

Morality as a Cultural System?

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“Every evil the sight of which edifies a god is justified”: thus spoke
the primitive logic of feeling – and was it, indeed, only primitive?
Friedrich Nietzsche¹

There is currently a coalescence of interest in morality within anthropology. In this essay I recognize and outline this intellectual movement, but also engage it with a sense of uneasiness that originated after I accepted an invitation to participate in a conference session on “Moral Experience.” With respect to the timing and scope of this undertaking, was this a session like any other, where enterprising organizers come up with a theme that a group of colleagues can address from a variety of perspectives? Or, more significantly, is morality a topic whose number has come up, which is interpellating the intellectual history of the discipline and inviting sustained and systematic elaboration rather than occasional and sporadic analysis? Does the current move toward morality reflect a crisis of morals in contemporary society? Is it an intuition imbued with foreboding and urgency that there is a need to understand a strain in the moral fabric of our civilization? Is there something new and distinctive about this move toward morality among a certain set of anthropologists?

These contemporary authors do not hesitate to recognize the role of Emile Durkheim (1887/1993, 1906/1953, 1912/1995, 1920/1979, 1925/1961) in establishing the terms of debate about morality in the social sciences. While morality was central to Durkheim’s entire research program, in the early 20th century he was not the only social thinker to address the topic. Morality was, for example, also an explicit concern of the nowadays much less read R.R. Marett (1902, 1912, 1930, 1931, 1934), successor to E.B. Tylor in the anthropology chair at Oxford. It

is of some help to observe that in the era of contemporary ethnography following World War II, morality per se has appeared to emerge as an anthropological topic in cyclical fashion. A few studies appeared in the 1950s, including the theoretical work by Edel and Edel (1959) and a number of ethnographies such as Brandt (1954) on the Hopi, Read (1955) on the Gahuku-Gama, and Ladd (1957) on the Navajo, and later von Furer-Haimendorf (1967) on South Asia and Strathern (1968) in New Guinea. Another wave of interest came in the late 1970s and 1980s and included more explicitly conceptual approaches to morality as such in works by Bailey (1977), Mayer, (1981), Wolfram (1982), Hatch (1983), Reid (1984), Edwards (1985, 1987), Overing (1985), Parkin (1985), Pocock (1986), Kagan and Lamb (1987), Shweder, Maharaptra, and Miller (1987), Parry and Bloch (1989), White (1990). In a third wave picking up momentum from the mid-1990s to the present, an increasing number of studies have focused either on 1) *morality* (Parish 1994, Moore 1995, Brodwin 1996, Cook 1999, Howell 1999, Rydstrom 2002, Robbins 2004, 2007, Widlok 2004, Carrithers 2005, Barker 2007, Mahmood 2005, Kleinman 1999, 2006, Shoaps 2007, Zigon 2007, 2008, 2009, Keane 2008, Stasch 2008, Wikan 2008, Heintz 2009, Sykes 2009, Throop 2010, Elisha 2011); 2) *moral development* (Briggs 1998, Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2007, Csordas 2009); 3) *ethics* (Laidlaw 1995, 2001, Faubion 2001, 2010, Paxson 2004, Goodale 2006, Evens 2008, Londoño Sulkin 2005 Lambek 2007,2010, Hirschkind 2006; or 4) *bioethics* (Muller 1994, Kleinman 1995, Salter and Salter 2007, Gaines 2008, Turner 2009).

This current period entertains the reciprocal possibility of considering both the morality of anthropology and an anthropology of morality (and here we have to observe that earlier calls for an “action anthropology” were cast more in political than in moral terms). The debate early in the current period between Roy D’Andrade (1995) and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995)

engaged only the first of these concerns, that is, moral stance in the practice of anthropology. Their exchange was framed in terms of an apparent contradiction between scientific objectivity and political engagement, such that the anthropologist who espoused objectivity could be accused of being amoral while the engaged anthropologist could be accused of subjectivism. A more recent version of this debate between Didier Fassin (2008) and Wiktor Stoczkowski (2008) benefits in subtlety from an intellectual milieu that allows for a simultaneous consideration of the morality of anthropology and an anthropology of morality. It demands attention to how humans including ourselves as anthropologists can distinguish right and wrong, and recognizes that the values of ethical commitment may in some situations conflict with epistemological values that determine how anthropological knowledge is constructed.

Anthropological Styles of Thinking Morality

Most distinctive of this current period, however, is the shift between treating morality as a topic and the attempt to develop programmatic, coherent anthropological approaches to the moral domain. The movement was initiated by Signe Howell (1997) who, introducing her volume on the ethnography of moralities asks “to what extent one may delineate something called ‘morality’ from within the whole gamut of human endeavor, thought, and values, and whether there can be an anthropology of morality” (1997:2). This move invites reflection on whether morality can or should be conceived as a cultural system in the way Clifford Geertz conceived of religion and ideology. Does separating out morality as an analytical domain make our study more experience-near or more experience-distant? Does the idea of moral experience place appropriate emphasis on moral emotions such as guilt, righteous indignation, care, horror, and remorse? Are categorical distinctions in binary form including right/wrong, good/bad,

holy/evil, virtue/vice, nurturance/negligence, creation/destruction experientially versatile or static and culture bound? Addressing these questions can be facilitated by observing how the incipient anthropological study of morality has begun to take shape. In this light I want to sketch out in the most provisional of ways four emerging approaches.

One approach is being developed in the work of Didier Fassin (2008, Fassin and Rechtman 2009) under the rubric of “moral anthropology.” Fassin argues that morality should be treated as a social domain just as are religion, politics, or medicine, and in this respect he is closest to Geertz in addressing “morality as a cultural system.” From this standpoint the processes of interest are those of moral economy, a phrase originally used with respect to the moral valence of economic exchanges and the social contract in peasant communities but more recently used also with reference to social justice in globalizing societies (Thompson 1971, 1991, Powelson 1998, Calabrese 2005). This approach includes a reflexive stance toward morality accepted as a problematic responsibility to engage as well as to analyze moral dilemmas and realities.

Another approach is referred to by Joel Robbins (2004, 2007) as “anthropology of morality” and by Jarrett Zigon (2007, 2008) as “anthropology of moralities.” Robbins is concerned with the contrast between the routine reproduction of moral regimes in stable societies and the enforced freedom of moral choice in situations of value conflict produced by social change, whereas Zigon emphasizes the interpersonal level in which taken for granted moral life breaks down and must be restored by self-conscious ethical work. Working at a relatively more macro-level, Robbins has an implicit typology contrasting the moral comfort of social stability with the moral effervescence of social change, while Zigon describes a social process in which

moral comfort is disrupted by the liminality of ethical questioning and reinstated if that process is successful.

