Ordinary Ethics

Anthropology, Language, and Action

Edited by

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For Aram Yengoyan

and in memory of Roy (Skip) Rappaport

Toward an Ethics of the Act

Michael Lambek

Where is the ethical located? I shall argue that it is intrinsic to action. I look at action in two related ways—as specific acts (performance) and ongoing judgment (practice)—and show that ethics is a function of each. Criteria for practical judgment are established and acknowledged in performative acts, while acts emerge from the stream of practice. Performance draws on previously established criteria, or felicity conditions, in order to produce its effects. These effects can be understood as committing performers to one particular alternative or set of alternatives out of many, and these commitments in turn inform subsequent evaluations of practice, and thus practical judgment itself, but do not determine practice. A simple illustration: insofar as the performance of a wedding instantiates the state of marriage, it provides criteria for evaluating the actors' subsequent practice as spouses. The act of marriage does not determine whether people remain "faithful" or practice "adultery," but it entails that their actions fall under such descriptions. If practice is rendered possible and meaningful through performative acts, practice also inevitably reveals the inadequacy of such acts and the limits of criteria and descriptions, especially their vulnerability to skepticism, and hence the need to start anew. Ethics, then, is not only about executing acts, establishing criteria, and practicing judgment, but also about confronting their limits, and ours.

A Personal Prolegomenon

The ethical has come to seem central and even necessary for my work along at least three overlapping routes. First, there has been my experience in the field, experiences (*erlebnis*) that across different sites and over many decades have, in this respect, not changed in the slightest, except insofar as it is *my* experience (*erfahrung*) that has grown or ripened.[1] Very simply, the people I encountered have attempted, routinely—but also anything but routinely—to do what they think right or good, sometimes as a matter of course, sometimes in a struggle to know what the right path was, and sometimes ineffectively, infelicitously, inconsistently, incontinently, or not at all, but then with respect to what they or others think or have established as right or good. They also interpreted the actions and characters of others by criteria similar to those they applied to themselves. Put another way, they have acted largely from a sense of their own dignity; they have refused positions or attributions of indignity, and they have treated, or understood that they ought to treat, others as bearing dignity of their own. I do not think the Malagasy speakers I have met are exceptional in this regard, yet social theory has focused almost exclusively on rules, power, interest, and desire as forces or motivations for action.[2]

Second, and to move up a level of abstraction, in trying to interpret and account for the acts and practices I encountered, I discovered the inadequacy or limited nature of previous theoretical models that attempt to explain a rich cultural tradition and set of practices with respect to the needs and intentions of its participants and that, as noted, reduce intention to interest, compulsion, obligation, competition, or imitation, hence to a kind of social or psychobiological mechanics, or, in the least mechanical of cases, to deception or game playing, thus formulating action either too automatically, too strategically, too self-consciously, or too self-interestedly, but never seriously, complexly, judiciously, passionately, or even ambivalently.[3] Spirit possession, for example, became an epiphenomenon rather than a practice,

1. The German distinction between *erfahrung* and *erlebnis* captures something not directly available in English *experience*; see Martin Jay's (2005) comprehensive account.

2. I do recognize that the attempt to do right or good is often distorted by rationalization, self-deception, or denying the humanity of others. As Jackie Solway (pers. comm.) has pointed out, particular distortions may be characteristic of specific regimes of power, such as capitalism, slavery, etc. My thanks to Solway, James Laidlaw, Veena Das, and the other workshop participants for helpful discussion of an earlier draft and to Kristina Kyser for excellent editing.

3. Weber, of course, is a partial exception, but most Weberian-inspired anthropologists have been impatient with Geertz's attention to meaning and ambiguity and have searched for more muscular kinds of explanation (Ortner 2006).

genre, tradition, or form of life that exists in its own right and that enables human creativity and skill in no less a fashion than any artistic or religious tradition that scholars of the humanities hold dear.[4] Moreover, as I have come to understand it, in its combination of passion and action, playfulness and seriousness, spirit possession itself is replete with moral insight.[5] Indeed, no less than Islam, Christianity, or Hinduism, spirit possession offers the means (for those who accept it) to cultivate an ethical disposition or sensibility.

Third, and moving to a yet higher level of abstraction, I have been deeply influenced by the later work of Roy Rappaport on the illocutionary function of ritual and hence from ritual back to ordinary language as formulated in J. L. Austin. From my other teacher, Aram Yengoyan, I was directed thirty years ago to *Must We Mean What We Say?* by Austin's student, Stanley Cavell, though twenty-five years were to pass before I took Yengoyan's advice, or perhaps was only then able to begin to understand what Cavell meant by what he wrote. Whereas Rappaport informed me of his own impatience with the hair-splitting of philosophers, I was taken by Cavell's complex style (evident in a lesser key in Geertz). Such a style adds to the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary means of language what I have the conceit to think of as the circumlocutionary. In the right hands, the fineness of insight expressed through circumlocution is no less than that to be found in the directness and clarity of Austin; Cavell speaks truth to the consequentiality of speaking despite the recursiveness of human experience.[6] Rather than providing specific lessons that could be

4. It seems odd to keep making the point. This is, in a nutshell, the critique of Lewis (1971) as set forth in Lambek (1981) and Boddy (1989), as well as by a number of other scholars. The argument can be found at a more abstract level (with no reference to spirit possession per se) in Sahlins (1976), but structural or cultural mediation says nothing about the forces underlying or stemming from specific actions.

5. Again, see Lambek (1981). On the ethical practice of spirit mediums, see Lambek (1993, 2002a, 2002b); on various other ethical dimensions of possession, Lambek (1988, 1992, 1996, 2002c, 2003a, 2003b, 2007a, and 2010). When I say "spirit possession," I refer in the first instance to the traditions and sets of practices I have encountered and described on the island of Mayotte and in northwest Madagascar in fieldwork since 1975. I leave open to what degree this might be exemplary of some broader category or family of traditions and practices of "spirit possession" that are not culturally specific, thus embracing forms of life found in West Africa, Brazil, Malaysia, etc. (Boddy 1994, Johnson forthcoming).

6. One might distinguish between two ideologies (or ethics) of writing—Austinian plain speaking, in which one's word is one's bond and therefore clarity is of the essence (though Austin himself is also deeply ironic), and the circumlocutionary or otherwise indirect forms characteristic of Socrates (Plato), Derrida, or

summarized from their texts, writers like Cavell and Derrida offer their readers, as Cavell puts it, the opportunity of being read by their texts (somewhat as attentive participants are "read" by their observation of spirit possession or students of traditional Qur'anic recitation come to embody the text). This is reading as ethical experience. Immersion in ethnographic fieldwork is similar as the fieldworker is "read" or tested in multiple ways. Irrespective of any insight or wisdom forged in this manner, the interpretation of ethnographic phenomena should contribute to the expansion and refinement of philosophy's attempts to reformulate and address classic problems.

