



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The ethical turn in anthropology Promises and uncertainties

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Do human beings act morally because they obey socially defined rules and norms as the result of a routine of inculcated behaviors, or an embodied fear of sanction, or perhaps both? Conversely, do they act morally because they decide to do so as a consequence of a rational evaluation, or transformative endeavor, or inseparably both? In other words, do they follow a Kantian ethics of duty or an Aristotelian ethics of virtue? This quandary has recently shifted from the philosophical debate to the anthropological realm. The publication of James Laidlaw's article "For an anthropology of ethics and freedom" (2002) has been a landmark in that regard. The argument went as follows. With few exceptions, such as Malinowski's *Crime and custom*, ethics has been largely ignored by anthropologists. A major cause was the influence of Durkheim's deterministic vision of the moral fact. An alternative proposition can be formulated on the basis of the writings of Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and Bernard Williams. According to this new paradigm, human beings are free ethical subjects even when they appear to follow a moral code imposed by their group or religion. A telling illustration concerns Jain ascetic practices among renouncers as well as lay people, who willingly exercise demanding practices of confession and penance that they have been taught to respect. *The subject of virtue* (Laidlaw 2014) is a systematic endeavor to extend this pioneering work by developing its theoretical side via a scrupulous philosophical discussion rather than exploring more in depth the empirical material briefly sketched in the initial article.



It has often been repeated that morality and ethics have long been neglected by anthropologists, to which it has sometimes been replied that anthropologists have in fact never ceased to study mores and norms (Fassin 2013). Be that as it may, this argument can no longer be defended because the ethnography of moralities (Howell 1997) and the anthropology of ethics (Faubion 2011) have become one of the fastest-growing fields within the discipline (Fassin 2012). The most interesting recent evolution of this flourishing domain is what can be called the ethical turn, in which Laidlaw played an important role at the beginning of the 2000s. Until then, most studies on morality and ethics adopted more or less explicitly the so-called Durkheimian paradigm: ethnographic work consisted in the elucidation of a set of norms and values for a given group or society, a task initiated more than half a century ago by Kenneth Read (1955) among the Gahuku-Gama of Papua New Guinea and John Ladd (1957) among the Navajo in the United States. However, Durkheim himself had a more sophisticated and somewhat ambiguous theory than what is often simplified by commentators, including Laidlaw (2014: 21), who writes that the French sociologist “ended up with a conception of morality as thorough law-like as Kant’s, but with obedience to the law naturalized into the smooth functioning of a well-engineered mechanical system,” thus ignoring what Durkheim ([1924] 2010: 17) clearly asserts: “In opposition to Kant, we shall show that the notion of duty does not exhaust the concept of morality,” since “to become the agents of an act it must interest our sensibility to a certain extent and appear to us, in some way, desirable.” Such an act “cannot be accomplished without effort and self-constraint” and “is not achieved without difficulty and inner-conflict”—a language not so far removed from the contemporary anthropology of ethics. A more attentive reading of the author of *The division of labor in society* would therefore account for his conception as not entirely foreign to what Foucault later called “the conduct of conduct.” But this is definitely not the way Durkheim was read by his followers and his critics.

With the ethical turn, a remarkable convergence occurred from various horizons and traditions of the anthropological world in an approach focused on the moral subjects and their subjectivities. Not only was the shift from the collective to the individual but also from the social to the experiential. The first anthropologist to contest the symbolic understanding of religion dominant at the time was Talal Asad (1993), who insisted on the importance of physical discipline in medieval ascetic practices and its role in the formation of the Christian self, an analysis inspired by Foucault’s late writings. This endeavor was pursued by his students, Saba Mahmood (2005) on the politics of piety and Charles Hirschkind (2006) on the ethics of listening, both working among Egyptian Muslims. A distinct path was followed by Veena Das (2006) in India and Michael Lambek (2010) in Madagascar, who developed parallel inquiries into ethics in everyday life on the basis of ordinary language philosophy, Wittgenstein for the former, Austin for the latter, both acknowledging Stanley Cavell’s intellectual imprint. Other authors were more sensitive to moral sentiments, such as Jason Throop (2010), who proposed a phenomenological approach of suffering in Micronesia; moral breakdowns, such as Jarrett Zigon (2011), who explored experiences of being-in-the-world in Russia through Heidegger; or even moral reasoning, such as Karen Sykes (2009), who mobilized Hume to interpret the logics of the gift in New Ireland. Indeed, there

is a plethora of conceptual frameworks and theoretical references, and it is in this rapidly changing landscape that Laidlaw's work is inscribed. The two distinctive traits of his analytical contribution are clearly indicated in the title and subtitle of his book: his ethics is concerned with virtue and freedom. Both words have been relatively unusual in anthropology until recently owing to the ethnocentric meanings anthropologists would suspect them of hiding, and therefore deserve close examination.

