



Ethics / morality

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It is possible to argue that the anthropology of ethics has always been part of the discipline but also that it is a radically new and transformative venture. This entry explains why both are true. It describes how moral life has long been generally understood in anthropology, how this came to seem insufficient, and the ways that have been proposed recently for improvement. We review the main intellectual traditions that have inspired these new departures – virtue ethics, ordinary language philosophy, the later thought of Michel Foucault, phenomenology, and experimental moral psychology – and outline briefly emerging debates within the field.

Introduction

To understand the anthropology of ethics, and its place in the wider discipline, it helps to know that two apparently contradictory things are both true. It is true that the academic discipline of anthropology has been centrally concerned with morality or ethics (these words will be used here interchangeably) throughout its whole [history](#). It is also true that until the last couple of decades there was nothing that could reasonably be called the anthropology of ethics. Its advent has been felt to be such a discontinuity that we are routinely said to be experiencing an 'ethical turn', yet people also feel moved, equally routinely, to point out that anthropologists have been writing about morality all along; and they are indeed correct in saying this. So what exactly is new?

Partial engagements: Durkheimian, Boasian, and Marxist

Influential early anthropologists with otherwise widely different approaches, such as Westermarck (1906-8, 1932) and Marett (1902, 1931), put the study of the evolution and variation of morality in different societies at the centre of their work. But the view that most profoundly influenced anthropology was that of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who proposed the replacement of 'speculative' moral philosophy with a positivist [science](#) of 'moral facts'. For Durkheim, the social changes brought about by modernization were so rapid and far-reaching as to produce unprecedented dislocation and the potential for discord and disorder. A science of social life was necessary to inform state policy in order to restore social solidarity. Early in his career, Durkheim thought that the newly complex division of [labour](#) might itself be the basis of a new form of social order (1933 [1893]), but he later concluded that modern societies would need, in

addition, to incorporate updated, rationally designed versions of the religious institutions that had been the basis of consensus and solidarity in pre-modern societies. His monumental *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1995 [1912]) was to provide the basis for the design of a religion for modernity, being an analysis of the religious foundations of social order in what he supposed to be the earliest and most primitive societies. What was required, Durkheim argued, was for the rules of good behaviour, including those variously relevant for people in different walks of life, to be rendered sacred: endowed with a kind of inviolable authority so that people would follow them willingly. For this to happen they must be associated with the ultimate Good, that in virtue of which all human flourishing is possible. In the past, that Good had been misrecognised as a supernatural reality, or God. It is in fact not supernatural, although it is super-organic, being nothing other than society itself. It is in ritual, Durkheim argued, that people enjoy their most direct experience of the reality of society as a thing greater than the sum of its parts, and it is there too that specific [values](#), ideas, and rules are endowed with society's authority. Under modern conditions, the state would need to institute rituals and design a [secular](#) religion so that the rules of conduct necessary to maintain harmony and solidarity come to be widely embraced and voluntarily followed. Sociologists must therefore replace not only philosophers but also priests, and serve the state by ensuring that the institutions of modern societies are matched by the correct values and rules, and that these are inculcated through the education system as well as in its collective civic life (1957 [1937], 1961 [1925]).

As Durkheim himself observed (1953 [1906]), his basic conception of morality in many ways closely paralleled the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant's account of the moral law, but it differed not only in being fully secularised, with society (in practice, the state) occupying the role of divine legislator, but also in being naturalised and mechanical. What for Kant was a profound philosophical problem about the relation between the human being as part of the natural world, subject to cause and effect, and that same being as a free and rational subject, is transformed for Durkheim into a crucially different conception of the 'double existence' of mankind: the individual, subject to ungovernable and egoistic biologically-driven desires, becomes capable of meaningful and satisfied life only insofar as he or she is incorporated into a well-functioning society. 'Freedom' is a matter merely of how willingly people do what society anyway requires.

