

Anthropological Theory

<http://ant.sagepub.com/>

Beyond good and evil? : Questioning the anthropological discomfort with morals

Didier Fassin

Anthropological Theory 2008 8: 333

DOI: 10.1177/1463499608096642

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://ant.sagepub.com/content/8/4/333>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Anthropological Theory* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://ant.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://ant.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

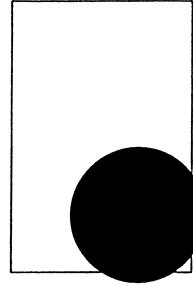
Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://ant.sagepub.com/content/8/4/333.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Nov 13, 2008

[What is This?](#)



Beyond good and evil?

Questioning the anthropological discomfort with morals

Didier Fassin

École des hautes études en sciences sociales and University of Paris North

Abstract

There is a paradox with morals in anthropology: on the one hand, morals are not considered as a legitimate object of study and are looked upon with suspicion; on the other hand, there is an increasing concern for moral issues both in society and within the discipline. Basing my analysis on several empirical studies which I briefly evoke, I call for the development of a moral anthropology. This does not mean that anthropologists should become moralists but that they should study morals as they do politics, religion or medicine. I discuss the two reasons, epistemological and historical, why anthropologists have been reluctant to enter this field of research. I analyse the ambiguities and risks which are effectively inherent to this particular domain. I conclude with two propositions and their two corollaries in favour of moral anthropology, but insist on the heuristic value of the intellectual discomfort aroused by morals among anthropologists.

Key Words

epistemology • ethics • moral anthropology • moralities • politics

The moral sentiment in Europe at present is perhaps as subtle, belated, diverse, sensitive, and refined, as the 'science of morals' belonging thereto is recent, initial, awkward, and coarse-fingered: an interesting contrast, which sometimes becomes incarnate and obvious in the very person of the moralist.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)

The classical act of duettists which turned into an intellectual joust between the detractor of 'moral models in anthropology' (D'Andrade, 1995) and the champion of 'the primacy of the ethical' (Scheper-Hughes, 1995) has given birth to a rhetorical paradigm based on a radical opposition between the pros and the cons of moral engagements and ethical implications in the social sciences. However, each article used these terms in a rather loose sense. On the one hand, the 'moral' also meant critical anthropology

denounced for its post-modern nihilism with regards to knowledge and power (anthropology representing both). On the other hand, the 'ethical' signified political involvement through field activism as well as academic militancy (anthropology allowing both). Roy D'Andrade called for anthropological objectivity, thus indicating that 'moral' was generously and paradoxically associated with both cognitive relativism and value judgement. Nancy Scheper-Hughes proclaimed the anthropologist's responsibility, thus implying in a broad sense her rejection of cultural relativism and her adhesion to political commitment. The show certainly gained in dramatic intensity what the debate sometimes lost in conceptual clarity.

The discussion I would like to engage in here has a more limited scope and the confrontation that will arise with Wiktor Stoczkowski's argument will have a less impassioned tone as well. Actually, one will find that our opposition, fuelled by the specific conditions of an academic arena to debate around the question of morals in anthropology – a question which make most French ethnologists frown – is not frontal but lateral, not total but partial: a theoretical conversation is not a duel, after all.

PLEA FOR A MORAL ANTHROPOLOGY

My point here is not to defend any kind of moral obligation for anthropologists but to underline the need for a moral anthropology. In Nietzsche's words, it is not to call for 'moral sentiments' as a moralist would do, but for a 'science of morals' as social scientists should do. By 'morals' I do not mean any kind of norms and values, of certainties about truth or knowledge (often written with a capital letter), of denunciation of power or authority (clearly separating the two): I simply refer to the human belief in the possibility of telling right from wrong and in the necessity of acting in favour of the good and against the evil. Obviously it does not have much to do with the classical senses of morals given in André Lalande's dictionary (1926) either descriptive as mores and customs of a cultural group or prescriptive as conforming to superior norms. Clearly it is inscribed in the scientific programme of an anthropology of moralities such as has been recently advocated by Jarrett Zigon (2007), who proposes it as an alternative to the tendency he criticizes in contemporary anthropological works in which one learns more about the 'moral understanding of the social scientist than that of their subjects'. This comment leads me to the following clarification.