Since Elizabeth Anscombe's seminal paper (1958) criticizing both Kant's "law conception of ethics" and Sidgwick's "consequentialism," as she coins it, Aristotle's ethics of virtue has made a remarkable comeback in moral philosophy, especially after the publication of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After virtue* (1981), to which Laidlaw dedicates an entire chapter that is illuminating as well as critical. This book has actually become the cornerstone of the anthropology of ethics, but those who use it tend to isolate and almost reify the proposed theory of virtue as an "internal good" which results from practice itself, opposed to "external goods" that are the outcomes of practice, such as money, power, and prestige. Yet this theory cannot be separated from its historical and political dimensions in MacIntyre's work. First, according to him, the necessity of reinventing virtue is the consequence of the loss of ethics, starting with the Enlightenment and culminating in the contemporary world, which implies that virtue ethics is definitely a normative project attempting to restore a previous state of the world. Second, for him, the moral philosophy to be promoted is indissociable from a political philosophy, which is a condemnation of both liberal democracy and capitalist ideology, with the consequence that virtue means going back to a former ethical stage when political communities were also moral communities defined by a tradition, such as was the case in heroic Antiquity or in medieval Christianity. It is at the expense of this dual feature, historical and political—but also normative and even reactionary in a literal sense since "modernity is a calamity for which a viable (indeed the only) remedy is to undo Enlightenment by returning to religious authority," in Laidlaw's words (2014: 68)—that anthropologists can isolate virtues when they study, for instance, South African hunter-gatherers, as Thomas Widlok (2004) does scrupulously, without imposing an ethnocentric view, that is, by combining an understanding of the cultural singularity of their concrete acts and a claim to a certain universality of the intrinsic way in which they are realized. Virtues do not depend on a specific morality but on a particular form of engagement in practices.

From this perspective, freedom is not far from virtue. Recognizing the latter as autonomous from any given morality means affirming freedom against the imposition of rules and norms in the name of a culturally defined good or duty. An interesting distinction is established here between freedom and a concept that has been extraordinarily successful in the social sciences: agency. This concept, as developed in particular by Anthony Giddens (1986), has been inseparable from that of structure, being used to contrast and nuance it: agency corresponds to the margin of liberty individuals dispose of, even when structures overwhelmingly tend to reproduce the unequal social order. The problem is that agency essentially reflects the view of the observers, who recognize its existence only when practices meet their expectations of openly manifested resistance. As

Laidlaw (2014: 6) expresses it, “this concept of agency differs from any everyday notion of freedom in smuggling analysts’ views of what people ought to do with their freedom—the pursuit of their ‘real interests’—into its very definition.” To justify this distinction, he refers to Foucault’s late writings, starting with the concept of subjectivation, where, however, he commits the frequent error of presenting it as a translation of “assujettissement” (2014: 101). In fact, although Foucault is not perfectly consistent in his uses of these words, he distinguishes “assujettissement” in the sense of subjection from “subjectivation” in the sense of ... subjectivation, the former indicating the submission to power and the latter referring to the constitution of identities, the knowledge of oneself, and, in *L’Herméneutique du sujet* (2001: 317) in particular, increasingly to “an art of life” and “an exercise of the self on the self.” It is in this government of the self, such as it is ideally developed in Ancient Greece, that Foucault finds a form of freedom that escapes its modern definition in terms of right: it is, rather, a practice. In that regard, it is surprising to see Laidlaw (2014: 142–49) distracted from his thesis by a long—and perhaps superfluous—digression on Quentin Skinner’s and Isaiah Berlin’s works on the classical concept of liberty, respectively, in the pre-liberal and liberal Western world.