Thus 'morality' was absolutely central to Durkheim's conception of society, and on his account to describe a society would necessarily involve describing its shared moral rules and values. Indeed, for Durkheim, the social just is the moral (which is to say the sacred) as opposed to the individual and biological. But if this makes morality central, the cost of this particular way of doing so, it could be argued, is a strikingly streamlined and impoverished conception of ethical life. Gone is any philosophical perplexity (as in Kant) about human freedom or about what might be a good life, in light of our nature and limitations or our place in the cosmos. Gone equally (or at best, reduced to mechanical 'forces' acting on the individual) are all the paradoxes and tragic conflicts involved in what T. S. Eliot has one of his characters describe as 'the endless

struggle to think well of ourselves' (1969: 402). It is a conception of ethical life as much without tragedy and conflict as it is without sainthood and striving. Morality is that mechanical process whereby individuals become a functioning 'part' of society.

The anthropology influenced by Durkheim's ideas, which is to say to some degree most anthropology, especially in Europe, through the twentieth century, thus conceived of morality as consisting of the socially-sanctioned rules of conduct that tamed individual desires in the service of society. And the central problem (see, for example, the essays in Fortes 1987), in addition to showing how rule-governed behaviour functioned in an integrated system, was to explain the mechanisms by which people are brought to follow these rules: how do customary rules and roles become compelling for the individual?

In American anthropology, where Durkheim's influence was less powerful, the Boasian conception of bounded cultures, each with its own distinctive values and modal personalities, resulted in a remarkably similar treatment of morality as the approved ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are taken for granted and habitual in each culture (Benedict 1934). The problem, strictly comparable to Fortes's though in a less mechanical idiom, was how processes of 'enculturation' ensured that individuals came to embody the values of their culture. Here the internal consistency, distinctiveness, and autonomy of individual cultures replace social integration and solidarity as the functional goods that morality serves, but the flattening of ethical life it implies is remarkably similar.

Marxist anthropologists introduced a couple of minor variations in the general approach. For some, since what Durkheimians called social solidarity is always in fact achieved in the interests of a dominant class, the problem was to explain how subordinated groups (such as young men in a gerontocracy) were induced to follow kinship and other 'moral' rules that were fundamentally against their interests. How was the dominant ideology inculcated (e.g. Meillassoux 1981; Bloch 1989)? For others, the focus should be on the limits to such ideologies: when exploited groups engage in violent rebellion or quiet everyday [resistance](#), they enact values that are contrary to the dominant ideology. The anthropologist's task here was to give articulate [voice](#) to this popular 'moral economy', which not coincidentally tended to coincide with the anthropologist's own [egalitarian](#) and anti-capitalist views (e.g. Scott 1976; Taussig 1980). In both these variants, morality functions as an idiom for the tactical expression of class interest, and thus as in Durkheimian and Boasian approaches, it remains fundamentally a matter of the collective representations and rules that define and enforce group membership, whether of a whole society or of a specific class.

The limitations of these general views of ethical life did not prevent anthropologists from giving rich and insightful descriptions of the morality, as they conceived it, of diverse societies. Studies of kinship explicated the complementary rights and duties of different kinship roles, and how these are reinforced in rituals such as initiations, marriage, and ancestor worship. Studies of economic life showed how cooperation is achieved and how competition is regulated, by shared norms and values. More darkly,

accusations of witchcraft, and [divination](#) and other methods of identifying malefactors, were shown to enforce moral values and mediate structural conflicts of interest. And all these studies, along with studies of political and religious life, showed how common values as well as structural principles cut across and integrated these never-actually-separate domains of life. In addition, within the terms set by this understanding of morality as collectively shared values, habits, and rules in relation to social structure, anthropologists achieved some notably sophisticated and original insights, including Leach's ideas about how conflicting complexes of values might be dynamically related (1954), Fortes's comparison of ideas of Fate and Justice in both scriptural and oral religions (1959), and Gluckman's suggestion that the social dynamics of moral life can be mapped by describing the processes involved in the allocation of responsibility (1972).