Having criticized reductionist arguments, I am equally uneasy about jumping to a position directly in opposition to them, namely, to seeing the human condition as essentially one of freedom (or reason) and, as a corollary, where this primary freedom is constrained, as inevitably one of resistance (ending, thereby, exactly back in a reductionist position). That is to forget all we know about structure, cultural mediation, social interpellation, violence, subjectivity, and psychic conflict. Recognizing that people want to do good and that attending to intention or motivation is critical for understanding human life is necessary but insufficient. Such insights cannot account for all the contexts in which good intention is derailed or misguided. Nor can they displace the analysis of particular cultural models and social practices or the general ways in which speech and action work. I argue that ethics is an intrinsic dimension of human activity and interpretation irrespective of whether people are acting in ways that they or we consider specifically "ethical" or ethically positive at any given moment. One can neither reduce human motivation to the ethical nor, as Laidlaw argues in his chapter, reduce the ethical to human psychology.

How to Recognize and Produce Ethical Criteria and Judgment Through Ritual Performance

Ethics entails judgment (evaluation)[7] with respect to situations, actions, and, cumulatively, actors, persons, or character. The exercise of judgment

Cavell, in which wisdom is to recognize what (or that) one does not know or cannot put into direct words. However, the work of the reader includes avoiding "an act of pious merger with Cavell's . . . all-but-inimitable sensitivity" (Gould 2003: 54).

7. I use "judgment" to similar ends but in virtually the opposite sense from Veena Das (this volume), for whom "the crucial requirement is that we should be able to take an abstract, nonsubjective vantage position from which we can orient

is prospective (evaluating what to do, how to live), immediate (doing the right thing, drawing on what is at hand, jumping in), and retrospective (acknowledging what has been done for what it was and is). Articulated more strongly as forms of action, these can be epitomized, respectively, as promising, beginning, and forgiving (Arendt 1998: 237–46). Judgment is both of others, thus social and conventional, and for oneself, thus linked to freedom and self-fashioning, but also to responsibility, care, guilt, forgiveness, and insight, and to recognizing the limits of what one can know or do or understand.

In order to exercise judgment, there must be criteria. Whence come criteria? I assume some come from mind and some from experience. But criteria are also instantiated through human speech and action. Ethics is intrinsic because there are always criteria already in place, because speaking entails and generates criteria, and because there are always places where disagreement over criteria or their absence is troubling. Criteria serve as the basis for judging how to conduct oneself, whether to commit or exercise specific acts, to what ends and in what manner—but also for deciding what constitutes a given act or kind of act, where specific acts begin and end, whether acts have in fact been committed correctly, completely, and legitimately (Austin's felicity conditions), and how to evaluate one's own and others' actions. In the ordinary course of events, criteria are implicit, internal to judgment itself, but they are also available for conscious discernment and deliberation. It should be evident that criteria are not rules for using words that can guarantee the correctness or success of our claims but "rather, criteria bring out what we claim by using the words we do . . . in making claims to knowledge, undertaking actions, and forming interpersonal relationships" (Guyer 1999: 128). As Cavell notes (1979: 30), if in ordinary usage (as in prize juries or admissions committees) agreement over criteria makes possible agreement over judgments, for Wittgenstein it appears that the ability to establish criteria is based on prior agreement in judgment. Wittgenstein's "appeal to criteria is meant, one might say, exactly to call to consciousness the astonishing fact of the astonishing extent to which we *do* agree in judgment; eliciting criteria goes to show therefore that our judgments *are* public, that is, shared" (ibid. 31). However, for that reason, criteria do not often need to be publicly enunciated; we appeal to criteria only when the sense of mutual attunement is threatened (ibid. 34). As Shiner helpfully explicates, for Cavell,

ourselves to the world." My usage is thus not that of the definitive attributive actions of the courts. Thanks to Carolyn Hamilton for urging the clarification.

Wittgenstein's criteria are in the nature of things, not a matter of imposed convention. "Criterial rules . . . are not external to, but *internal to* the human form of life" (1986: 364, italics in original). To call them conventional, "alienates us from them, and thus from ourselves, for our form of life and our criteria are one" (ibid).[8]

I take this to indicate the fundamental givenness of ethics. Nevertheless, while certain criteria are continuous or perduring, others are contingent. If criteria define contexts of action, there must be the means to transform the context and hence the relevant criteria. There are times when new criteria must be brought into effect or applied to new persons or new contexts and hence when they must be made relatively explicit. Rappaport (1999) shows how ritual operates as a central means through which this happens. Among Tsembaga Maring of highland Papua New Guinea, rituals effect—bring into being—particular states of war and peace. These can be considered ethical states, since any aggressive or nonaggressive act is interpreted and evaluated as such in their light (that is, differently according to whether the current state is one of peace or war). Likewise, acts may be discerned as cooperative or uncooperative among those constituted as allies by having undergone the ritual together. More generally, rituals effect states of ethical personhood and relation, transforming a biological infant into a named social person, a man and woman into a married couple, a novice into a monk, a profane condition into one of blessing, a breach into a reconciliation, and so forth. To each of these persons, relationships, and states, criteria departing or renewed from or additional to what has hitherto been the case apply.

Whereas Austin argued that criteria of truth and falsity do not apply to illocutionary statements, Rappaport showed that in a sense they do, but in an inverted fashion. A locutionary statement is judged true or false according to whether it is in conformity with the state of affairs that it purports to describe or refer to (it is raining, Sarah Palin is president). However, following a felicitously enacted illocutionary utterance, it is the state of affairs or the subsequent actions that are to be judged as true or false according to whether they are in conformity with the utterance (you are false not to keep your promise or the peace; the drought is false once the rain magic has been performed). These are faults—falsehoods, lies, errors, sins, etc.—insofar as they are not in conformity with the moral condition that has been brought into effect. When the state of affairs is in conformity

8. The depth of human agreement is acknowledged in Cavell's phrase "the conventionality of human nature itself" (1979: 111, as cited by Hammer 2002: 28).