A third approach is evident in the work of Arthur Kleinman (1999, 2006) and Steven Parish (1994, 2008), and can be referred to as the analysis of “local moral worlds.” Here morality is a form of consciousness, the seat of which is the self embedded in the context of a collective moral sensibility. The processes of interest are those of moral experience on an intimate level, accessible through person-centered ethnography, in which persons struggle against suffering. By asking what on the surface are the simplest questions about what really matters and what is fundamentally at stake in human affairs, this approach directs our attention to the deepest levels of what it means to be human. The sense both of human values and the value of humanity makes it possible to imagine how the soul could become a demythologized concept for the human sciences.

A fourth approach, associated with the work of Michael Lambek (2008, 2010), James Laidlaw (2001, 2010), and James Faubion (2001, 2011), is an “anthropology of ethics.” Prominent in this approach is a return to Aristotle and an elaboration of Foucault, with a strong interest in engagement with philosophy, a keen sensitivity to language use, and a sometimes implicit sensibility for the relation of ethics and aesthetics in social life. The conceptual linchpin of this approach is the notion of human agency as it appears when ethics is considered on the one hand from the standpoint of practice theory with respect to actor, act, and virtue (as with Lambek), and on the other hand from the standpoint of systems theory that emphasizes ethical subject positions defined by ethical discourse within politico-semiotic fields and entered/exited by processes of autopoiesis (as with Faubion).

Provisional as they are, these sketches of a series of complementary and sometimes overlapping approaches suggest that a field of study is indeed taking shape. My impression of what lends it a distinctive tenor is that anthropologists are arriving at the study of morality from two distinct directions, one defined broadly by psychological and medical anthropology's concern with suffering and the other by the concern of social anthropology and the anthropology of religion with social order. The concern with suffering has affinities with the tradition of Marx in the critique of the social sources of human misery and with phenomenology in the attention to the experiential immediacy of that misery. The concern with social order has its roots in the tradition of Durkheim, where insofar as society can and must cohere, the obligation to maintain that coherence depends on conventions and institutions that establish and maintain solidarity. While in the first case the meaning of morality may be skewed toward responsibility of a moral actor and in the second toward obligation within a moral order, their convergence at the present moment is fertile, regardless of whether it is coincidental or indicative of a sense of moral crisis which is attracting attention from different quarters of the discipline.

Given this state of affairs, I return to my uneasiness about our current undertaking, specifically insofar as it appears poised to be more than interest in morality as a topic and aspires to be a kind of disciplinary subfield. If such a field has not existed until now, who do we think we are trying to invent something that self-consciously identifies itself with labels such as the anthropology of morality or moral anthropology? Such a move, if we are serious, means that we had better be prepared to confront and engage not only cultural relativism, which can be debated in a more or less theoretical and intellectually neutral manner, but also the far thornier issue of moral relativism. Cultural relativism, after all, offers the possibility of experience-near analysis through an act of intuitive engagement with alterity; moral relativism is not only experience-

distant but challenges the very integrity of experience. Cultural relativism is itself a moral stance that anthropologists like to think promotes tolerance; moral relativism is a challenge to the definition of morality that invites existential vertigo.² But there is an even bigger question on the immediate horizon – a larger elephant in the room of anthropological morality studies – and this is where we turn next.

The Problem of Evil

With the preceding concerns in mind, in what follows I take up an issue that I am convinced must be addressed as this moral agenda unfolds, that is, the necessity to confront the problem of evil as an anthropological problem. Here I mean the concrete possibility of evil, conceived not only as an emic/indigenous/local category or as an etic/analytic/cross-cultural category, but in an immediate existential sense. The emerging models we have just sketched presume actors who recognize moral challenges as such and want to make the morally best choice. They tend neither to theorize nor to address evil as such. Yet to elide the issue of evil is to dodge the question of morality, for in a sense *if it wasn't for evil morality would be moot*. Whether one understands evil as undermining morality from below and outside or as intrinsic to morality in a foundational sense, and whether the very concept of evil originated as a product of class antagonism as Nietzsche argued, it must be interrogated. Does evil exist, and if so in what sense? Does it make a difference to distinguish ontological, cultural, discursive, or personal understandings of evil in relation to morality? Is it possible to be/do evil and not know it? Under what conditions can evil be perpetrated in the name of good or god?

David Parkin identifies three senses in which we typically use the word 'evil,' including "the moral, referring to human culpability; the physical, by which is understood destructive

elemental forces of nature, for example earthquakes, storms, or the plague; and the metaphysical, by which disorder in the cosmos or in relations with divinity results from a conflict of principles or wills” (1985: 15). These are all mutually implicated in the problem of theodicy, but the first takes priority in a study such as ours. Here Paul Ricoeur’s late essay on evil as a challenge to philosophy and theology is also relevant for anthropology. Ricoeur stresses the contrary but complementary features of sin and suffering in the existential structure of evil: the first is perpetrated and the second undergone, the first elicits reprimand and the second lamentation. At issue for anthropology is “the parallel demonization that makes suffering and sin the expression of the same baneful powers. It is never completely demythologized” (2007: 38). This structural duality of sin and suffering in itself accounts for the observation I made above about anthropologists arriving at morality simultaneously from the directions of Durkheim and Marx, and affirms that an anthropology of morality must acknowledge at its very source the enigma of evil.

This does not simply mean that an anthropological approach to morality must execute comparative, cross-cultural study of how evil can be defined, but also requires a specification of how an anthropology of morality itself defines evil as a human phenomenon. Recognizing that neologism and barbarism are close kin in language, I want to say that as anthropologists rather than theologians our concern is not with theodicy but with homodicy, or perhaps ethnodicy. The difference between understanding evil as a cosmological force and a human phenomenon is vivid in a comparison between two famous literary doctors: Faust and Jekyll. The real life model of Faust is said to have been a disreputable alchemist, what a more recent era would call a mad scientist, of which Jekyll is an archetypal example. David Parkin has observed that “Mephistopheles represented to Faust not just evil, but an experience that could not be obtained

by either divine or secular means. The devil for, let us say, the reckless, brave and foolish here offers a third world” (1985: 19). In this scenario evil is a force external to humans, a cosmic force that, personified as the devil, has its own agenda, motives, and modus operandum. It can be negotiated with in the sense of making a Faustian bargain, but it can also be prevailed against and even tricked, so that the protagonist takes on a heroic cast as a representative of humanity independent of both god and the devil. Recall that though Marlowe’s Faust loses his soul, Goethe’s Faust is saved in the end. Even Marlowe’s doomed Faust has moral qualms and second thoughts throughout, maintaining some identity as a sympathetic if tragic figure.