The sense that all this, while valuable in its own terms, simply bypassed much of what is most important about the ethical dimension of human life, was never far from the surface. Might it be possible to broaden the range of what was included under 'morality' to include more than the following of obligatory rules? How do we understand what happens when people doubt or question the dominant values of their social milieu? And what about when they face irreconcilable conflicts of values, or aspire to alternative ideals and values, or respond to what they take to be ethical demands than run contrary to accepted rules and values? Can people's sense of responsibility and freedom in relation to their own character and conduct really be written off, with a causal story about how, generally speaking, they come to do what society (or their culture or their class) requires of them? Could not anthropologists' knowledge of the diversity of forms of moral life contribute something to debates among philosophers and others about how to understand ethics?

So punctuating the history of anthropology in the twentieth century, we find calls, sometimes by anthropologists, more often by philosophers, and on one memorable occasion by a husband-and-wife team of philosopher and anthropologist, for a more reflective focus on ethics in anthropological thought and, as part of this, a dialogue with moral philosophy (e.g. Westermarck 1932; Firth 1951, 1953; Kluckhohn 1951; Macbeath 1952; Brandt 1954; Read 1955; Ladd 1957; von Fürer-Haimendorf 1967; Vogt & Albert 1967; Edel & Edel 1968; Mayer 1981; Evens 1982; Wolfram 1982; Pocock 1986, 1988; Moody-Adams 1997; Cook 1999). But none of these various initiatives and proposals generated much of a response. No sustained debates developed within anthropology, so there was no conceptual innovation or argument that could attract much attention from other disciplines. It remained the case that when philosophers mentioned anthropology at all, it was merely as the [professional](#) exponents of cultural relativism, which meant of course that there was no substantive conversation to be had.

New departures: The anthropology of ethics

Around the turn of the millennium, a newly sustained interest in ethics began to be evident in anthropology: one that was liberated by a broadening of scope well beyond problems of social control and

enculturation, and by a loosening of the commitment to cultural relativism that enabled a more rounded and productive engagement with moral philosophy. A few [ethnographies](#) and collections of essays indicated a growing interest (e.g. Parish 1994; Laidlaw 1995; Howell 1997, Briggs 1998). Then, three programmatic essays written independently of each other (Lambek 2000; Faubion 2001b; Laidlaw 2002) made overlapping cases for anthropologists to take the problem of understanding ethical life much more seriously, and each surveyed some intellectual resources they suggested might be drawn upon to help with this. For reasons that will surely not be fully understood until we have rather more hindsight (inevitably, the suggestion has already been made that it is a facet of '[neoliberalism](#)', but then since scarcely anything has *not* been explained that way by someone recently, this is hardly significant), these suggestions seem to have struck a chord, or at any rate shortly afterwards workshops and symposia began to be held on the subject (for example, those published as Barker 2007; Corsín Jimenez 2007; Brown & Milgram 2009; Heintz 2009; Sykes 2009; Lambek 2010; Pandian & Ali 2010), what are now classic monographs began to appear (e.g. Robbins 2004; Mahmood 2005; Hirschkind 2006), as did synoptic accounts and readers aiming to introduce students to the emerging field (Zigon 2008; Faubion 2011; Fassin 2012; Fassin & Lézé 2014; Laidlaw 2014; Lambek *et al.* 2016).

Surveying all this and the subsequent literature, which has continued to grow at a still gathering pace, it is possible to identify two salient features: first, a range of work that engages systematically with intellectual traditions, many in other disciplines, where there has been a sustained engagement with ethics, in an effort to develop a conceptual vocabulary for anthropology and to advance a general understanding of the nature of ethical life; and second, a series of emerging debates taking place more or less within anthropology, on topics ranging from very general theoretical matters to substantive controversies about ethical change in specific societies, as well as a series of established topics of anthropological research that have been materially enriched by being subject to 'the ethical turn'.

Under the first of those two headings, the main philosophical orientations or disciplinary sources anthropologists of ethics have explored are: virtue ethics, ordinary language philosophy, and Michel Foucault's 'genealogy of ethics', and, to a lesser extent and more recently, [phenomenology](#) and experimental psychology.