with the performative act, then the state can be said to be "true" (or correct, right, or good). Once I am inaugurated as president, my conduct is judged with respect to my status as an office holder and no longer as a contender. It is my conduct that is in question, not the act of inauguration or the office. If I serve as witness to a marriage, I cannot henceforward deny that the couple are married, nor act toward them or evaluate their actions as if they were not. To undergo a ritual is to commit, says Rappaport, both to the specific effects or conditions it produces (thereby agreeing to apply to them the relevant criteria) and to commit more generally to the relevance of the criteria that the ritual underwrites or reproduces, as well as the means of producing them (the nature of marriage, the legitimacy of weddings). Thus, the performance of a ritual initiates or transforms a specific moral state or condition relative to the participants, while also reproducing the felicity conditions or criteria that apply to such a transformation. Hence Rappaport says that ritual is simultaneously performative and meta-performative.[9]

The performance of a ritual, argues Rappaport, is characterized by the conjunction of indexical and canonical dimensions—that it is me undergoing it here and now ("indexical"), and that it is these previously inscribed and relatively unchangeable ("canonical") utterances and acts, part of a perduring liturgical order, that I hereby repeat. Rappaport argues that, by their submission to its bodily demands (of presence, posture, endurance, etc.), the participants performing or undergoing a ritual demonstrate to others and to themselves their acceptance of both its message and its form. They do so whether or not they "believe" in any specific propositions associated with it; hence the outward, public consequences prevail irrespective of the inner states of the participants. This evades the problem of recursiveness inherent to theories of intentionality, as well as the instability of subjectivity. In these respects Rappaport is very close to Austin and somewhat akin to what Derrida means by "tethering" or avowal, or Cavell means by acknowledgment, and quite distinct from what is commonly meant by sincerity. I can pray effectively, for example, without being certain that I believe in God, that I want to do so, or that prayer is the means to address God; I can successfully ask for forgiveness without feeling particularly contrite.[10] Indeed, in Rappaport's view, I am *likely* to be uncertain;

9. Here and below I severely condense what is actually a highly elaborated and systematic argument (Rappaport 1999).

10. The matter of sincerity has been the subject of considerable debate, especially over the interpretation of Austin's citation of the words Euripides gives to Hippolytus, "my tongue swore to, but my heart did not" (Austin 1965: 9–10, Cavell 1995b, 1996). Presumably its salience as a felicity condition depends on the

the point of ritual is to substitute public clarity for private obscurity or ambiguity, that is, to establish beyond question the relevant criteria. The central criterion—being accountable for what one says and does—is virtually universal, by contrast to the substantive criteria put into effect by specific rituals. Definitive ethical commitments and criteria are thus produced publicly and irrespective of personal doubt.

Rappaport begins his book not by acknowledging the universality of acknowledgment but by asserting that recognizing lies is a human problem. Insofar as symbols form the basis for human language and culture, hence for creativity, speculation, and so forth, hence, following Kant, for freedom from immediate sensations and circumstance, thought and communication by means of symbols raise two enormous problems. These are the problem of the lie and the problem of the alternative. The problem of the alternative can be seen as the flip side to Geertz's observation that culture always manifests itself as particular (1973a); it is always in some specific form and thereby in contrast to alternative forms. This raises the following questions. On what basis should I follow one alternative rather than another? Is the choice mutually exclusive? (Does the acceptance of one entail the rejection of all others?[11]) How do I indicate which alternative I have chosen? How do I come to accept that I have made the (right) choice and hence stick to it? Rappaport attends more explicitly in his subsequent argument to the way ritual addresses the problem of the lie (How can we be reasonably sure that we are not lying to each other or establish commitments in the face of possible insincerity?) than to how it addresses alternatives. But in a sense the lie is a subspecies of alternative, and the focus in the subsequent argument on how ritual produces (relative) certainty is a way of reducing alternatives and specifying a particular path or

"semiotic ideology" in place (Keane 2007; compare Lambek 2007a). Mahmood (2004) and Hirschkind (2006) have pointed interestingly to an ideology in which the "inside" of a person is part of the context that is expected to be transformed by performative acts and utterances. Here, then, is the reverse of the idea that a "good" or "true" utterance corresponds to an existing interior state. Rather, a person becomes better insofar as his interior state is appropriately shaped by the right acts and utterances: for example, contrition would follow from rather than precede an act of apology. Prevalent among pious Muslims in Cairo, such an argument draws from (and elaborates) Aristotle's ideas about the cultivation of character through education and good deeds.

11. Alternatives thus come in the form of either/or and both /and. The tension between them exemplifies a central feature of human thought (Lambek 1998, 2007b).

set of criteria as much as it is one of assuring the truthfulness of any given utterance or set of propositions or, as noted above, of moving from the assertion's conformity to the facts to the facts' conformity to the assertion.[12] Rituals commit their performers to taking up specific alternatives and therefore rejecting competing or contradictory ones (you cannot be simultaneously married and unmarried or alternate between these states at will) and to ignoring incommensurable ones (alternative views of what constitutes "marriage"). Moreover, they render such acts of commitment difficult, and sometimes impossible, to take back, as in acts of scarification, circumcision, and other forms of sacrifice (Lambek 2007c). (Cavell's problem of finding a voice is thus partially obviated by inhabiting and suffering a body.) A critical point here is that, while the unfolding of events enables us to reinterpret earlier events in light of subsequent ones through the ongoing construction of narrative, it is more difficult to reinterpret after the fact the commitments entered into and the moral conditions brought into effect through the performance of rituals and, indeed, of everyday performative utterances of all kinds.

Truthfulness and committing to specific ways of doing or being are fundamentally ethical matters. The questions are not only how human society responds to the possibility of the lie or adjudicates among competing alternatives but how we accept specific statements, alternatives, responsibilities, and courses of action as *ours*, how we become committed to them (such that they become a part of us and we of them), and how we demonstrate and acknowledge to ourselves and to others that we (and that others) mean what they say. The broader issues are less ones of distinguishing lies from truth than of enacting and recognizing acceptance (or accepting one's nomination) to certain positions and committing to one's utterances, to the courses of action established and initiated in public moments, and to the criteria by which such courses of action are identified as such and the means by which they are taken up and evaluated. Temporality is critical—whether we stick with things long enough to make our statements and actions coherent and reasonably predictable, available for development, interpretation, evaluation, and response. Ultimately we must acknowledge our identification with the person we have, through a series of marked and unmarked acts and utterances, become.

12. The most salient and succinct form of the question of commitment is that of making a pledge or promise, a matter that, as noted in the Introduction, is central to and often materialized as the gift.