When I talk of 'moral anthropology', the validity and relevance of which I assert here, I do not mean that I want anthropology to act for the good of humanity (which, anyway, would not be shameful) and anthropologists to become moralists (at least as part of their professional activity): I merely plead for an anthropology which has morals for its object – in other words, which explores how societies ideologically and emotionally found their cultural distinction between good and evil, and how social agents concretely work out this separation in their everyday life. A medical anthropology does not cure – it is interested in local knowledge and practice about illness. A religious anthropology does not proselytize – even if researchers sometimes get converted to the doctrine or mystique they study. A political anthropology does not tell whom to vote for – although some might let their audience know where their preference lies. Similarly, a moral anthropology does not propose a code of good conduct or a guide towards a better society.¹ It helps understand the evaluative principles and practices operating in the social world, the debates they arouse, the processes through which they become implemented, the

justifications that are given to account for discrepancies observed between what should be and what is actually.

Let me give a brief illustration, which, as one may guess, will be based on my own research. A few years ago I taught a course entitled 'The Politics of Suffering'. My point was not to arouse a compassionate feeling in my audience about the misfortunes and afflictions of the unemployed and immigrants but to analyse the sort of moral engagement French society² had with these populations at a particular time in its history, that is, in the 1990s.

A first study was conducted on the 1997 social movement of the unemployed (*'mouvement des chômeurs et précaires'*) which gave way to the creation by the then prime minister of a temporary special fund to distribute among the unemployed. I analysed in particular this new mode of government which was founded on the expectation of individual stories written to the administration by the candidates in order to justify their demand, thus provoking an unprecedented production of autobiographies which had in common an attempt to raise sympathy from the readers and ascertain the merit of seekers (Fassin, 2003). The financial evaluation of the administrative 'remain-to-live', which was the difference calculated between economic resources and uncompressible expenses, was not sufficient any more, even when it was negative, to obtain aid; a moral evaluation was henceforth needed.

A second study was carried out around the 1996 social movement of the undocumented immigrants (*'mouvement des sans-papiers'*) which revealed the existence of a category of foreigners who were not only clandestine workers going through borders but very often persons who had lost a previous legal status, who had been denied asylum, who had not been allowed to join a husband or a father. I discussed how in this period of increasing restriction of immigration and repression against immigrants a new criterion was inscribed in the law for the regularization of foreigners: the 'humanitarian rationale', which concerned persons who were seriously ill and could not receive treatment in their own country. This soon became an important legal avenue for undocumented immigrants (Fassin, 2005). More generally, humanitarianism became the main criterion to legalize clandestine foreigners, and even candidates to a refugee status often had to ask for humanitarian protection after having been denied asylum by immigration services.

These two facts – the exposition of one's life or body to arouse moral sentiments and prove moral qualities – can be inscribed in the larger picture of what I proposed to designate as a 'compassionate moment' characterized by the development of notions such as 'exclusion' and 'suffering' to refer to economic inequalities and their consequences and by the implementation of programmes with more psychologists than social workers, more charity organizations than state institutions. So what I was interested in is how the 'social question' has been turned into a 'moral question' in France during this period; how the poor received money not in relation to their resources but according to their capacity to exhibit their misfortune and merit; how the clandestine immigrants were granted residence permits with medical aid because they were affected by severe diseases, and also how drug-users previously seen as delinquents were henceforth considered with empathy because of the lethal infections they were exposed to and how clinics of listening were opened in the impoverished suburbs with psychologists to consult the marginalized youth.