Intellectual traditions

a. Virtue ethics

In the middle of the twentieth century, two schools of thought dominated Anglophone moral philosophy: consequentialism (primarily utilitarianism), according to which courses of action are judged by calculating their relative effects (e.g. on aggregate happiness or well-being), and deontology (predominantly Kantian), which is concerned with identifying the duties and obligations necessarily pertaining to a (rational) moral

agent. Both these traditions are largely abstract, deductive, normative, and [ahistorical](#), so establishing dialogue between either and anthropology would encounter obvious difficulties. But the most significant development in moral philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century, usually seen as beginning with Anscombe (1958), was a reaction against just these features of those traditions. What became known as 'virtue ethics' emphasises the careful description of linguistic categories, especially those describing aspects of character, conduct, and social [relations](#), and therefore contextually sensitive interpretive descriptions of exactly the kind referred to by Clifford Geertz, in his prescription for interpretive anthropology, as 'thick description' (1973). For virtue ethicists, the central task is the explication of the virtues and vices that are central to the ability to thrive and flourish within a socially- and historically-located form of ethical life, with the supposed fact-value dichotomy being overcome by the fact that these concepts of good and bad conduct and character are inextricably both descriptive and evaluative. The virtue ethics revival involved a conscious recuperation of a good deal of the form, and not a little of the content, of the moral philosophy of the classical world, with Aristotle being a particularly pervasive influence. And exponents have frequently called for moral philosophy to proceed on an [ethnographic](#) or anthropological (or historical or sociological) basis. Unquestionably the philosopher writing in this tradition who has had the widest direct influence on anthropologists has been Alasdair MacIntyre, whose seminal and widely-read *After Virtue* (1981) directly inspired Talal Asad's (1986) prescription for an anthropology of [Islam](#), which in turn has been the framework in which Saba Mahmood (2005), Charles Hirschkind (2006), and others have written ethnographies of ethical (or 'piety') movements in Islam that have transformed the anthropological study of that religion. Anand Pandian's ethnography of the Piramalai Kallar caste in south India (2008, 2009), which also takes the form of an explication of virtues and moral reasoning and is in some ways indebted to MacIntyre, makes in addition a persuasive argument for rejecting some of the more crudely normative elements of MacIntyre's philosophy, accepted by these other authors, in particular the implicitly authoritarian assertion that only a tradition that is internally consistent and coherently integrated, and where orthodoxy is effectively enforced, can provide a sustainable framework for ethical life (on this, see Laidlaw 2014: Chs 2 and 4). Also influenced by MacIntyre, but more extensively drawing directly on Aristotle, Michael Lambek (2002, 2008) and Cheryl Mattingly (2012, 2014) have carefully worked out and exemplified virtue-ethical analytical methods for anthropology. Virtue ethics remains a rich and developing field, and is much more diverse than anthropological engagements have yet fully reckoned with; there has been little engagement with the important work of Martha Nussbaum (1986, 1994), Christine Swanton (2003, 2015), Charles Taylor (1989, 2014), and others. My own work has proceeded in part through an engagement with various works by Bernard Williams (e.g. 1985, 1993), and increasingly virtue ethics is developing in a self-consciously interdisciplinary direction, in which awareness of cultural diversity and the theoretical challenges this represents call directly for productive dialogue with anthropology (e.g. Snow 2015; Annas, Narvaez & Snow 2016).