From Performance of Ritual to Performance of Everyday Speech and Action

For Rappaport, ritual lies at one end of a continuum of formality. Yet many of his arguments apply to acts and events of lesser formality. While the "conjunction of the indexical and canonical," and especially the invocation of relatively unchanging "canonical" phrases (like the *B'ismillah*) and sequences of action (like the Catholic communion), are depicted as characterizing ritual, in fact virtually all speaking entails a similar conjunction. What Rappaport calls the indexical dimension is each time original, linear, and consequential—a threshold crossed and an act that happens and cannot readily be retracted (my words uttered, the "reply all" button fatefully pushed), while what he calls the canonical dimension is highly iterative or citational, comprising words or phrases that have been said before, and will be again, by other people.[13] Many ordinary utterances bring the performative and iterative dimension to the fore, so that Austin originally referred to them as performatives, as when I thank or introduce someone, or simply say "yes." As Austin subsequently realized, all utterances contain an illocutionary dimension, insofar as they make statements, describe a state of affairs, refer to a person or place, ask or respond to a question, and so forth. In so doing, and in announcing that they are statements or other specific acts of communication, all utterances entail simultaneously a commitment on the part of the speaker to be understood (somehow) and a commitment to stand by the message, semiotic code, and conversational implicatures (Grice 1976; Ochs Keenan 1976) that are ostensibly in use. We must, as Cavell puts it, mean what we say. Or, as Hent de Vries explicates Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, "No a priori principles or axioms, no conventional maxims or norms, could ever relieve us of that responsibility—'commitment'—to the language and singular terms we use. . . . What holds true for promising and for moral judgment governs all actions and passions, events and encounters" (2008: 85).

Particular genres of speech and action in various cultural milieus refine such commitment—the ostensive relations between the speaker's intentionality and the code or message—in various ways. We can refer here to the field of metapragmatics as elaborated by Michael Silverstein (1976). Thus the displacement of intentionality is central to a practice like spirit possession, in which there are explicit shifts in voice (Boddy 1989, Lambek

13. Thus, ritual action entails the conjunction of what Lévi-Strauss has called reversible and irreversible time.

1981). The perception of a possible gap between what is said and what is meant is also heightened in certain discursive regimes, such as Calvinist Protestantism, with respect to what Webb Keane (2007) has usefully identified as semiotic ideologies. Nevertheless, insofar as there is an illocutionary dimension and it is felicitously enacted, so too the consequences that Austin and Rappaport attribute to performative utterances follow—namely, that they usher in a state of affairs (criteria) according to which the speakers, participants, and context are henceforth to be judged.

Language is central to the ethical and the ethical to language, both to language in the abstract, in the sense of grammar and semantics (*langue*), and to acts of speaking, pragmatics, and meta-pragmatics (*parole*)—to the names and pronouns that I take on, by which I am addressed and respond, by which I address others or refer to others, and which I link to specific actions. The ethical is intrinsic to utterances by which I acknowledge (or repudiate) words and acts as mine or yours, ours or theirs; by which I accuse, command, condemn, confess, congratulate, criticize, defer, defy, denounce, encourage, excuse, exonerate, honor, insult, ignore, injure, obey, praise, pronounce, refuse, swear, sympathize, etc.; but also by which I agree, answer, argue, denote, describe, disagree, exclaim, imply, question, refer, request, state, suggest, and so forth.[14] The ethical is embedded in the relations produced and presupposed among the nominative, the accusative, the dative, the ablative, and the genitive attributions of persons and things as the subjects and objects of action—as people nominate and accept nomination, accuse and receive accusation, act on and are acted upon directly and indirectly, toward and by means of other persons and things, and attribute similar actions and causes to others. Adverbs and adverbial phrases specifically refine aspects of means and intention, as memorably illustrated in Austin's (1961b) elaboration of the distinction between shooting a donkey and dropping a tea tray by accident or by mistake. Ethics is grammatical, grammar ethical.

Of course, the distinct verbs and adverbs of English or nominal cases of Latin or Russian, no less than the speech genres in which they are embedded, express refinements of ethical stance and perspective that in

14. In our joint seminar (2006), Jack Sidnell remarked on the large number of performative verbs in a single paragraph from Jane Austen. So far as I know, no one has investigated whether there has been a decline in the presence, number, or quality of explicitly performative verbs in English, whether and how their presence is related to such matters as genre and social class, what the implications are for infusing sociality with an ethical tenor (or whether this is mere propriety), or how closely the set of English performative verbs is replicated in other languages.

other languages may be performed by means of other grammatical categories and functions, including modes of address (such as tecknonyms), allusion, metaphor, avoidance, shifts between transitive and intransitive or active and passive verbs, morphemes indicative of agency, authorship versus animation (Goffman 1981), evidentiality (Hill and Irvine, eds., 1993), indexical discernments of context (Hanks 1990), genres or modes of speaking that enable degrees of quotation or de-quotation (Urban 1989), turn taking, and various forms of oral and gestural punctuation.

Ethical Consequences of the Irreversibility of Action: Forgiveness and Acknowledgment

Taking speech to be a subcategory of acts (or, perhaps, acts to be a subcategory of speaking),[15] I turn to some of the general features of human action as discerned by Arendt, followed by some remarks on Cavell. Despite radical differences in style, sources, and temperament, there are interesting parallels between these two thinkers, each of whom attends to the irreversibility and ethical consequentiality of action. I begin with Arendt, even though, unlike Cavell, she writes without the benefit of speech act theory and hence introduces something of a break in my larger argument.[16]

Arendt celebrates the *vita activa*, in which public action is really the highest or best form of activity. The fundamental feature of an act is that it brings into play something new in the world. "To act" she says, "means to take an initiative, to begin" (1998: 177). She writes, "The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin" (ibid. 246). Arendt identifies "the principle of beginning" with "the principle of freedom" (ibid. 177). However, the condition of humanity is one of plurality. Hence she cautions that "Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting

15. Elsewhere (Lambek 1992) I have described the maintenance of taboos as a kind of performative activity, in which speech may be largely irrelevant; gendered comportment would be another instance (Butler 1989). However, to ascribe an act as performative is to acknowledge its categorization in words.

16. My remarks on Arendt are restricted entirely to *The Human Condition*.

beings, he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin" (ibid. 190).

If human labor stems from necessity and work is prompted by utility, by contrast, Arendt argues, speech and action spring from us as a kind of spontaneous disclosure of the agent. However, such disclosure retains a certain ambiguity insofar as action reveals its consequences only after the fact. Illuminating action is the province of the storyteller, not the agent; it cannot be captured in the intentionality of the actor. "This unpredictability of outcome is closely related to the revelatory character of action and speech, in which one discloses one's self without either knowing himself or being able to calculate beforehand whom he reveals" (ibid. 192).[17] Hence the burden of the consequentiality of action is "the burden of irreversibility and unpredictability" (ibid. 233).