The sort of anthropology I tried to implement around this historical reconfiguration of moral sentiments and values within politics was thus a critical anthropology in the sense that it made visible and significant what had been taken for granted – the exclusion and suffering of unemployed and immigrants, drug-users and marginalized youth. My intention was to account for the changes that had occurred in our perception of the poor and the ‘other’, and to apprehend what it meant to display compassion rather than justice. It is clear that this moral anthropology is closely related to political anthropology.

WHO'S AFRAID OF MORALS?

Thus exposed and illustrated, the project of a moral anthropology might not seem scandalous, and at this stage of my argument the reader may wonder if it is really necessary to make a case of it. Should not any anthropologist agree on the idea of studying morals just as one studies kinship, rituals, religious institutions, representations of nature or categories of knowledge? Can we not assume the fact that anthropology should contribute to a science of morals as it did for the science of politics since Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes? Conversely, have not all anthropologists considered their work, at least partially, in terms of serving humanity, as did Claude Lévi-Strauss, putting aside the formalism of structural analysis to write a moral anthropological manifesto against racism?

In fact, were it true, moral anthropology would be an entry in social science dictionaries and encyclopaedias, it would be presented in student textbooks and taught in humanities courses – which it is not. Moral philosophy is a traditional intellectual domain, and moral sociology has recently gained an academic space. But in spite of Kant's enthusiastic claim (Louden, 2000) – or maybe because of it since it had clearly a normative orientation – there is no such thing as a moral anthropology – or rather, where there is one, it turns out to be precisely the sort of moralistic, sometimes ‘Christian’ or ‘Neomodern’,³ anthropology which has little to do with what I defend and which, moreover, is usually claimed by disciplines other than anthropology, namely law, philosophy or, more explicitly, ethics.

The question is, then, why should anthropologists be afraid of morals? In other words, why is there not a moral anthropology? I suggest that anthropologists' reluctance with respect to morals has two principal explanations, epistemological and historical.

On the one hand, anthropology constructed its intellectual autonomy, at least since Franz Boas and his followers, on a principle of cultural relativism, opposed to evolutionist as well as universalist paradigms. Cultures were ethically incommensurable. The analysis of their values would risk surreptitiously reintroducing value judgements and moral hierarchies. An extreme illustration of this is Colin Turnbull's ethnography (1972) of the famine among the Ik in Uganda: the author's moral ethnocentrism is revealed both by the parallel he draws with the horrors of the extermination camps and by the contrasting analysis proposed by his young African American colleague. However, a response to this legitimate epistemological anxiety may be given through case-studies in the ‘ethnography of moralities’, to use Signe Howell's words (1997), which reveal the local systems of moral values within specific societies – the Mongols for instance (Humphreys, 1997) – or even particular social worlds – Argentinean football fans as an example (Archetti, 1997). Here the anthropologist does what he usually does, that is to say he provides a culturally situated account of a particular dimension of social reality, in this case the local sense of right and wrong.

On the other hand, anthropology has a long history of erring in the name of morality. There is no need to return to the well-known past of collaboration between anthropologists and colonial administrations to provide evidence of the problem: for many of those involved it was not only a practical manner of gaining access to the field but also an ideological choice in favour of a supposed moral progress. In a different historical context, David Price's research (2004) on 'Cold War anthropology' highlights not only the courageous resistance of anthropologists to surveillance and repression under McCarthyism but also the ambivalent and often conniving relationships between the Central Intelligence Agency and the American Anthropological Association. The post 9/11 situation reawakened these problematic moral commitments, this time within a 'War on Terrorism' aiming at the 'forces of evil' but also in terms of an offensive strategy against Islamism and sometimes Islam itself, invoking both secular and feminist values, as Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) has analysed it.