b. Ordinary language philosophy

Overlapping with the virtue ethics revival is the school of thought known as 'ordinary language philosophy' (both were the work initially of disciples of the Cambridge philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, and both derived in part from his later teachings). This philosophical tradition had long been influential in anthropology, both from anthropologists' readings of Wittgenstein and as mediated especially through the writings of J. L. Austin, Gilbert Ryle, and others, in the so-called 'interpretive turn' in general and specifically in manifold uses of the idea of performativity. Indirectly, through Clifford Geertz (1973, 1983), the influence of Wittgenstein's later thought has been very wide indeed, even if not all anthropologists have been impressed (see especially Gellner 1959, 1998). Two authors in particular have recently championed the importance of ordinary language philosophy specifically for the anthropology of ethics, and their proposals for 'ordinary ethics' have attracted a good deal of interest and comment. For Michael Lambek (2010, 2015b) and for Veena Das (2010, 2012, 2015), following Wittgenstein and Austin and also later interpreters such as Cora Diamond and Stanley Cavell, it is impossible to separate action from the concepts that structure its intentional content, which means that even apparently unthinking or habitual conduct is subject to criteria and embodies ethical judgement. They conclude accordingly that ethics is immanent in human action as such. Further, Das in particular insists that while the ethical is therefore properly to be located in the ordinary or everyday, we should be intensely suspicious of all claims to represent any extraordinary or transcendent 'good', whether made by individuals or religious or state institutions or in the name of formalised, aspirational ethical projects: these are emphatically not where the ethical is to be sought. Many have found these arguments persuasive and ethnographically productive (e.g. Jackson 2013; Stafford 2013; Singh 2015). Debate on the position has focused on two main sets of questions: just what it means to say that the ethical is 'immanent' in all human action, and whether this risks once again collapsing ethics into 'the social' (on this see Lempert 2013; Lempert 2014; Laidlaw 2014b; Zigon 2014; Lambek 2015a; Lempert 2015); and whether it unhelpfully treats the categories of the ordinary and extraordinary normatively rather than ethnographically, and so forecloses prematurely on what it makes sense to include within the ethical, by assuming it must contain only phenomena of which one approves (Clarke 2014; Venkatesan 2015; Robbins 2016; Laidlaw 2017).

c. Michel Foucault

A third formative source of ideas in the development of the anthropology of ethics has been the later writings of Michel Foucault: the project he referred to as his 'genealogy of ethics'. This project shows both continuities and discontinuities from his earlier and better-known studies of asylums, clinics, and prisons. In his genealogy of ethics, Foucault continues and extends his influential rethinking of the concept of power, pursued in those earlier studies, but now encompassing an equally radical rethinking of that of freedom, such that these two concepts are not defined negatively as what the other excludes, and such that freedom emerges as a central term in the analysis of how subjects are constituted in diverse historical and social contexts. Power is a pervasive aspect of human relations not in spite of the fact that, but only

because, human subjects are free (Foucault 1982). They have the capacity to reflect, to stand back from their own conduct and constitute it as an object of knowledge, and to act so as to change themselves; and this reflective freedom is the basis of ethics.

Substantively, Foucault seeks to trace the genealogy of what he calls 'the desiring subject': how did it come to be that in the modern West people think of themselves as defined by their desires, such that the modern concept of 'sexuality' seems to reveal one's inner nature and destiny? To tell this story properly requires beginning from a form of thought and practice constituted altogether differently. The ethical life of classical Athens, Foucault seeks to show, was not yet based as is the modern complex on what he calls 'a hermeneutics of desire'. Instead, it was 'an ethics of existence'. What he means by this is that [citizens](#) of classical Athens were invited, in the dominant ethical discourses of their time, not to *discover* who and what they were by uncovering their hidden desires – perhaps with the aid of therapists, priests, or psychiatrists, as we are invited to do – but instead consciously to *fashion* themselves, and to do so, in particular, with regard to their fitness to exercise both freedom and power in relation to others. In the two last published volumes of his *History of Sexuality* (1986, 1988), and in a number of essays, interviews, and posthumously published lectures (1980, 1997, 2005, 2010, 2011), Foucault sets out to describe this radically different form of ethical thought and practice, and the millennium-long process whereby it was replaced by the hermeneutics of desire, from which our own taken-for-granted assumptions – including those of Foucault's Marxist and Freudian contemporaries who fancied themselves radicals – derive.

Of course, Foucault's diagnosis of the infirmities of our political discourse and the sources of our identity are a challenging provocation for anthropologists, as they overturn many of the accepted understandings widely shared in modern societies. But these writings also provide a more focused impetus to the anthropology of ethics, because in the course of pursuing these arguments, Foucault develops a number of conceptual resources for the ethnographic and comparative analysis of forms of ethical life, including a distinction between forms of moral life dominated by rules and codes, and those organised around more optative projects of ethical self-fashioning, and a formal scheme for making comparisons among the latter.