This understanding of ethics as virtue and freedom, as proposed by Laidlaw and—with a certain variety of words and concepts—by several others, has opened an important field of research and substantially renewed the domain of moral anthropology. I would like, however, to briefly suggest a series of issues that might be worth taking into account by those pursuing such an inquiry into ethics and morality.

First, students of ethics and morality, whether they consider the two concepts as interchangeable or radically different, tend to give them an autonomous existence, often seeming to forget that, in the same way as the political or the aesthetic, they are co-constructions of the observer and the observed, of the anthropologists and their informants. It is a major difference between the work of philosophers or psychologists, who can artificially isolate moral judgments or ethical dilemmas for the purpose of their conceptual experiments, such as in the famous example of the trolley, and social scientists, who know that in their fieldwork moral and ethical acts or thoughts are never “pure,” so to speak. The contribution of the anthropologist to this co-construction is perfectly legitimate, on condition not to forget that it is an intellectual operation. Obviously, it is all the more relevant that it concerns religion, prayer, ascetic practices, in other words situations where subjects are themselves involved in conscious moral or ethical exercises. It should therefore be no surprise that most ethnographic studies have this religious background and even, in Laidlaw’s case, extreme examples such as the renunciation to the world. However, in more common contexts of everyday life, isolating the moral and the ethical is empirically more problematic, and there might be a heuristic benefit in accepting this complexity and indeterminacy of human action.

Second, the shift from Kant to Aristotle, and from duty to virtue, leaves an orphan in the foundational triptych of moral philosophy: consequentialist ethics, which precisely avoids the essentialization of morality by relating it to the broader effects produced by human action. In other words, beside or beyond Durkheim and Foucault, there might still be a space for Weber and his important distinction



between the ethics of conviction, which subordinates means to ends, and the ethics of responsibility, which proposes a compromise between them. In other words, the question is whether it is possible to limit the investigation of morality to the alternative between the respect of rules and the realization of the self, or whether it is necessary to include the evaluation of the consequences of what one does or does not do. Again, empirical research shows that most of the time subjects simultaneously take into account moral norms, practice ethical reflection, and consider the consequences of their acts.

Third, both the autonomization of morality and the neglect of consequentialism contribute to a form of depoliticization. Actually, Foucault himself became aware that the argument according to which one should govern oneself in order to govern others, and therefore the thesis that politics could merely derive from ethics, were not entirely satisfactory. This is how one can interpret his last two series of lectures on “The government of the self and the government of others” and “The courage of truth”: as a way to reconcile ethics and politics, in particular through the exercise of parrhesia, which consists in speaking the truth at whatever cost. Such an endeavor to reintroduce politics in relation to ethics can be regarded as a manner to escape the ultimate impasse of MacIntyre’s radical rejection of the modern way of life and nostalgic call for a return to traditional moral communities.

Finally, little reflexive attention has been paid to the historical meaning of the recent ethical turn in anthropology. A significant evolution of contemporary society has been the banalization of moral discourse and moral sentiments in the public sphere, the insistence on suffering and trauma in the interpretation of a multiplicity of social issues, the focus on human rights and humanitarianism in international politics, as well as the invocation of ethics in a wide range of human activities, from finance or development to medicine and research, from the re-discovery of bodily practices of the self in religious and secular worlds to the social expectation of the subjects’ autonomy. That social scientists would adopt the same language and manifest the same concern is certainly not neutral. The critical examination of this parallel evolution of society and those who study it seems all the more necessary that the intellectual fathers, MacIntyre and Foucault, are a Marxist philosopher who increasingly put his Christian engagement at the heart of his theory and a Leftist thinker who gradually developed sympathies for liberal ideas, suggesting a certain interpenetration of theory and ideology. By echoing the language used by politicians, corporate groups, public relations strategists, and nongovernmental organizations, among others, social scientists contribute to produce and legitimize it, at the expense of potential alternative languages. This does not mean that they should renounce it, but simply that they should be aware of it and reflect on the implications of their way of describing and analyzing the world.

The subject of virtue is an important book. Although it is composed of chapters born from various projects, sometimes at the expense of a certain intellectual coherence, notably toward the end of the volume, and although it may sometimes prove to be too much of an academic discussion of philosophical texts, when one would have liked a more direct engagement with ethnographic material, it is a substantial contribution to the growing domain of the anthropology of ethics, not least because of the questions it raises and the debates it should provoke.

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