One could, of course, think that cases of scientific and deontological deviance, such as have been recently revealed in Afghanistan and Iraq,⁴ remain marginal or at least easy to identify and thus to stigmatize. But things get more complicated when it comes to anthropologists who act in favour of the dispossessed and the dominated but use similar moral dichotomies. This is where Jeremy MacClancy (2002) clearly stands when he writes about the 'many anthropologists dedicated to research which has socially beneficial ends . . . exposing the weaknesses in grand policy programs, acting as advocates for the unvoiced, championing the downtrodden' and finally asks, referring to the polemic concerning Napoleon Chagnon's alleged unethical practices with the Yanomami: 'should the bad apparently performed by the odd renegade be allowed to overshadow the much greater good performed by the many?' I would not consider too reassuring the fact of supposedly being on the 'good' side, since blurring of genres (analytical and normative) serves neither science nor politics.

Having done much of my own research on the 'wretched of the earth' – that is, on undocumented immigrants and unemployed poor in France, Andean peasants in Ecuadorian Indian communities or AIDS patients in South African townships – I feel particularly concerned by this risk for anthropologists to take their work on moral issues as a sort of moral guarantee. For this reason I include in my project of a moral anthropology the necessity to consider the anthropologist's own moral prejudices – or in a more neutral way, value judgements – as objects of his scientific investigation as well as those of his 'others'.

PORTRAIT OF THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AS A MORALIST

A significant proportion of contemporary anthropological studies deals with inequalities and violence, refugee camps and military conflicts, human rights and sustainable development, ethnic groups in danger and social resistance to domination. To put it bluntly, this trend demonstrates the generalization of moral concern within the discipline. With this assertion I intend to disqualify neither those who share this moral concern (a priori suspecting them of 'moralism') nor those who prefer less moral topics (a priori assuming their assumed 'amoralism'). Moreover, by referring to this tendency I do not mean to suggest that moral engagements were absent in the past (many examples could be supplied of implicit moral judgements but also some quite explicit judgements in classical works). I merely want to underline the fact that moral indignation has

become a major resource in the choice of topics to be studied, in particular among younger researchers or students, with the obvious risk of confusion between anthropological interpretation and moral evaluation. The consequence is a need for an even more demanding methodology and ethics.⁵ The more we are conscious and critical of our own moral presuppositions or certainties – instead of keeping them in the black box of self-contentment – the more we are capable of respecting the epistemological grounds and of preserving the political engagements of our scientific work.

In order to illustrate this point, I will refer to two personal situations of public disagreement with colleagues on anthropological subjects, which aroused a high level of moral investment. I do not underestimate the risk to which this rhetorical artefact exposes me, of being simplistic in the presentation of the arguments and unfair in supplying only my own version of the discussion. However, I hope that my temporary intellectual sparring partners will consider their perspective neither betrayed nor stigmatized. Both of them are leading researchers who not only share an undisputable scientific authority within the discipline but also clear moral claims within society. And both precisely used the former to found the latter, justifying normative discourses on anthropological grounds. It makes these cases worth studying.

The first scene took place during a conference on the social aspects of AIDS held in Ivory Coast in 1993. The topic under discussion was the secrecy the African doctors kept around the HIV tests: most of them at that time would not tell their patients when doing these tests and consequently would not inform them of the results. Such practices were considered unethical and, as a person but also as a physician, I disapproved of them, like most of my colleagues. But I thought that an anthropologist had to account for what he could understand of the context and reasons of their doing so (Fassin, 1994). This meant taking seriously the justifications they could provide but also trying to suggest broader interpretations they often could not provide. In fact, doctors did not have anything to offer when they discovered an infection, which put them in a discouraging position of helplessness and exposed their patients to a feeling of despair, which sometimes led them to suicide. Remarkably, in the blood banks, where the persons were informed and counselled before being tested, they would never come back and get their results, and if a letter was sent to ask them to go to the hospital it would most often be returned to the sender with the notice that the person did not live there anymore. Doctors did not want to notify and patients did not want to know. This silence around the disease was linked not only to its fatal prognosis, since no treatment was then available, but also to its association with stigma and witchcraft. Françoise Héritier, who was professor in comparative studies of African societies at the Collège de France and president of the French Council on AIDS, was chairing the session.⁶ She indignantly commented that my presentation amounted to a form of moral compromise and considered that my analysis of the doctors' justifications could be understood as my justification of them. Time had come to condemn these practices rather than to analyse them, she said. Nevertheless, she differentiated between the obligation for doctors to inform and the right of the patients not to know. My position, which was not to decide who was wrong but to understand why and how social agents acted as they did, seemed hardly audible.