Arendt honors the act more than the actor; indeed, for her, the relationship between the two is characterized by a kind of opacity:

> Men have always known . . . that he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes 'guilty' of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it, that the process he starts is never consummated unequivocally in one single deed or event, and that its very meaning never discloses itself to the actor but only to the backward glance of the historian who himself does not act. (ibid. 233)

This produces a paradox with respect to freedom insofar as it makes the actor appear "more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer of what he has done" (ibid. 234). Arendt remarks provocatively, "Nowhere, in other words, neither in labor, subject to the necessity of life, nor in fabrication, dependent upon given material, does man appear to be less free than in those capacities whose very essence is freedom and in that realm which owes its existence to nobody and nothing but man" (ibid. 234).

The solution lies in the act and reception of the other. Arendt writes, "The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving" (ibid. 237). Moreover, forgiving cannot be predicted and thus "is the only reaction [that] . . . retains . . . something of the original character of action";

17. This speaks directly to the condition of irony I discussed in the Introduction and is illustrated there in my anecdote of the fallen granary.

indeed, forgiving is a new, unconditioned act (ibid. 241). Furthermore, in a remark that returns us to Rappaport, "The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises" (ibid. 237). In these two quintessential expressions of freedom—forgiving and promising—we are back to preeminently illocutionary acts and the criteria they establish.

Both forgiving and promising are performative acts, one retrospectively redressing the past and the other prospectively charting a future. Ethics in this vision is resolutely historical. It is not maintained by means of individual reason or internal self-control (ibid. 238), nor does it emerge directly from a form of Durkheimian social regulation or transcendence. Both promising and forgiving depend on the fact of human plurality, "for no one can forgive himself and no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself" (ibid. 237). In a striking phrase that distills the wisdom acquired by her own experience, Arendt writes that "men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and . . . unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable" (ibid. 241).

Arendt's ability to forgive was no doubt compromised by Martin Heidegger's inability to acknowledge his own actions. This weight of acknowledgment is a central subject for Cavell, who goes so far as to say that speaking is apt to become unbearable. Here Arendt's miracle of natality produces labor pains and struggles over both detachment from the words of others so as to find one's own voice and the weight of attachment to one's own words. Cavell advocates finding one's voice, yet recognizes that one "moves between owning one's words and being abandoned to them" (Szafraniec 2008: 379). We must mean what we say and yet recognize that we cannot always do so completely or consistently. The world would be incoherent if we did not stand by what we say, but to do so inflexibly leads inevitably to tragedy, so well exemplified in the figure of King Lear, or, for that matter, the unfolding of the *Hippolytus*.

Thus, if Cavell reads Austin as "affirming that I am abandoned to [my words]" (Szafraniec 2008: 371–72, citing Cavell 1996: 125), Cavell himself would not exactly follow suit. Cavell would not condone Hippolytus for keeping his word to the bitter end:

> To live is to engage in a movement between controlling one's words and being controlled by them. To act as if these two sides of the movement were the same, as Hippolytus does, is to have, in Cavell's terms, a petrified imagination. To mean every word one says is to assume responsibility for the (criterial) implications of what one says, while in full awareness that these implications may change, that they remain in need of our future interventions, and that they are potentially infinite, so that what we say exceeds our control, so that we will always mean more and less than we do. (Ibid. 372)

That is to say, it is to acknowledge Arendt's "burden of irreversibility and unpredictability."

To take responsibility for one's words is not to refuse ever to take them back. But to redeem a change of direction, one must acknowledge it for what it is. We are faced with the challenges not only of keeping our commitments and answering to the names we have been given and accepted but also of acknowledging our failures, thoughtlessness, infelicities, incontinence, and changes of heart and direction—and forgiving those of others, as well as accepting their forgiveness. As Stephen Mulhall helpfully puts it, it is not that a person is or isn't responsible for all the consequences of her utterances or actions, could have foreseen them all, etc. but rather that "she is then flatly responsible for determining her relation to them—whether and how to claim them as unforeseeable or simply unforeseen, to accept them as meant or excuse them as unintended" (1996: 17). The point is recognizing and living with the consequences of one's words.

Thus, whereas some thinkers focus on the lie, on promising, or on keeping one's promise, Cavell adds that, whether one promises or fails to keep a promise, the issue is acknowledging that one has done so. Whereas silence has its functions, sometimes speech is "essentially *owed.* Flowers are not a substitute" (Cavell 2005b: 191). Moreover, as he notes in *The Claim of Reason* (p. 298, as cited by De Vries 2008: 83), "there are any number of ways, other than promising, for committing yourself to a course of action: the expression or declaration of an intention, the giving of an impression, not correcting someone's misapprehension . . . and so on."

I take the ethics of the ordinary to be entailed in these performative and practical qualities of speech and action, promising and beginning, forgiveness and acknowledgment. Not only are speaking and acting intrinsically or formally ethical (committing, executing, evaluating, and becoming subject to evaluation), but the particular substance of ethics (criteria, values, commitments) is specified, instantiated, and informed through specific utterances and acts. Original utterances nevertheless contain quotation or citation of some kind. Ritual performances may differ from everyday acts and utterances with respect to the degree of canonical citation, formality, legitimacy, publicity, conventionality, spectacle, consequentiality, and, as Rappaport (1999) argues, the relative certainty,

perdurance, and sanctity of what is iterated. As noted, ritual performances more clearly establish and specify criteria for judgment than do less formal utterances, leaving less room for the kinds of qualifications that Cavell describes. However, the distinctions are not absolute, and all speaking carries some of the weight that Rappaport attributes to ritual, just as ritual carries the weight Cavell attributes to speaking. Moreover, certain relatively informal utterances, such as accusations and invective (*sale juif*), but also repeated praise or affirmations of love, may prove equally if not more momentous for addressees, and perhaps for speakers.[18] One implication of the work of Arendt, Cavell, and Rappaport is that the ethical is to be distinguished not only from what is specifically unethical but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, from simple indifference.