Our other literary doctor is less ambiguous, a better example of evil as a purely human phenomenon. Dr. Jekyll was not compelled by the limits of science and wisdom to seek a supernatural solution to his quest for enhanced pleasure and human fulfillment. For him, excess was transmuted into malevolence as he literally became addicted to evil. By the end, one has to suspect that in fact the potion did not actually transform the mild and moral Dr. Jekyll, but in fact brought out Mr. Hyde as his true self, monstrous and evil. If an anthropological study of morality is addressed to the question of what it means to be human – synonymous with the question of defining human nature – this possibility of evil cannot be dodged. The likelihood that Jekyll did not initially realize that he was flirting with and then succumbing to evil enhances the tragedy and, for us, defines the ultimate conceptual ground upon which an anthropology of morality must be constructed.

The volume edited by Parkin (1985) is probably the most sustained and comprehensive approach to evil in the anthropological corpus. The contributions focus for the most part on evil in societies dominated by world religions – just four of fourteen chapters devote significant attention to indigenous, “small-scale” societies. Overall there is also more of an emphasis on

evil as a conceptual or existential category than on evil in either everyday life or specialized practice. On the conceptual side contributions range from observing the Teutonic origin of the English word “evil” (Pocock 1985) to consideration of whether the Fipa people have a word or implicit concept for evil (Willis 1985). The salience of evil in everyday life has ranged from the constant threat of demonic force in the reign of the Inquisition from the 15th-18th centuries (MacFarlane (1985:59) to the present in which people reserve judgment about the evil even of a crime as depraved as sexual assault on a child unless all the circumstances are known (Pocock 1985: 50). Particularly valuable examples of how the conceptual and pragmatic interact appear in comparisons of how Hindus and Pentecostal Christians deal with evil spirits called *peey* in southern India (Caplan 1985) and how Muslim Swahili and non-Muslim Mihikenda in Kenya experience different behavioral consequences based on whether evil is explicit/marked or implicit/unmarked, whether its existential locus is the divine/deistic or the human/agnostic, and whether the ideal relationship among humans is understood to be based on equality/resemblance or hierarchy/distinctiveness (Parkin 1985b). Indeed, across the contributions different modulations of evil are spelled out in such a way that a negative framework for an entire approach to morality appears. Without attempting to extract such a framework in detail, we can note a number of critical elements. Thus, evil can be understood as imperfection/impurity/defilement or as ambivalent/uncontrolled power, as an impersonal or personified force, as part of a situation/circumstance or as part of the character/personality of a person, as explicable or inexplicable, as excess or malevolence, as forgivable or unforgivable, as strong/unmitigated or weak/incidental.

Pocock (1985), although recognizing that evil has a role in the language of morality to define “the outer limits of the bad” (1985:53), argues that it carries further ontological weight by

symbolizing “the inversion of the ideal of order itself” (1985: 47). Radical, inexplicable evil is definable as fully non-human, inhuman, or monstrous, and thus turns on cultural variation in how the human is defined and who counts as such. His concluding observation that “in primitive societies evil is attributed ultimately to monsters that cannot exist, whereas in our society it is attributed to monsters that do” (1985:56) identifies both the variation in locating monstrosity in relation to humanity (i.e., within or outside its boundaries), and the difference between a strategy that allows people to distance themselves from evil and one that allows them to distance themselves from others. It also offers a hint at how one might define a transmoral essence of evil in relation to the human without “essentializing” evil as ontologically homogeneous.

The importance of evil as a foundation for the study of morality is further highlighted in one more recent anthropological piece that explicitly treats it. In a reflection on abuses by the American military against captives in the prison at Abu Ghraib during the second Iraq war, Caton (2010) suggests that anthropology would be well served in some instances to go beyond describing actions as unethical to take seriously the category of evil, and not only as an indigenous cultural category but as an interpretive analytic category. This does not require conceptualizing evil as a universal or transcendent category, and is more fruitful with a notion of “situational evil” that identifies the specificity or singularity of evil in discrete events and the manner in which evil or ethical conduct emerges in the way actors construe and respond to those situations. Caton’s rehabilitation of evil as an analytic category corresponds to the strategy of seeking the “essence of the particular” as a way of rehabilitating the concept that does not presume a definition of essence as universal and invariant (Csordas 2004). Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, he suggests that anthropological consideration of evil in its singularity can be successful by going beyond the issues of intentionality and contingency to include responsibility,

will, and moral judgment. This is a promising and forward looking proposal; here I want to complement it by turning back to the anthropological literature on witchcraft with an eye to how evil has been recognized (or not) and conceptualized (or not), and with the intuition that this literature may offer either something to build on or something to critically surpass in our theorizing of morality in anthropology.³

My motive here is to bring pre-existing scholarship to bear on the project of the moment, and thereby to help avoid “reinventing the wheel” in the anthropological study of morality. If this is granted, however, it is legitimate to ask why not include evil of the demonic and diabolical type as well as witchcraft and sorcery? For present purposes my answer is that the relation of evil to morality is mediated by the demonic realm in a way that is not the case with witchcraft, and in some ways the problem of human evil, or ethnodicy as I called it above, is peripheral in the literature. Several brief examples will have to suffice. When explicitly addressing “the problem of evil” in his study of devil-beliefs and rites in the milieu of sugar plantations in Columbia and tin mines in Bolivia, Taussig (1980) is directed toward explicating their symbolic/ideological representation of colonial caste and class oppression and confrontation between Christian and indigenous religion in a way that leans more toward their political economic than their moral consequences, and toward the restructuring of the relation between the ethical and cosmic order with the Christian introduction of a dualism radically distinguishing good and evil that substituted what he calls a moral for a normative concept of sin. Peasant contracts with the devil are not about evil but about resistance to the threats against cultural integrity, and in addressing the “sociology of evil,” Taussig refers mostly to sorcery rather than to devil-beliefs. Indeed, the aura of Conradesque darkness and cruelty evoked by his later study

of shamanic healing during the rubber boom along the Putamayo River is in some ways a more explicit meditation on evil (Taussig 1987).

Meyer (1999) presents an account of religion among the Ewe people in contemporary Ghana in which the domain of evil spirits and that of witchcraft are both in play in everyday life, and in which missionary Christianity is in lively conflict with indigenous religion. The indigenous understanding of evil focuses on two terms, one combining the senses of personal agency in committing evil acts and the agonizingly disastrous results of bad actions, the other combining the senses of evil or wicked and incredible or miraculous. The sources of the latter, broader form of evil include evil fate, a malevolent ghost, a malicious deity, black magic, and witchcraft, and Meyer suggests that the entire system of “Ewe ethics can be glimpsed through the analysis of these particular images of evil” (1999: 88). The situation is vastly complicated by dual processes of missionary “vernacularization” of Christian ideas and “diabolization” of Ewe deities into evil spirits and their rituals into demonic practices. Conversion became more of an escape from the Devil than a turning toward God, and among converts witchcraft above all remained a central, feared, and secretive issue within the domain of demonic evil.