The second scene took place at a conference of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago in 2003. The theme of the session was the polemics ignited in South Africa by the president's statements on AIDS. As is well known, from 1999 on

Thabo Mbeki developed theories largely influenced by Californian dissidents who had been at the centre of a scientific controversy on the aetiology of the disease in the late 1980s but had since then been completely forgotten. The South African head of state revived the heterodoxy, giving it a political economy turn: poverty inherited from the apartheid regime was incriminated as the main cause of the epidemic; antiretroviral drugs were suspected of contributing to the ongoing tragedy as part of an international plot. These ideas aroused a furore in the country as well as in the rest of the world. The president and his government were alternately denounced as irrational, cynical or insane, especially by AIDS activists who formed a spectacular social movement called the Treatment Action Campaign. My fieldwork in townships and former homelands, but also in scientific arenas and political circles, led me to think not only that things were more complex but also that the contribution that anthropology could bring to public health was to render some intelligibility to seemingly incomprehensible discourses and interpretations (Fassin, 2007). And beyond Thabo Mbeki's statements it was necessary to account for the large audience his theses attracted in the popular classes but also among African intellectuals, not for their scientific relevance but for their political meaning. To many, the link which had been established with history, the recognition of the deep inequalities in the distribution of the disease and the access to treatment, the critique of the behavioural and culturalist interpretations, often mixed with racist overtones, made profound sense. To analyse this economy of resentment operating in large segments of society I suggested apprehending the present situation in terms of embodiment of the past. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, who was speaking on the same panel as me, adopted a quite different position.⁷ Siding with the patients and with the activists who were at that time accusing the head of state and his collaborators of holocaust, she vehemently condemned not only the wrong governance but above all the criminal neglect of a president who was endangering his own people by challenging science and slowing down treatment policies. For me, this position was completely legitimate from the perspective of militancy but it did not bring the sort of knowledge and understanding for which anthropologists are so irreplaceable.

If I have mentioned, without any polemical intention, these anecdotal events – with their almost symmetrical issues of silence and secrecy, on one side, and noise and fury, on the other – it is because they allow me to underline the difference I consider crucial in theory, although difficult to establish in practice, between a moral discourse (what doctors should do and what the president should not say, in these particular cases) and a critical analysis of a moral topic (what are the issues at stake in relation to the question of telling the truth to one's patient or of taking care of one's people). The moral discourse evaluates, judges, sanctions. Critical analysis proposes a possible intelligibility by considering the sense that words and acts have for social agents but also by inscribing them in their broader historical and political context. Moral discourse simplifies for the purpose of its cause (which we can consider as just) whereas critical analysis renders the complexity of issues and positions (which can be taken into account by social agents themselves). Moral discourse is enunciated *a priori* (it knows where good and evil are located) on the basis of intangible principles: it does not need ethnographic validation. Critical analysis is formulated *a posteriori* (it is interested in where and why social agents locate the good and the bad) as a result of an investigation: it requires an empirical exploration as well as a theoretical discussion.