Finally, it is worth underlining that action finds its complement in passion; as Aristotle realized, virtue finds the right balance of passion and action to suit the circumstances. Arendt, as I have indicated, speaks of the complementarity of acting and suffering. Cavell (2005b) argues that the criteria for passionate utterances are not the same as those for performative utterances, emphasizing that a passionate utterance is one in which I do not know in advance how my statement will be received or what my standing is.[19] Radically to separate the ethical from the passionate would reproduce the Kantian dichotomy between reason and the senses as one between freedom and constraint. This is one of the places where a close analysis of spirit possession could prove instructive (Boddy 1989, Lambek 2010).

From Performance to Practice and Back: Toward an Ethics of History

While ritual performance produces states of affairs, the descriptions under which people act, and the criteria for judgment, it cannot determine either who participates or the subsequent actions (including acts of evaluation) of the participants. How, when, and whether people act is a product of

18. In fact, invectives often carry the features of being low in informational content and high in meaning that Rappaport attributes to sacred utterances.

19. Thanks to Veena Das for clarifying the point. In addition, many emotion words or invocations carry ethical weight (Lutz 1988; see also Lutz and Abu Lughod, eds., 1990, Myers 1988, Lambek and Solway 2001, Hirschkind 2006, and chapters below by Stafford and Baker).

their exercise of judgment to fit the circumstances, an exercise that is in turn related to character, acquired disposition, and accumulated wisdom.[20] Hence one may distinguish analytically the ethics of practice from that of performance. As a theorist of performance, Rappaport has relatively little to say about practice, how it is that *I* come to perform *this* ritual *now*, how I orient my conduct subsequently, whether or how I fulfill the obligations I have just committed myself to, or what happens if I do not. Bourdieu is the primary theorist of practice, discriminating the manner in which actions are undertaken and paying specific attention to response and timing. It is not simply a matter of playing by rules but, as Bourdieu puts it so well, of having a feel for the game, of simply doing the right or best thing under the circumstances (1977). If a theory of performativity describes the establishment of criteria, practice theory recognizes that criteria are not usually applied explicitly, as in following a set of rules or bureaucratic procedures, but are implicit in both the game and the disposition to exercise (and the ability to recognize) good judgment.

What counts as ethical is a matter not only of choosing freely or judging wisely but of sustaining commitment to a specific direction, order, goal, discipline, set of criteria, or Weberian "absolute value." Not to follow through on what one has committed to is, in at least some respect (but bearing in mind Cavell's strong qualifications), to place oneself in the wrong. Moreover, we are back to the problem of alternatives. To take up one alternative or to go down one path entails passing up opportunities that other paths could have afforded and even explicitly rejecting some. Having married one woman, given my blessing to one child, or shown my devotion to one jealous god, I cannot readily go ahead and pursue other alternatives.[21] Not only can we not explore all paths at once, or even in succession, but there is something to the fact that we ought to keep to certain paths or commitments once we have initiated or started to follow them, at least long enough for our companions to be able to count on us to be there. The freedom of starting something new entails the judgment of what kinds of compromises that will make with the old and reconciling the new direction with what is being left behind.

20. Material constraints and political and discursive factors can also prevent people from carrying out certain desirable acts or from carrying them out in a specific manner.

21. Yet one should continuously exercise judgment; it would be unethical to be rigid, to stop thinking after one has made one's first commitment. The point is that subsequent acts need to be made in light of previous commitments.

If performance establishes the criteria by which subsequent practice is engaged and evaluated, so too practical judgment generates new performances, that is, relatively formal acts and utterances that recalibrate the criteria and shift the ethical context. Thus there is a whole ethics to history and social change.

The emergence of new performances within the stream of practice may be understood with the assistance of a distinction made by Cavell.[22] Cavell describes appeals to criteria as having two moments, which he calls predication and proclamation, namely, having something to say about something, and actually saying it:

> In ordinary cases, a set of specifications or features is established that set the terms of, are the "means" or basis of, the judgment; and then there are standards on the basis of which to assign the degree to which the object satisfies the criteria of judgment, or to determine whether an object *counts* under the criteria at all. We may think of the former moment as the judgment's *predication*, its saying something *about* something; we may think of the latter moment as the judgment's *proclamation*, its saying it out. (1979: 34)

Further, "Whether to speak (proclaim) has two aspects: determining whether you are willing to count something as something; and determining when, if ever, you wish, or can, enter your accounting into a particular occasion" (ibid. 35). Wittgenstein, says Cavell, moves between observing—"it is what human beings *say* that is true or false," the predicative moment—and communication as "agreement in judgments," the proclamatory moment (ibid. 35).

A broad concern with acknowledging and reconciling with the past and bearing witness to departures from it has been evident in the practices of people I have encountered in fieldwork and hence has become a theme of my work (Lambek 1996, 2002a, 2002b, 2004). Here, however, I offer two brief illustrations drawn from recent essays by younger scholars of the way that judgment is predicated in practice and proclaimed in performance, in acts of acknowledgement (as pointed to by Cavell) and in forgiveness and natality (as emphasized by Arendt).

Catherine Allerton reports the various ways that people of Manggarai in Western Flores, Indonesia, are performatively rooted in their localities,

22. In light of Cavell's account of opera as an exemplary locus of voice, I am tempted to speak of my ethnographic illustrations as a kind of Cavelleria Rusticana. Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* is itself a drama of failed acknowledgment.

through ritual acts performed as infants. As youths setting out to live elsewhere for high school or university, they perform another ritual, of "rooting the feet," acknowledging where they come from in order to travel safely forward. People of Manggarai must also formally say farewell to the dead. Allerton recounts how:

> Maria . . . once described to me a time when she briefly visited a house in another village. As she sat down, she became aware of a terrible smell of rotting. She called out to the women of the house, "Quick, pass me a betel quid!" and then "offered betel" (*waré sepa*) to the ghost of a woman of that house. Maria told me that she had known this woman fairly well, but had not been able to visit the house to formally offer her "tears" (*waé lu'u*) [money] after the woman's death. The terrible smell was that of the corpse of the deceased woman, who Maria had not yet formally "remembered." Finally remembering the woman by offering betel caused the smell to disappear, as the ghost returned to the realm of the ancestors. (Forthcoming)

We see here both the named acts of conventional acknowledgment and the circumstantiality of initially having forgotten to carry them out. Maria both proclaims her omission (as manifest or predicated in the smell) and redresses it by acknowledging the deceased person. Her act is accepted and the omission forgiven as the smell disperses.