In the Ewe case evil spirits that are exorcized or delivered by Christians represent the full range of indigenous spiritual entities cast as afflicting agents, while priests and priestesses of Ewe deities honor them while offering remedies against other powers recognized as evil. The externalization of evil as a force to be engaged in spiritual warfare on a cosmic scale is particularly evil when the ethnographic setting is one simplified by the absence of missionary Christianity and witchcraft. This is the case in the account by Csordas (1994) of deliverance from evil spirits in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement in North America. Here evil is represented in a highly elaborated demonology comprised of spirits whose names are those of

problematic thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that are beyond the control of individuals (e.g., Anger, Addiction, Bitterness, Rejection, Depression). As is the case among Christianized Ewe, in this conception of evil there is a decentering of agency and responsibility: diabolical evil originates outside the individual even though a person must in some degree collaborate with and consent to it; sin opens one to the influence of evil, and evil tempts one to sin. On the individual level, the language of Charismatic deliverance is that affliction and healing rather than guilt and repentance, and on the cosmological level encounters with evil spirits are episodes in spiritual warfare between the forces of God and Satan.

In the South Asian cultural zone, a similar understanding of evil spirits primarily in the idiom of affliction and healing is evident in the study by Kakar (1982). Across Muslim, Hindu, and indigenous traditions, a variety of healers confront a broad repertoire of spirits and demons attacking from outside the individual with an effect that is described more as illness than as evil, and that can be understood in terms of psychodynamic conflict rather than morality. In the Sinhalese Buddhist setting, Kapferer (1991) also examines ceremonies to exorcize demons as forms of ritual healing, where the demons are understood as fully integrated into the larger ritual system such that “deities and demons are inversions, refractions, or transformations of the possibility of each other” (1991: 162), and exorcism ceremonies are artistic forms applied to human problems. It is certainly the case that “To sign an event of illness and suffering as the work of demons is to invoke some of the most powerful Sinhalese metaphors of destruction and disorder, and to point to death and cosmic disruption as ultimate possibilities” (1983/1991: 121). However, the effect of demons is completely independent of human agency, except in the case of the sorcery demon in which illness is “mediated by the malign thoughts of others towards the victim” (1983/1991:76). When Kapferer turns in a separate work to consider the major

ceremony associated with this demon, his attention remains focused as much on its place in the overall religious system as on the problem of evil. He emphasizes an existential understanding of sorcery in its engagement with “fundamental processes by which human beings construct and transform their life situation... the humancentric forces of humanly created realities” (1997: xii) and the importance of both human intentionality and the contingency of human life. While sorcery is clearly regarded as immoral by Sinhalese, the burden of this immorality is partially displaced onto the “supramundane agents” (1997: 44) invoked. Indeed, Kapferer’s only direct reflection on evil comes in a long footnote concerned with comparing Buddhist and Christian conceptions of evil, including radical evil understood as “beings of total destruction that threaten the ground of existence” (1997: 314)

My position is that an anthropological approach to morality is best served by first attending to evil at the human and intersubjective level of analysis rather than to cosmological or radical evil. This is not to say that they are unconnected, for one can see the diabolical as a fetishization of human evil in Marxist terms (e.g., Taussig 1980) or as a projection of human evil onto the cosmos in Freudian terms. Nevertheless, moral agency and responsibility for evil are refracted and mediated by an entire ontological domain of evil spirits, such that the central issue becomes whether the person is an innocent victim or a willing accomplice of evil, and is not evil but weak. With respect to witchcraft, on the other hand, the issue of evil and immorality is less murky, and what remains to be distinguished is the technical issue of whether the person projects an inherent malevolence or employs spells and medicines to perpetrate evil. Demonic evil certainly deserves extended treatment – Faust should have his day alongside Jekyll⁴ – but it is the latter, in which evil appears as a direct manifestation of the human spirit, which is our next topic.

Witchcraft: Anthropological Impressions of Evil

In framing his edited volume on evil, Parkin explicitly eschews a focus on witchcraft on the grounds that it is only one of many perspectives on good and evil and hence deserves no privileged place. Further, even though it is a concrete activity subject to ethnographic analysis, its understanding is contingent on understanding the philosophy or ontology of a people before understanding its social and moral status (1985:4). However, such a concrete activity presents a number of issues prerequisite to formulating an anthropological approach to morality, precisely because it is a domain including both cultural construals of evil and ritual practices of evil. I will restrict my discussion to witchcraft with the caveat that my goal is not a comprehensive account but a limited outline of how consideration of witchcraft might help us approach morality from the side of evil. This being said, we must recognize with Jackson (1975) that the phenomenological states and mental representations associated with witchcraft may transcend the boundaries of the cultural category, just as “phenomena which are designated by the term ‘witchcraft’ in one society may also exist in other societies but go under other names” (1975: 388) – and the moral valence doubtless varies depending not only with respect to the coexistence of witchcraft and sorcery in a society but also on whether it is more common to emphasize witchcraft accusations or confessions, and whether it is more important to diagnose a suffering person as afflicted by witchery or to identify an actual witch.

To begin, it is not clear that for the most part studies of witchcraft are primarily studies of morality in any case, or whether they are typically read as studies of morality. Consider the following two passages from Evans-Pritchard’s study of Azande witchcraft, taken from the opening lines of separate chapters:

1) It may have occurred to many readers that there is an analogy between the Zande concept of witchcraft and our own concept of luck. When, in spite of human knowledge, forethought, and technical efficiency, a man suffers a mishap, we may say that it is his bad luck, whereas Azande say that he has been bewitched. The situations that give rise to these two notions are similar (1937: 148).

2) Zande morality is so closely related to their notions of witchcraft that it may be said to embrace them. The Zande phrase “It is witchcraft” may often be translated simply as “It is bad.” For, as we have seen, witchcraft does not act haphazardly or without intent but is a planned assault by one man on another whom he hates. A witch acts with malice aforethought (1937:107).

These two starting points, placing witchcraft once in the domain of luck and again in the domain of hatred, identify a cleavage in the intellectual agenda of the work. In the first passage the focus is on explanation of misfortune as a means to interrogate the nature of rationality, and in the second it is on the understanding of evil as a means to interrogate the nature of morality. Is it not the case, though that the problem of rationality overshadows that of morality? Or perhaps we ought to say that it is not only the case that Evans-Pritchard’s work has a central place in anthropological discussions of rationality, but also that the issue of rationality has tended to dominate readings of this work.