THE POLITICS OF A MORAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Although I have, in my examples, criticized the moral discourse of anthropologists, I must admit that I feel a stronger affinity with it – even in the disagreements that I expressed – than I do with anthropologists who have more comfortably limited the scope of their research on AIDS in Africa to idiosyncratic representations of the disease or traditional practices of curers. By doing so, they provided a culturalist picture of an exotic African AIDS with its blood-sharing rituals, virgin-cleansing myths and fake healers – all themes pertinent as cultural productions on the disease rather than as mere mirrors of reality – without taking into account the much more relevant moral – and political – issues at stake in the epidemics (nor the everyday experience of patients or societies confronted by the latter). Leaving morals – and politics – aside does not guarantee a rigorous epistemology or ethics, and there is a sort of ‘unbearable lightness of anthropological being’, to paraphrase Kundera, sometimes displayed in our disciplinary arenas: avoiding moral issues may be seen as a moral position as well.

A few years ago, Orin Starn (1991) wondered how anthropologists working in Peru had been ‘missing the Revolution’ that the Shining Path was preparing in the rural areas of the country. For him the traditionalist perspective adopted on Indian cultures had occulted the political economy of the Andean world with its injustice and violence. To phrase it somewhat differently, their intellectual indifference to these issues had certainly spared them the sort of moral engagement of which we saw the limits, but it had also blinded them to what was about to happen. After the outbursts of urban violence which occurred in the autumn of 2005 in the French ‘banlieues’, I suggested (Fassin, 2006) that anthropologists had similarly missed the riots. The ethnography which had been carried out in France focused primarily either on traditional beliefs and practices, especially in rural areas, or on strictly symbolic dimensions of political and social life. It had clearly prevented most anthropologists from pronouncing moral judgements on their own society, or had got those pronouncements seriously wrong in relation to what was really transpiring in the country.

In particular, no ethnographic study could account for what I proposed to call the ‘moral economies’ of the impoverished outer cities, in reference to E.P. Thompson’s analysis (1971) of hunger riots in 18th-century England. Just as in the situation 300 years ago, it was not the ‘structural violence’ (to quote Paul Farmer, 2004) which could help us understand why and how youths, mostly from African families, had gone to the streets to burn cars and schools (although these elements were obviously part of the picture, they were precisely structural and could not serve to explain the immediacy of the events). It was, rather, the disequilibrium in the fragile setting of norms and obligations which existed in these neighbourhoods and which was accepted, however unjust (this disequilibrium occurred with the death of two adolescents in an electric power plant as they were trying to hide from the police). Of course the young rioters were aware of economic inequalities and racial discrimination, but, as their parents had done for years, they could endure it only up to a certain point. It is only when a certain threshold was passed that street violence became imminent, as had been the case for all riots since the early 1980s in France. The 2005 events occurred after the death of two youths in the context of a confrontation with the police – the former as well as the rioters were from poor immigrant families, all of them residing in racially segregated housing estates. If the riots in 2005 spread throughout the country instead of remaining localized as in

previous protests, it is not because of a particular behavioural mimesis, as psychological explanations suggested, but because of the provocations of the then minister of the interior Nicolas Sarkozy. Even though the two adolescents had done nothing that could be reproached, he referred to them as delinquents instead of expressing official regrets to the families, and this episode, coming a few days after a verbal altercation in which he had qualified the youth of these 'banlieues' as 'scum', broke the fragile equilibrium of local values of fairness and injustice. This is how I analysed this explosion of violence on the basis of the participant observation I had conducted. However, my fieldwork on the day and night-time activities of the police anti-crime squad in these poor suburbs of Paris convinced me that moral economies were not to be found only among the dominated, as illustrated by the study conducted by James Scott (1976) on South-East Asian peasants, but had to be analyzed also among police as well as suburban youth. In fact it could even be said that the riots resulted in the confrontation between the two moral economies. The practical evaluation of the intolerable in the two worlds, the sense of dignity and the demand for recognition, the ideas about right and wrong were certainly at stake on both sides when violence erupted.

CONCLUSION

Returning to the introduction, I will conclude with the following interrogation: What are the conditions of possibility of a moral anthropology? To answer this question I will resort to a rhetorical presentation borrowed from Spinoza's *Ethics* – my topic being a good excuse for it – with two propositions and their corollaries.