The second example illustrates how an act of acknowledgement resolves a traumatic historical event and a political stalemate. In 2002 a heavily laden ferry capsized en route from Ziguinchor in the Casamance region of Senegal to the capital, Dakar. As Ferdinand de Jong describes, after unsatisfactory attempts at memorializing the nearly two thousand people who drowned, some citizens of Ziguinchor began to feel that the cause of the accident was their unresolved struggle for independence of the Casamance. Women referred back to an earlier event, predicating the shipwreck as part of a moral state of struggle they had proclaimed in 1982. They then attempted to undo what they had begun, to terminate the state of being and close off the chapter. The women of the sacred groves, who twenty years earlier had assisted militants to utter oaths of commitment to the insurgent movement, now asked the men to take them back. As one of the women explained to de Jong, "*Il faut passer là où tu es passé.* We have to return along the same path that has taken us here" (n.d.: 6). Most remarkably, at the signing of the peace treaty that soon followed, the leader of the separatist movement publicly "apologized for the victims of the shipwreck" (ibid.).

These events indicate how Rappaport's account of ritual can be taken out of the structural and functionalist framework in which he largely places it and applied directly to specific historical occasions. The performance of taking back the oaths is a novel, historical event, actually making history, and doing so by publicly transforming the ethical state of affairs in Casamance so that new criteria apply. This offers another dimension to the much-discussed question of the relationship of structure to event (Sahlins 1985).

What is equally exciting and so productive of peace here is the performance of an apology. The actors in the conflict take responsibility for the tragedy rather than displacing it onto other people, actions, or forces (which one could readily imagine). There is a lesson of wide relevance here. Taking responsibility for historical events, acknowledging our role in them, is not only the way to make peace but also turns people from the victims of history into its agents and finds in suffering not resentment or *ressentiment* but forgiveness and conciliation.

The simultaneous profundity and fragility of such acts leads directly to the final phase of my argument.

Skepticism

Rappaport argues that the clarity and certainty produced in the performance of ritual is necessary in light of the ambiguity and uncertainty that would reign in its absence; this is clearly illustrated in these ethnographic vignettes. But sometimes ambiguity appears more salient or powerful than what is achieved in ritual, persisting in the face of the performance or having no performance that could resolve it. Despite the evident and positive effects of acknowledgment, apology, and forgiveness, it sometimes rises to consciousness not only that the proclamation might be at odds with what we feel but that the very predication is difficult or impossible to make; that we cannot get to the bottom of where we stand or who we are, of our original or current intentions or deepest desires; that the right words or even the criteria for knowing, saying, or doing something are absent. An account of ethics must recognize limitations to acts of acknowledgment, the inevitable infelicities that accompany and undermine them, and the difficulties encountered in remaining consistent and complete with respect to one's criteria and acknowledgments.

Assuming we have the freedom or potential of which some philosophers speak, how shall we know what to do with it, what to choose, or how to

recognize on what basis we have made our choice (or chosen to have it made for us)? Were we responsible for a given act of omission or commission? Where does responsibility begin and end? Did we know what we were doing or mean what we said? Are conventional words and actions sufficient to our meaning? Did we do it in intentionally, seriously, unconsciously, by accident? Are your criteria commensurate with mine? How are we to recognize the meaning of our words or the consequences of our acts? How, at the end of the day, are we even to know who "we" are, or even that we are? Sometimes we simply feel the absence of criteria to know. Performance then takes place on thin ice, appearing as "mere" or "staged" performance, and sometimes the ice begins to melt.

In sum, what if skepticism creeps into performance or practice, if criteria are no longer unambiguous or disambiguating (or, conversely, too discriminating), if felicity conditions lose their authority, become fragmented or incoherent, if practices are no longer satisfying or sufficient, if there is a perceived rupture between means and ends, if competing or contradictory ends and means nominate us or override each other? These are problems not only of individual or collective incontinence and failure but also of genuine human paradox. Cavell describes the condition as "the absence or withdrawal of the world, that is, the withdrawal of my presentness to it; which for me means the withdrawal of my presentness to (the denial of our inheritance of) language" (1988: 174–75). Presence to the world is replaced by mourning its loss.

How could one have an answer for the disappointment of criteria? Only by concluding that ethical insight must *begin* in mourning the loss of the world—and thereby recognizing the courage entailed in speaking and acting at all, including the act of refusing to do so. (As Derrida indicates, disavowal is also an act of a kind of avowal.)

Most fundamentally, if ethics entails acknowledgement or avowal, who am *I* to make such acknowledgment? How is it that I find my voice or acknowledge myself, that I am who I say I am, who others say I am (or that I am other than who others say I am), that I hear my nomination, that I accept what has been entailed in that nomination, that I can be sure it is me who has been nominated, that I have not mistaken myself for another or been so mistaken by another? Reflecting on Abraham's answer to God's call to sacrifice his son, these are the questions with which Derrida begins a late essay.[23]

23. Derrida is drawing on a parable by Kafka, who imagines "another Abraham" who was unsure whether he was the one called and doesn't want to appear ridiculous by accepting the call too readily.

> the first Abrahamic teaching . . . that if everything begins for us with the response, if everything begins with the "yes" implied in all responses ("yes, I respond," "yes, here I am," even if the response is "no"), then any response, even the most modest, the most mundane of responses, remains an acquiescence given to some self-presentation. Even if, during the response, in the determined content of a reply, I were to say "no"; even if I were to declare "no, no, and no. I am not here, I will not come, I am leaving, I withdraw, I desert, I'm going to the desert, I am not one of your own nor am I facing you," or "no, I deny, abjure, refuse, disavow, and so on," well then, this "no" will have said "yes," "yes, I am here to speak to you, I am addressing you in order to answer 'no,' here I am to deny, disavow, or refuse" (Derrida 2008: 313)

How Abraham should answer when he is called by God is not so different a question from how Derrida himself should answer the call of the other, as a child in Algeria and since. What is it to be Jewish, or to be "a Jew," because others have called him Jew? And why him, rather than another? Derrida's "Jewish question" is at once exemplary and ordinary, applying to each of us.[24] This is because we come to be persons "under a description," hence ethical subjects, precisely by means of such nominations or interpellations, performative acts that begin even before we are born. For Derrida, to answer, to avow or disavow, provokes "an ethics of decision, an ethics of responsibility, exposed to the endurance of the undecidable, to the law of *my* decision as *decision of the other* in me" (ibid. 324).