The conceptual and analytic resources Foucault developed in his genealogy of ethics (for extended commentary see Faubion 2011 and Laidlaw 2014) have been productively used by anthropologists in a range of ethnographic studies (e.g. Laidlaw 1995; Rabinow 1996; Faubion 2001; Robbins 2004; Mahmood 2005; Cook 2010; Dave 2012). Perhaps the most widely shared reservation among anthropologists about Foucault's analytics of ethics concerns the extent to which it relies on the notion of freedom. Despite the fact that the Foucauldian concept of freedom is necessarily limited, and socially and historically variable, anthropologists are made 'nervous' and 'uneasy' because it plays such a prominent part in what they tend to call 'Western common sense' (for sophisticated expressions of these concerns see Robbins 2007 and Keane 2014) and therefore use of the notion analytically might be ethnocentric. My own view is that the real danger of ethnocentrism here lies not in taking for granted a supposedly Western common sense about

freedom, since there is in fact no such agreement, but rather in allowing the fiercely *contested* place of the idea of freedom in Western political debate to give rise to an intellectual taboo, preventing both the acknowledgement of the ethnographic prevalence of concepts of freedom well beyond the modern West and serious analytical engagement with the question of the place of freedom in ethical life.

d. Phenomenology

Anthropologists have been influenced by philosophers who fall under the designation '[phenomenological](#)' for a very long time indeed: Lévi-Strauss's great book *The Savage Mind* (1966 [1962]) was dedicated to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, after all. The category 'phenomenology' covers a wide range of thinkers, who have in common only that they take as their subject matter structures of experience and consciousness. Those who identify themselves as part of this tradition typically qualify the designation in one of a number of overlapping ways (hermeneutic, existentialist, dialectical, or transcendental phenomenology, etc.) and those identified as its major thinkers (variously Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Scheler, Sartre, Levinas, Schutz, Arendt, Dilthey, Garfinkel, Derrida – some even include James and Dewey) adopted a wide range of conflicting positions. Nevertheless, there are those who have argued in recent decades that there is enough of common substance in phenomenology to provide the basis for a distinctive project of 'phenomenological anthropology' (e.g. Jackson 1996; Desjarlais & Throop 2011). A common objection, of course, is that so much of what phenomenological thinkers say is couched in universal and culture-free terms and is concerned with ostensibly universal dimensions of human experience, and although some proponents of 'cultural phenomenology' have attempted to link questions of selfhood and experience to specific social and cultural settings (e.g. Csordas 1999), the increasingly dominant tendency has been to comment on what are seen as existential challenges of human being as such, or in the context of very generally conceived global circumstances (Weiner 2001; Jackson 2005, 2013; Ingold 2011, 2013).

Unsurprisingly, some anthropologists of this persuasion have proposed that phenomenology also provides the basis for a distinctive approach to the anthropology of ethics (Kleinman 2006; Zigon 2009, 2014; Jackson 2013; Throop 2010, 2012, 2016; see also Wentzer 2016). A difficulty here is that these anthropologists owe primary allegiance to different foundational phenomenological thinkers, and therefore divergent intellectual programmes, and these imply rather different trajectories for the anthropological study of ethics. Thus, while Kleinman's phenomenology is mediated through American pragmatism, and Jackson draws most concertedly on Merleau-Ponty, Zigon by contrast speaks up in particular for 'those of us who take Heidegger seriously' (2009) and his 'theory of moral breakdown' (2008) is presented as being directly derived from Heidegger. Given these differences, calls for a specifically phenomenological approach to morality perhaps sometimes express a general preference for a certain theoretical vocabulary in anthropology, more than a commitment to specific ideas or concepts in relation to ethics. And given how differently ethics figures in the writings of major phenomenological thinkers – while for some it is a central concern, Heidegger was, as it seems to me, almost as much a stranger to ethics in thought as in his life –