First proposition: Anthropology is always confronted in field situations with a series of moral issues which it often crystallizes by its mere presence. Since value judgement is the most commonly shared attitude toward the social world, the anthropologist cannot avoid and should not elude the moral position he or she adopts, either explicitly or implicitly, either by excess or by omission.

First corollary: It is thus epistemologically but also politically crucial to consider moral reflexivity as part of our research activity, in other words to question the values and judgements that underlie our work.

Second proposition: Moral anthropology is an anthropology which has as its object the study of moral issues posed to societies or which societies pose to themselves – an important distinction since it implies that one should explore questions overtly present but also questions which remain covert or unformulated.

Second corollary: It is then obvious that moral anthropology is not an anthropology which proposes its own morality – that of the anthropologist. Even if it cannot completely escape an evaluative perspective, it remains a critical approach just as any domain of social anthropology and as such it attempts to render visible and intelligible moral issues in a cultural, and consequently historical, context.

This formulation, which advances general principles rather than specific methods, may suggest certainties more than doubts. In fact my main conclusion is, on the contrary, that moral anthropology, that is to say a science of morals based on ethnographic work, should always remain problematic, in the sense that it should always pose problems to the researcher both epistemologically and ethically. Vincent Crapanzano (1995) expresses it in his response to Roy D'Andrade and Nancy Scheper-Hughes: 'If categories of social and psychological understanding are derivative of the complex

indexical dramas that characterize ordinary social interaction, including that between anthropologist and informant, then it follows that our human sciences are morally grounded and have to be recognized as such.' Considering this embedding of anthropological activity in the morals of the anthropologist, the only rigorous attitude towards moral issues is a permanent questioning of the 'moral grounds' of our understanding of societies and their moralities. This is how I comprehend the tension in Michael Carrithers' suggestion (2005) of 'anthropology as a moral science of possibilities', tension between the 'cultural relativism' that anthropologists defend with its toleration of different moralities and the 'moral conviction' that they share about universal values which are worth fighting for – a tension that is not merely abstract since at the end of his discussion he moves from the former to the latter in a radical criticism of American politics after 9/11, particularly in Iraq, which precisely illustrates the blurred boundary between ethical indignation and critical thinking.

There is no social exteriority of morals – even the most radical critique, such as that of Nietzsche, contains a moral discourse. Since we have to live with it, let us work on it and consider our anthropological discomfort with morals as heuristic rather than paralyzing.

Notes

- 1 Although in fact there might be a symmetrical dual trend in contemporary societies to impose ethical codes on anthropology (Lederman, 2006) and to expect expert answers from anthropologists (Rosen, 1977).
- 2 Of course France was not exceptional in that matter, and I have discussed elsewhere a more general phenomenon, in particular in the social sciences, through which 'suffering became social' (2004).
- 3 I am thinking of Richard Garnett (2003) and Agnes Heller (see Constantinou, 1999).
- 4 On the inclusion of anthropologists in the Human Terrain System programme, see David Rohde's article (2007). A heated debate occurred at the American Anthropological Association meeting in November 2007.
- 5 A discussion has been engaged in on this ground in terms of 'new accountabilities' in Marilyn Strathern's collective work on 'audit culture' (2000).
- 6 Françoise Héritier presented her position both as social scientist and AIDS expert in her conclusion of the conference (1995). She reminded the audience in particular that her experience in France made her conscious that ethical problems were obviously not limited to the African continent.
- 7 Nancy Scheper-Hughes has assumed a clear position several times on AIDS issues, her most famous intervention being to defend Cuban policies of control of the epidemic through forced isolation of patients (1994). But beyond this specific case, she has devoted most of her work to the analysis of the political economy of health.

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila (2002) 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others', *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 783–90.
- Archetti, E. (1997) 'The Moralities of Argentinian Football', in Signe Howell (ed.) *The Ethnography of Moralities*, pp. 98–123. London: Routledge.