Derrida answers "yes," but he avows that he does not know what he means when he does so. He points to the

> essential difficulty . . . in underwriting and in countersigning [*à soussigner et à contresigner*] an utterance of the type: "Me, I am jew" . . . To say "I am jew," as I do, while knowing and meaning what one says, is very difficult and vertiginous. One can only attempt to think it after having said it, and therefore, in a certain manner, without yet knowing what one does there, the *doing* [*le* faire] preceding the *knowing* [*le* savoir]. (Ibid. 333)[25]

Derrida answers "yes," but he refuses to choose or to authorize whether this answer (in response to Sartre) is authentic or inauthentic. Such undecidability, "far from being a suspending and paralyzing neutrality, I hold to be the very condition . . . within which decision, and any responsibility worthy of the name . . . must breathe" (ibid. 335):

24. Cavell responds to his own "Jewish question" in the remarkable autobiographical essay in *A Pitch of Philosophy* (1996).

25. Note how Derrida addresses Cavell's fundamental question *Must We Mean What We Say?* and places "proclamation" ahead of "predication."

> anyone responding to the call must continue to doubt, to ask himself whether he has heard right, whether there is no original misunderstanding; whether in fact it was his name that was heard, whether he is the only or the first addressee of the call; whether he is not in the process of substituting himself violently for another; whether the law of substitution, which is also the law of responsibility, does not call for an infinite increase of vigilance and concern. It is possible that I have not been called, me, and it is not even excluded that no one, no One, nobody, ever called any One, any unique one, anybody. The possibility of an originary misunderstanding in destination is not an evil, it is the structure, perhaps the very vocation of any call worthy of that name, of all nomination, of all response and responsibility. (Ibid. 337).

In the beginning was the word, but the word was simultaneously a deed, an act, a call uttered without an intention we can fully understand but the effects of whose proclamation we must continue to acknowledge.

Conclusion

By contrast to those who have seen the substance of ethics as either values or rules, or as the freedom to break away from the obligation of adhering to rules, I have argued that the ethical is intrinsic to human action, to meaning what one says and does and to living according to the criteria thereby established. Ethics is a property of speech and action, as mind is a property of body (or, action is a manifestation of ethics as body is an extension of mind). Ethics is not a discrete object, not best understood as a kind or set of things. Taking such an approach has avoided explaining ethics in universal rational, instrumental, psychological, or biological terms. And while acknowledging cultural difference, it has equally avoided depicting such difference according to distinctive values and thus stumbling over problems of relativism.

If I have advocated the exercise of practical judgment at the expense of following (or rejecting) rules, that is in large part because it is a more accurate description of how we live. And if I have taken up the concept of virtue at the expense of values, that is largely because virtue pertains to the qualities of acts and practical judgment rather than to the depiction of discrete objects or cultures. The substance of a virtue is never fixed but is a function of contingent circumstances; virtues are attributions in context,

not things in themselves.[26] Whether a specific act is to be described as virtuous is a matter not of adherence to a rule but of the quality of judgment it exhibits. The judgments entailed in ongoing practice (when and in what manner to act), no less than the judgments entailed in evaluating acts and character after the fact, are rendered possible by the criteria at hand. Criteria are embedded in our use of language or established by means of the relatively formal orders of acts and utterances that anthropologists describe as ritual and that have as their core the illocutionary function of speech acts.[27] Criteria can be found in a hierarchy or continuum—from the fundamental, constant, comprehensive, or certain to those specific to the moral states, persons, and relations that have been brought into effect (under description) through immediate performances and acts of commitment. Criteria shape but do not determine how we act. We are never free insofar as we are always already spoken, spoken to, and spoken for; we are always free insofar as we are always already responsible for exercising our practical judgment.

Aristotle's conception of virtue as a function of ongoing practical judgment (*phronesis*) needs to be supplemented with an understanding of how criteria are established and how they come to apply to specific circumstances, contingencies, subjects, objects, and means of action. It is in the definitive acts and utterances we refer to as ritual that particular criteria are simultaneously established, acknowledged in principle, and rendered applicable in practice. To establish criteria is to acknowledge them both as valid generally and as relevant and relative to particular persons and circumstances. To live ethically is to accept specific criteria and nominations, to acknowledge such acceptance, to live in accord with such acceptance, to recognize the fragility of that acceptance and those criteria, and, finally, in the least felicitous circumstances, to acknowledge when one has failed and to forgive others their failures. Among the most significant and pervasive criteria are those that establish the basic humanity of persons—as beings mutually subject to criteria and hence to be acknowledged as ethical subjects in their own right, thereby, as Kant put it, having dignity, not price. However, this is also an area both subject to abuse and vulnerable to skepticism.

26. Of course, they often do become objectified as values. For an earlier and somewhat different attempt to articulate the relation of virtue to value, see Lambek 2008.

27. I have not addressed the place of criteria established through law, and hence the tension between ritual performance and legal act.

Speaking and acting entail the predication and appropriation of voice—speaking and acting as oneself (to someone, in the sight or hearing of someone, with reference to someone . . .)—and as such are intrinsically constitutive of ethical subjects and relations. We must (in this sense) mean what we say and do. In addition, we are required to acknowledge what we have said and done. And yet, at the same time, we cannot always mean what we say, insofar as we do not fully know the consequences of our actions, the depths of our intentions, the specificity of our path, or even that it is we who are called upon to speak and act now. We must speak and act seriously and commit to the paths we have begun, to which we are held (and hold ourselves) accountable—and also recognize that full certainty and consistency are not possible. Ethics is vulnerable to—but also achieved in the face of—rupture, erosion, and skepticism.

Speech and action, understood as illocutionary performance, establish the criteria according to which practice, understood as the ongoing exercise of judgment, takes place. We are judged and we judge according to the commitments we make and have made (including those that others have made on our behalf). Ritual acts establish moral states in which new or renewed criteria apply. Ritual serves to increase clarity, certainty, consistency and completeness in what is accomplished in speech and action. Yet it can never fully overcome skepticism or the work of time.

Since every utterance entails a commitment to our words, we are continually put to the test to keep, as it were, our promises. But in the face of circumstance this is often hard to do, and so we are also faced with the challenges of acknowledging our failures, thoughtlessness, misdeeds, infelicities, and changes of heart—and forgiving those of others. It might be said, then, that promising, acknowledging, and forgiving are meta-ethical acts.

Such acts are intrinsically temporal and historical. Indeed, insofar as taking responsibility, rather than apportioning blame, serves as the motor of history, it not inconsequentially produces a subject position of agent rather than victim (except insofar as one is victim to one's own acts).

Insofar as these are features intrinsic to human speech and action, criteria of being human, they will be culturally recognized, a part of the store of human wisdom transmitted in distinctive traditions, cultivated through forms of discipline, embedded in the fine discriminations of ordinary language, and enunciated more explicitly in proverbs and narratives, and sometimes in the rationalized bodies of argument we call philosophy, theology, and even "ethics."

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