some considerable conceptual work would be required to reconcile divergent starting points into a unified research programme, if the prospect of a distinctive, comprehensively phenomenological anthropology of ethics is to be realised. But even if that is not to come to pass, phenomenological ideas and concepts are already being productively deployed, as variously dominant or subsidiary conceptual components, in ethnographies of ethical life of otherwise quite divergent character (e.g. Parish 1994; Lester 2005; Marsden 2005; Prasad 2007; Mattingly 2014; Throop 2010; Simon 2014; Schielke 2015; Keane 2016).

e. Experimental psychology

A different kind of challenge is presented by the burgeoning research carried out by experimental psychologists in recent years on how people in varied situations make moral judgements and decisions, and the role especially of emotions in shaping those decisions (for a thoughtful survey, see Appiah 2008). Many of the methodological assumptions made in that research strike most anthropologists as unrealistic; it also often makes decidedly parochial assumptions about what counts as 'morality'; and genuinely cross-cultural research is extremely difficult, and therefore rare. But the difficulties are not insuperable, as demonstrated by pioneering research using experimental methods by anthropologists Rita Astuti and Maurice Bloch (2015). For several years, Richard Shweder and others have been developing a synthesis of anthropological and psychological research, which they refer to as 'cultural psychology' (1991), and this has included a distinctive approach to the question of cultural variation in moral reasoning. In a challenge to the most influential psychological accounts of moral development (e.g. Kohlberg 1981; Turiel 1983), which focused entirely on the supposedly universal moral principles of justice, emphasising autonomy and protection from harm, Shweder and his colleagues (Shweder *et al.* 1997) argue that there are three distinct areas of concern in moral reasoning – autonomy (which encompasses justice/harm), community, and divinity – and that these are balanced differently in more individualistic and more collectivist cultures. So far at least, this analysis has seemed to most anthropologists of ethics to be overly schematic, and not much other anthropological research has been guided by it (although see Cassaniti & Hickman 2014 for anthropological attempts to follow Shweder's lead). However, a modified form has been adopted by one of the most innovative psychologists of moral development writing today (Haidt 2013), and this work is formulated in such a way that it both invites and enables dialogue with anthropology. The intellectual basis for such cooperation has been greatly strengthened by Webb Keane's recent book, *Ethical Life* (2016), which achieves a critical synthesis of a wide range of psychological research with anthropological and historical perspectives. Perhaps the most salient and interesting challenge in all of this literature for the anthropology of ethics is the foundational role much of it implies, in ethical thought and practice, of emotions and sentiments. A serious engagement with this literature, and with the broad Smith/Humean tradition in moral philosophy that emphasises moral sentiments, might have the potential to enrich the anthropology of ethics while at the same time breathing new life into the anthropology of emotions.

Emerging debates

With intellectual resources drawn largely from these five broad and diverse sources, what briefly are the concepts, questions, and topics of debate anthropologists of ethics and morality are beginning to explore? Having realised that collective rules do not exhaust the ethical dimension of social life, they are exploring a range of other ways in which ethical thought is organised socially. More or less voluntary projects through which people work to fashion themselves and cultivate ethical qualities have been studied mostly in religious contexts (e.g. Lester 2005; Mahmood 2005; Marsden 2005; Eberhardt 2006; Hirschkind 2006; Cook 2010; Bender & Taves 2012; Fisher 2014; Cassaniti 2015), but also in fields as diverse as parenthood (Paxson 2004; Clarke 2009; Kuan 2015) and activism (Dave 2012; Heywood 2015a, 2015b; Lazar 2016). There is also a renewed interest in the concepts of value and [values](#) (Robbins 2012, 2013). And following a pioneering early paper by Caroline Humphrey (1997), there has been interest in the part played in ethical life by modelling one's conduct on a chosen 'exemplar' (who might be a known, [historical](#), or mythical individual), rather than, or in addition to, the following of moral rules (Højer & Bandak 2015; Robbins forthcoming). All of this has also prompted the appropriate corrective: the realization that when the specificity of rules as a mode of organising ethical life is recognised, elaborate attention to rules, when and where it occurs, becomes interesting in its own right (Dresch & Skoda 2012; Pirie & Scheele 2014; Dresch & Scheele 2015, especially Clarke 2015). Anthropologists have long found more rich and subtle resources for thinking about moral life in the writings of Marcel Mauss, Durkheim's nephew and sometime collaborator, than in Durkheim himself (see, for example, Carrithers *et al.* 1985). The stimulus of the new anthropology of ethics has, however, also prompted a creative and careful re-reading of Durkheim, with a view to finding insights in relation to ethical life quite other than those derived by mainstream anthropology through the twentieth century (e.g. Stavrianakis 2016).

