthropology contributes to “big questions” about the category of the human. But these questions are being raised anew in current engagements with ethics, albeit in ways that do not simply dismiss or marginalize centuries of philosophical debate on the topic. The ontological implications of anthropology’s inquiries into the ethical thus constitute an important area for further thought. It is also worth asking about how ontological inquiry arising within the ethical turn relates to, or contests, scholarship in the “ontological turn” (see Holbraad & Pedersen 2017). What are the ethical entailments of particular ontological concerns? How do particular ontological premises configure moral and ethical life? Does ontology precede ethics or does ethics precede ontology? Are they equiprimordial and mutually entailing? Or can a given ontological framework give rise to multiple ethical and moral worlds, or vice versa? We leave these as frontier topics for a turn that only continues to gain momentum.

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