It is doubtless compelling to the reader to see Evans-Pritchard’s confession that while in the field he too “used to react to misfortunes in the idiom of witchcraft, and it was often an effort to check this lapse into unreason” (1937: 99). When he does directly address morality and evil, however, it is to point out that the sentiments they condemn correspond to those we condemn, including jealousy, uncharitableness, ill will, greed, and hatred. It is not that being a witch

causes or consists in bad action or feeling, but that such action or feeling “is bad because it may lead to witchcraft and because it brings the offending person into greater or less disrepute”

(1937: 110). Moreover,

Moral condemnation is predetermined, because when a man suffers a misfortune he meditates upon his grievance and ponders in his mind who among his neighbors has shown him unmerited hostility or who bears unjustly a grudge against him. These people have wronged him and wish him evil, and he therefore considers that they have bewitched him, for a man would not bewitch him if he did not hate him (1937: 109-10).

Without a theological grounding of morality as is the case in Western societies, “It is in the idiom of witchcraft that Azande express moral rules which mostly lie outside criminal and civil law” (1937:110), and because virtually anyone can be a witch without necessarily even knowing it, evil is a relatively common human propensity which can remain “cool” even in those endowed with the “hereditary psycho-physical powers” of witchcraft. This moral profile contrasts with that in the domain of medicines which involve overt practices of both malevolent sorcery that flouts moral and legal rules and good magic performed for benign purposes or to wreak vengeance on a witch or sorcerer (1937: 388). However, there are also medicines whose moral attributes are not entirely agreed upon, particularly in cases where foreign medicines have been recently introduced and in situations of dispute where both sides consider themselves to be in the right. With respect to evil, then, Zande society presents an interesting contrast between the moral uncertainty of witchcraft (how evil is the witch and am I responsible for any witchcraft?) and the moral ambivalence of magical medicines (is this medicine actually good or evil?)

In this light it is worth considering the puzzlement of Meyer Fortes in his study of Tallensi religion and morality over why the Tallensi so deemphasize and marginalize the notion

of witchcraft in their theory of human nature and causality. Fantasies of sexual aggression, soul cannibalism, gross immorality that invert and repudiate normal humanity typical of African witchcraft beliefs are “quite alien to Tallensi ways of thought” (1987: 213). Fortes resolves this puzzlement in a comparison between the Tallensi and Ashanti, among whom witchcraft is highly elaborated, tracing the difference to family and descent group organization. The Tallensi individual’s identity is given a firm anchorage in the complementarity of legal father-right and spontaneous mother love, the enclosed family and localized lineage creating a benign domestic environment guaranteed by a cult of ancestors. The Ashanti individual is pulled two ways between matrilineal uncle-right and supposedly spontaneous care from the father, leading to preoccupation with purity and pollution, personal sensitivity and vulnerability, high personal autonomy combined with a divided sense of identity. The relative weakness of Tallensi witchcraft can be accounted for by the experiential ramifications of these differences: among the Tallensi the survival to adulthood of a developmentally early basic trust whereas the Ashanti culture enshrines basic mistrust; a Tallensi conscience externalized to parent surrogates and understood in affective terms as *pu-teem* or ‘stomach-thinking’ that contrasts with Ashanti conscience rooted in personal responsibility and understood in intellectual terms as *ti-boa* or ‘head creature;’ and Tallensi wrongdoing being treated as an issue among the individual, his kin, and the ancestors, whereas Ashanti violation of taboos is a sacrilege attributed to individual wickedness and dangerous to the community that must be adjudicated by the chief and his council (1987: 216).

Yet the “Tallensi recognize the existence of evil. They experience and give vent to envy, greed, hate and malice” (1987: 212). As it turns out, for Tallensi, the locus of evil, and certainly of misfortune, is Destiny. It is “thought of as a component of a person’s personhood”

that is effective from birth, but unlike the Azande hereditary witchcraft substance it is “chosen” by a person pre-natally (1987: 149). Evil predestiny accounts for a condition or conduct counter to customary norms and is “apt to be adduced where there is a difficult or impossible moral dilemma to be resolved” (1987: 153), precisely where other African societies might invoke matrilineal witchcraft (Ashanti), ancestral ghosts (Ndembu), lineage sorcery (Zulu), or spirit attack (Hausa). The Tallensi thus serve as a prime example of the limitations of a study of witchcraft as an approach to evil, precisely by showing not its absence but how it reappears in a different cultural pattern that is equally critical to understanding morality.

Clyde Kluckhohn’s account of Navajo witchcraft makes a different kind of statement from a different culture area and a different line of anthropological thinking. My intuition is that Kluckhohn’s book is less referenced as a classic than Evans-Pritchard’s not only because it is less appealing from a literary standpoint but because it is less accessible from the standpoint of discussing rationality and frankly scarier from the standpoint of evil supernaturalism. Navajo witchcraft comprises “all types of malevolent activities which endeavor to control the outcome of events by supernatural techniques” (1944: 22). Navajo witches are associated with death and incest, use powder made from human corpses and shoot mystical arrows into a victim, travel by night transformed into were-animals by clothing themselves in an animal skin and meet other witches to perform inverted versions of healing ceremonies, and perpetrate sorcery through spells uttered over the victim’s clothing, a fabricated image of the victim, or bodily leavings like hair or fingernails and “praying a person into the ground” body part by body part, and perform love magic by administering hallucinogenic plants including datura. They become witches “in order to wreak vengeance, in order to gain wealth or simply to injure wantonly – most often

motivated by envy,” (1948: 26), and must kill a near relative as part of their initiation. A witch who was caught could be killed.

The Navajo case is complicated by ethnographic uncertainty over whether one is dealing only with witchcraft “beliefs” or actual “practices.” There is also a fundamental ambivalence insofar as these practices were not necessarily evil when practiced by the divine Holy People in mythological times, and that traditional ceremonialists may be schooled both in sacred rituals and in methods of witchcraft. A distinguished chanter of my acquaintance once shocked me by acknowledging the ability to don an animal pelt and transform himself into a “skinwalker,” continuing on to avow the technique’s value in his day job as a police officer because having that ability “scared the daylight out of criminals” who knew he could immediately recapture them on attempted escape. For Kluckhohn, the emphasis was on positive and negative effects of witchcraft as a cultural pattern assemblage both with respect to the survival of Navajo society and the equilibrium of Navajo individuals, with the methodological injunction to resist an ethnocentric labeling of witchcraft and sorcery as “evil” (1948: 68). Witchcraft thus has a number of functions including to provide stories with entertainment value, to explain the inexplicable, to gain attention for oneself, to express culturally disallowed impulses and aggression, to deal with anxieties about subsistence, health, and deprivation due to pressures from contemporary white society as well as the lingering trauma of collective incarceration at Fort Sumner and the removal of intertribal warfare as an outlet for aggression – all of which “make for personal insecurity and for intensification of inter-personal conflicts” (1948: 87). Witches are scapegoats toward whom Navajos can vent hostility against relatives and whites to achieve “hate satisfaction,” comparable to the way other societies have blamed “Jews” or “niggers” [note that Kluckhohn was writing before Navajos elaborated their own race prejudice].