Although it is occasionally suggested (in seminars and informal discussion) that the very category of ethics may be inapplicable in this or that part of the world (the usual candidates being Melanesia and Amazonia, and conditions of extreme poverty and exclusion), a sustained exposition of that position has yet to be attempted, and persuasive [ethnographic](#) accounts of ethical life in just such places and situations have been published (Robbins 2004; Londoño Sulkin 2012; Roberts 2016; see also Lear 2006, 2015). But if the ethnographic range of the anthropology of ethics is global, there is something of a special case, in terms of density, with China. The idea has gained some currency in popular discourse in China itself that in the wake of the catastrophes of Maoism and the lurching dislocations of the 'reform' era, the country might be enduring an especially profound 'moral crisis'. It is perhaps for this reason that a strikingly rich and varied ethnographic literature on aspects of moral life in China has appeared in the last few years, with emerging debate on what, if anything, a notion of civilizational moral crisis might mean, and in what ways, if any, it might apply (Liu 2002, 2009; Jankowiak 2004; Yan 2009a, 2009b, 2014, 2016; Oxford 2010; Zhang, Kleinman & Yu 2011; Kleinman 2011; Steinmüller 2013; Fisher 2014; Xu 2014; Kuan 2015).

So, the development of the anthropology of ethics has not seen the emergence of a new sub-discipline. It has instead constituted both a renewal (and in some cases rediscovery) of concerns with deep roots in the discipline, and a fairly radical re-thinking of the fundamentals of anthropological theory, in which perennial questions of human [agency](#) and social causation have been revisited in new ways. For instance, it has been a theme in the anthropology of ethics (see Laidlaw 2016) to pay attention to the specific modes and moods of people's personal striving, resisting the all-too-common reflex in much recent anthropology of reducing all such phenomena to mere expressions of [neoliberalism](#): some thought-provoking examples, strikingly different from each other, include Kuan (2015), Schielke (2015), Singh (2015), Cook (2016), and Marsden (2016). And of course, renewed interest in ethics in the discipline has profoundly inflected anthropological analysis and critique of the two most newly powerful discourses and sets of institutions and practices through which 'doing good' is organised in the contemporary world: [human rights](#) and [humanitarianism](#), respectively (see Bornstein 2003, 2012; Englund 2006; Ticktin 2006; Bornstein & Redfield 2011; Elisha 2011; Fassin 2012; Keane 2016: 248-59). Other topics that have proven amenable to new and interesting forms of anthropological analysis, once approached in part as an aspect of the ethical dimension of social life, include happiness (Kavedžua & Walker 2016), the giving and receiving of favours (Henig & Makovicky 2017), and the varied practices and phenomena of detachment (Candea *et al.* 2015). A further development to note, however, lies outside anthropology itself, in highly encouraging signs of considerably more informed and considered use of anthropological writings than heretofore in discussions of morality in other disciplines, including in psychology (e.g. Haidt 2013), moral philosophy (Lear 2006, 2015; Lillehammer 2014), and theology (Banner 2014). Finally, the rich potential for productive interdisciplinary conversation is illustrated by recently published symposia, on ethical conversations conducted across cultural borders (Mair & Evans 2016) and on the fundamental sources and forms of ethical life (Mattingly *et al.* 2017).

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