Witchcraft remains significant as a versatile expressive medium because other culturally developed patterns including withdrawal, passivity, conciliation, and narcoticism are insufficient to deal with and channel fundamental aggression and anxiety (1948: 92). A great adaptive advantage is that Navajo witches are often distant and thus anonymous rather than located within the immediate social group and readily identifiable, which moderates the degree of actual conflict. Moreover, with respect to morality “witchcraft lore affirms solidarity by dramatically defining what is bad” (1948: 110), and more specifically prevents undue accumulation of wealth by those who fear jealousy, puts a check on the power and influence of ceremonial practitioners, and is a means of social control against “acting mean” and in favor of social cooperation.

It is not only the functional approach that allows Kluckhohn to defer judgment on evil in relation to witchcraft. Like Fortes, Kluckhohn provides a psychoanalytically inflected accounting for the particular character of witchcraft in terms of the effect of early childhood socialization on the psychological makeup of individuals. Rather than the effect being due to the balance of matrilineal and patrilineal forces on identity development as in the Tallensi and Ashanti cases, among the more individualistic Navajo it has more to do with tensions between siblings since a child experiences a dramatic removal of parental gratification when a younger child is born, and the ambivalence toward old people who are closer to death and to becoming dangerous ghosts. This kind of psychological account affects both authors’ understandings of the relation of witchcraft to evil.

A rather different manner of deferring the question of evil appears in Geschiere’s (1997) work on southern Cameroon, where from the beginning it is clear that witchcraft/sorcery “was not just something evil to the people among whom I lived but that it also meant thrill, excitement, and the possibility of access to unknown powers” (1997: 1). Witchcraft is an idiom

of power with a public presence in political practice and explicitly entwined in commodified contemporary culture.⁵ Geschiere argues that the use of European-derived terms like witchcraft and sorcery creates a bias toward “unequivocal opposition between good and evil” where a more nuanced distinction taking into account a more fundamental ambiguity is required (1997: 12-13). He prefers beginning with local concepts of *djambe* or *evu*, the little being residing in the belly that is the source of a witch’s power, which as elsewhere serves to explain misfortune, contributes simultaneously to the leveling of inequalities and accumulation of power and wealth, and indeed constitutes “the dark side of kinship” now applied to the expanded scale of politics. Using the indigenous terms assists in raising analysis to an amoral level in the sense of suspending judgment, in specific contrast to the moralizing tenor and preoccupation with the micropolitics of social order that dominated British studies of witchcraft in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus the forces of witchcraft “have highly disturbing effects, but they can also be used constructively” (1997: 13); they are “inherently evil yet also a condition for all forms of success” (1997: 63); it is regrettable that they exist but they are indispensable to the proper functioning of society, and witchcraft “is in principle an evil force, yet it must be canalized and used for constructive aims in order to make society work” (1997: 219).

This ambiguity is raised to an ultimate degree in Stroeken’s (2010) work on the moral power of witchcraft and healing among the Sukuma of Tanzania. Here the witch is in fact “hyper-moral” and partakes of the same entitlement as the ancestor: “Both witch and cursing ancestor are thought to feel neglected, jealous of the other’s good fortune. Both have moral power in relation to the victim” (2010: x). This moral power, derived from the dark side of kinship, operates according to a rationality specifying that because of some offense or neglect “the witch must be entitled to the victim’s life” (2010: 15) and hence can override and pervert

ancestral protection in order to “eat” the accursed victim. Witches are both socially marginal and intimately connected to their victims, such that “The absolute outside furnishes power; the absolute inside furnishes morality. Together they constitute the moral power the witch draws on... It is a type of power beyond domestication” (2010: 124). In this context the radical reality is that accused witches are in fact killed remarkably often, and at the same time an outcome of healing is often “to leave participants with a feeling kept largely unspoken: ‘Aren’t we all witches?’” (2010: 31).

Beyond this sampling of monographic treatments of witchcraft, I can only briefly allude to the tenor in relation to evil in a limited selection of edited collections. The volume edited by Kapferer (2002) stands firmly on the shoulders of Evans-Pritchard in beginning with and moving beyond the problem of rationality. One direction of this movement is emphasis on the “human-centric, person-centered and social nature of witchcraft’s practical reason that gives prime force to human agency” (2002: 7), and the assertion that “Sorcery fetishizes human agency, often one which it magically enhances, as the key mediating factor affecting the course or direction of human life-chances” (2002: 105).⁶ Another is the conjunction of witchcraft and sorcery with the conditions of modernism, postmodernism, the state, and postcoloniality, pushing analysis toward mythopoesis, metacosmology, and the imaginary rather than toward morality, while yet acknowledging their inherent violence and the monstrosity of their symbolism and practice. In contrast to this approach, the volume edited by Whitehead and Wright (2004) on witchcraft and sorcery practiced by “dark shamans” in Amazonia directly confronts both the lethal violence and socio-cosmological centrality of these practices, and avoids playing into either a renewal of irrationalizing colonial demonization in the name of suppression or romanticizing contemporary rehabilitation in the name of cultural diversity. Thus Amazonian shamanism is a “predatory

animism” and in this sense its key symbol of the jaguar should be understood not as an endangered species but as a dangerous predator (Fausto 2004: 171). The witch or dark shaman is “the embodiment of evil in the world” because the “lack empathy for other humans and act for purely personal motives” (Heckenberger 2004: 179). For the Arara people there are explicit connections among morality, sorcery, and banishment with respect to people who forego generosity and unselfishness and thereby “break the moral rules connected to the use of certain technical skills” (Texeira-Pinto 2004:217).

The collection edited by Walker (1989) focusing primarily on indigenous peoples of the Americas encompasses diversity among them by broadly defining witchcraft and sorcery as “the aggressive use of supernatural techniques” (1989:3). Individual victims suffer from anxiety over being the target of hate or envy, and techniques reflect culturally patterned fears and frustrations. The emphasis is on functional interpretation at both the individual and social level, though with a recognition of violence as a theme and the declaration that “By investigating the aggressive and even immoral uses of religion and magic, we may explore the darker and uncontrollable side of human nature” (1989: 9). In contrast, the volume edited by ter Haar (2007) on African witchcraft from a predominantly religious studies perspective foregrounds the problem of evil. The possibility is entertained that in the contemporary milieu “not just the human world but the spirit world *itself* has gone out of control,” and that contemporary witches represent a situation in which the spirit world has “assumed and inherently evil character in the face of which humans are rather powerless” (2007: 2). While witchcraft accusations are understood to result in serious violation of human rights, witchcraft beliefs amount to a moral theory, and witchcraft is defined as “a manifestation of evil believed to come from a human source” (2007: 8) with powers “considered to be inherent, voluntary, and permanent” (2007: 11).

A volume edited by Moore and Sanders (2001) includes an introduction that offers a comprehensive analysis of the extensive body of anthropological literature on African witchcraft since Evans-Pritchard, the surface of which I have barely been able to scratch in the present discussion. Several of the contributions directly address evil and misfortune (Rasmussen 2001) and morality (van Dijk 2001, Sanders 2001), while Moore and Sanders in their introduction highlight the ambivalence of witchcraft in relation to both morality and modernity. A contemporaneous volume edited by Bond and Ciekawy (2001) on witchcraft in Africa with contributions primarily by philosophers and anthropologists takes up morality and ethics and on occasion directly addresses evil, but for the most part adopts a similar concern with the broader meaning of witchcraft: "It is not the quirk of one people but, one might suggest, an attempt to explain events and activities, to account for misfortunes through a projection of human agency. It involves economic, political, and moral issues. It is full of surprises and imaginary reversals revealing the moral order through its symbolic representation of the imagoes of both the good and the bad person. The imagined world of witches is essential to maintaining the moral and ethical order of the real world of everyday experiences" (2001: 5). By contrast, the volume edited by Stephen (1987) on witchcraft and sorcery in Melanesia is singularly concerned with bringing scholarship from that geographical region out from under the theoretical and ethnographic shadow of Africanist scholarship. With such a goal, the theme of evil is peripheral to issues of cosmology, politics, religion, warfare, social change, legitimate uses of sorcery, and the validity of a distinction between sorcery and witchcraft. Likewise, the volume on witchcraft and sorcery in Southeast Asia edited by Watson and Ellen (1993) also sets itself off against Africanist scholarship, but does so more by observing the different colonial circumstances that resulted in these practices being both less frequently reported and less of an overt social problem

than in Africa, as well as a scholarly problematic more related to the diagnosis and curing of sickness than to rationality and social control, and the effect of relations with major religious traditions in addition to Christianity (Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism). Here evil is explicitly recognized as a topic, primarily with reference to different degrees of evil attributed to witches and sorcerers in societies across the region, and to the relation between evil and power.

An Irony of Evil: Child Witchcraft

These contrasts can only point in a cursory way to how reconsideration of witchcraft in relation to evil might contribute to an anthropological approach to morality. A final reflection on witchcraft originates with the recent observation by Jenkins (forthcoming) that in contemporary Zuni society witchcraft remains a problem, that moreover some witches are children, and that it appeared that the witches were becoming younger all the time. There is evidence that even in earlier times a Zuni child it was known that a child could decide to learn witchcraft (Ellis 1989: 196), but the idea that children might not only require protection from witchcraft but also be accused of it is disturbing. Unfortunately, the Zuni are not unique. The idea of child witchcraft appears to have been introduced to the subarctic Athabaskan Kaska around the turn of the 20th Century, whereupon a pattern of witch-killing ensued in which a child was blamed for someone's serious illness and often "confessed to the crime which he did not understand" (Honigmann 1989:29). Harsh punishment and execution of child witches was common among Arawak-speaking peoples of the Peruvian Amazon until around 1970 following mass conversions to Christianity, but resurfaced in the 1990s in the context of intense political violence, and the accused do not protest their innocence because they feel that the accusation itself constitutes proof regardless of their intentions or awareness of any occult powers (Santos-

Granero 2004). In the past several years an epidemic of child witchcraft in Africa has been reported both in the scholarly literature (de Boeck 2005, Ranger 2007) and in popular press reports from the Congo (Dowden 2006, Harris 2009) and the Niger Delta in Nigeria (Harrison 2008, Houreld 2009). Children are subjected to brutal exorcisms, abandoned to the streets, or murdered, often by pastors in the name of fundamentalist Christianity. Again, children “can be persuaded to accept it’s their fault. They tell themselves ‘it is me, I am evil’” (Remy Mafu quoted by Dowden 2006: 2).⁷

Are Euro-American societies immune from this phenomenon? There is indeed indeed episodes of child witchcraft in 17th and 18th Century Europe associated with the emergence of childhood as a cultural category and evident not only of a dark side to the history of childhood but of “a move from one symbolic organization, from one way of understanding evil, to another” (Roper 2000: 109). Much closer culturally and historically, in the contemporary United States, I would argue to include instances like the killing in 2010 of a seven year old girl and the severe injury of her eleven year old sister– both coincidentally adopted from Liberia – by parents adherent to the Independent Fundamental Baptist sect who customarily carried out “spiritual spanking” on all their children, based on a widely promulgated interpretation of the Biblical injunction derived from the aphorism “spare the rod and spoil the child” (Harris 2010). This is strikingly analogous to the cases of child witchcraft in Africa. Granted that torture, abandonment, and/or killing as punishment for alleged witchery is not precisely the same as an intent to beat children into docility in order to suppress a tendency toward evil, with death as an unintended outcome. This is only to say that the overt forms taken by these perverse practices of Christianity vary culturally from North America to Africa. The presumption of children not as victims but as perpetrators of evil is what is at question, revealing the deep irony of a twisted

logic that enables killing in the name of destroying evil in someone whose only experience of evil is in the beating itself.

Conclusion

To recognize that an anthropological approach to morality must confront the enigma of evil as a human phenomenon is not to say that we should return to a study of witchcraft as our starting point, but that we recognize along with Parkin that “Evil is morality reflecting on itself” (1985b:242). When we do reconsider witchcraft we will see it not simply in terms of the sociology of accusation or traditional practices of cursing and spell-casting, but as an instance of a human phenomenon to which an anthropological approach to morality remains obligated to theorize and respond. Cases like those of child witchcraft in which evil is perpetrated in the name of eradicating evil poignantly raise the question of whether one can be evil or involved in evil without knowing it. This question constitutes a wide category of phenomenon that ranges across the acknowledgment of unwitting harm done that exculpates the Zande witch and the standard operating procedures of military personnel operating as part of the security apparatus at Abu Ghraib prison, the moral lacunae of the sociopath and the moral depravity of the psychopath, the delusion of misrecognizing evil (Anakin Skywalker becoming Darth Vader) or the denial of compromising with it (Dr. Jekyll becoming Mr. Hyde). The priest/ethnographer De Rosny recognizes this disturbing existential category in his work on *nganga* healers in Duala, describing evil sorcerers as “either people who manipulate others’ credulity for their own profit (sometimes even using poison); or persons who are not conscious of their own perversity... Aren’t there in every society certain perverted persons who – without even knowing it – make

their fellow men ill by draining their vital energy from them, thus depersonalizing them – in other words ‘eating’ them?” (quoted in and translated by Geschiere 1987: 20).

We will also have to consider the fact that in those instances where the focus comes to be on the victims of witchcraft, the register shifts to that of ethnopsychiatry and medical anthropology. This is the case in Field’s (1960) study of Ashanti women’s self-accusations of witchcraft corresponding to depressive disorder,⁸ Favret-Saada’s (1980) case study of a bewitched French man whom she encountered in a psychiatric hospital, and Levy, Neutra, and Parker’s (1987) examination of Navajo frenzy witchcraft in relation to epilepsy and other seizure disorders. The consequences for our theorizing are that the discussion must then account for the relation between morality and pathology. In any case, the study of morality must take up the problem of evil, and one of evil’s primary loci is witchcraft. It is not a mere curiosity that the Hopi used to say that “there may be more witches than normal persons in a village” (Ellis 1989: 196). Neither is it meaningless that despite there being among the Navajo numerous named forms of witchcraft (Kluckhohn 1948), Navajo also recognize that merely thinking or speaking negatively can bring about harm. Insofar as witchcraft is a disposition of the soul, another name for malevolence and disregard, we have probably all experienced it, and some of us may have perpetrated it.

Beyond what we have been able to learn by a reconsideration of witchcraft, the investigation just concluded entitles us, or perhaps obligates us, to ask whether the notion of evil can or should constitute an analytic category, not to abet the study of evil for its own sake but as part of an anthropological approach to morality. In gesturing toward an etic of evil, there are two general ways in which such a category could be defined. As a cumulative category, evil would be either the sum total or the least common denominator of all the indigenous concepts and

situations that ethnology could assemble, though as with any such category this strategy would face the problems of contextual commensurability and where to draw its boundaries. As a substantive category, evil would require an essential structure sufficiently flexible to avoid the universalism and immutability of essentialism while facilitating description of essences of the particular. Thus, for example, we might propose that the depravity and malevolence that constitute evil be defined along two dimensions. The first would identify its source as internal or external in the sense of originating in the human or the diabolical. Are human actors affected by evil as victim or perpetrator, prey or predator, as the motive of action or the consequence of action by others? This distinction requires presupposing a valence of moral responsibility that problematizes both the claim that “the devil made me do it” and confronts the dilemma of whether it is possible to be or do evil without knowing it. The second would identify its mode as active or passive in the broad sense in which the behavioral manifestation of the former is the positive malevolence of violence and abuse, with the associated moral emotion of hatred and moral stance of hostility, and in which the behavioral manifestation of the latter is the negative malevolence of disregard and neglect, with the associated moral emotion of self-love and moral stance of narcissism. This distinction requires presupposing a qualitative difference between actions such as assault, dispossession, displacement, debasement, or enslavement on one hand and lack of care, abandonment, delegitimization, and failure to recognize on the other.

All these questions deserve a place on the agenda as we determine the ethnographic and theoretical place of morality in contemporary anthropology. The problem of evil reminds us that the issue is not exhausted by the question of how people decide what is right and wrong, since it is possible not to care at all about that. Witchcraft is a topic in which evil may be invariably at issue, but which opens upon a very wide range of questions about social life and human

experience such that evil in fact may not be in the immediate foreground of discussion. Being sensitive to the unfortunate possibility of reinventing the wheel in studies of morality reminds us to reconsider and compare classic works that bring anthropology and philosophy into dialogue such as those of Brandt (1954) on Hopi ethics and Ladd (1957) on the Navajo moral code. This task also urges us back to the question of whether indeed it is necessary or valuable to understand morality as a “cultural system” or domain, when in fact it may be better conceived as a modality of action in any domain – a flavor, a moment, a valence, an atmosphere, a dimension of human action that may be more or less pronounced, more or less vividly discernible, and more or less urgent across settings and situations, but always present whenever humans are present.⁹ We ought to be wary insofar as treating morality as a noun creates a semantic milieu that rhetorically moves us toward thinking of it as an entified cultural system or domain to be placed alongside religion, ideology, law, or politics. The move to pluralize the noun as moralities is a valuable hedge that helps guarantee pluralism across cultures and internal diversity within, keeping the issues of relativism and variation before us. However, it does not invite us to analyze morality as a modality of being in the way we might by instead emphasizing how we use moral as an adjective that can precede and modify any number of terms: obligation, challenge, sensibility, emotion, crisis, failing, code, system, education, community, judgment, order, actor. In the adjectival rather than its nominal sense it may be easier to recognize that the moral can enter into – spontaneously or by conscious evocation – virtually any corner of human concern, and most particularly into the anthropological analysis of that concern.

Notes

¹ The epigraph is from *On The Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche 1967, p.69).

² These distinctions between cultural and moral relativism are perhaps to starkly drawn, and for an extended and considerably more nuanced account of moral relativism in relation to cultural and cognitive relativism see Lukes (2008).

³ For another reflection on evil with reference to Abu Ghraib by a leading sociologist, see Bauman (2011); for an earlier sociological reflection on evil shaped by the political and intellectual ferment of the 1960s see Wolff (1969).

⁴ Indeed, Dr. Jekyll's nocturnal potion preparation and consumption can be glossed as a kind of witch's Sabbath.

⁵ Certainly the modernity of witchcraft is no more the case in garrulous West Africa than among the more guarded Navajo, where I have observed the wearing of anti-witchcraft amulets, quietly and without comment, by staff members in a hospital psychiatric unit during a period of particularly stressful relations among their colleagues, and where I have been told that witchcraft is increasingly common as more Navajo become educated and successful.

⁶ Kapferer's introduction includes a lucid comparison of witchcraft and sorcery, including the observation that witchcraft is immoral because of its unambiguous malevolence while sorcery is amoral because of its ambiguous possibilities for both protection and destruction (2002: 11).

⁷ This discussion is not intended to occlude the fact that women in Africa have been and continue to be frequent targets of witchcraft accusation and murder (Field 1960, Adinkrah 2004).

⁸ For a recent reconsideration of M.J. Field's classic study of depression and witchcraft self-accusation in the context of social justice see Jenkins (in press).

⁹ I made this suggestion in the panel discussion at the 2010 AAA meeting, and subsequently found that it was at the same moment coming into print in more fully elaborated form by Michael Lambek, who warns against trying to make an anthropology of ethics into another disciplinary subfield, insofar as "The task is to recognize the ethical dimension of human life – of the human condition – without objectifying ethics as a natural organ of society, universal category of human thought, or distinct kind of human practice. In sum, it is preferable to see the ethical as a modality of social action or of being in the world than as a modular component of society or mind...Rather than attempting to locate and specify a domain of ethics, we ought to clarify and deepen our understanding of the ethical quality of the full range of human action and practice" (2010: 10, 11). I quite agree with this stance.

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