- Carrithers, Michael (2005) 'Anthropology as a Moral Science of Possibilities', *Current Anthropology* 46(3): 433–46.
- Constantinou, Marios (1999) 'Agnes Heller's Ecce Homo: A Neomodern Vision of Moral Anthropology', *Thesis Eleven* 59(1): 29–52.
- Crapanzano, Vicente (1995) 'Comment to "Objectivity and Militancy: A Debate"', *Current Anthropology* 36(3): 420–1.
- D'Andrade, Roy (1995) 'Moral Models in Anthropology', *Current Anthropology* 36(3): 399–408.
- Farmer, Paul (2004) 'An Anthropology of Structural Violence', *Current Anthropology* 45(3): 305–17.
- Fassin, Didier (1994) 'Le domaine privé de la santé publique. Pouvoir, politique et sida au Congo', *Annales Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 49(4): 745–75.
- Fassin, Didier (2003) 'Justice Principles and Judgement Practices in Allotting Emergency State Financial Aid', *Revue française de sociologie* (annual English selection) 44: 109–46.
- Fassin, Didier (2004) 'Et la souffrance devint sociale', *Critique* (special issue *Frontières de l'anthropologie*) 680–81: 16–29.
- Fassin, Didier (2005) 'Compassion and Repression: The Moral Economy of Immigration Policies in France', *Cultural Anthropology* 20(3): 362–87.
- Fassin, Didier (2006) 'Riots in France and Silent Anthropologists' (editorial), *Anthropology Today. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22(1): 1–3.
- Fassin, Didier (2007) *When Bodies Remember: Experience and Politics of AIDS in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Garnett, R.W. (2003) 'Christian Witness, Moral Anthropology and the Death Penalty', *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics and Public Policy* 17(2): 541–60. See abstract at URL (accessed August 2008) http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=785849
- Héritier, Françoise (1995) 'Rapport Général', in Jean-Pierre Dozon and Laurent Vidal (eds) *Les sciences sociales face au sida*, pp. 295–300. Paris: Orstom Editions.
- Howell, Signe (1997) 'Introduction', in Signe Howell (ed.) *The Ethnography of Moralities*, pp. 1–22. London: Routledge.
- Humphreys, Carolyn (1997) 'Exemplars and Rules: Aspects of the Discourse on Moralities in Mongolia', in Signe Howell (ed.) *The Ethnography of Moralities*, pp. 25–47. London: Routledge.
- Lalande, André (1926) *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Lederman, Rena (2006) 'Anxious Borders Between Work and Life in a Time of Bureaucratic Ethics Regulation', *American Ethnologist* 33(4): 477–81.
- Louden, Robert (2000) *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- MacClancy, Jeremy (2002) 'Taking People Seriously', in Jeremy MacClancy (ed.) *Exotic No More: Anthropology on the Front Lines*, pp. 1–14. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1989 [1886]) *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (trans. Helen Zimmern). New York: Prometheus Books.

- Price, David (2004) *Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rohde, David (2007) 'Army Enlists Anthropologists in War Zones', *New York Times*, 5 October, URL (accessed August 2008): <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html>
- Rosen, Lawrence (1977) 'The Anthropologist as Expert Witness', *American Anthropologist* 79(3): 555–78.
- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy (1994) 'Aids and the "Social Body"', *Social Science and Medicine* 39(7): 991–1003.
- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy (1995) 'The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology', *Current Anthropology* 36(3): 409–20.
- Scott, James (1976) *The Moral Economy of the Peasants: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Starn, Orin (1991) 'Missing the Revolution: Anthropologists and the War in Peru', *Cultural Anthropology* 6(1): 63–91.
- Strathern, Marilyn (2000) 'New Accountabilities', in Marilyn Strathern (ed.) *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*, pp. 1–18. London: Routledge.
- Thompson, E.P. (1971) 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present* 50: 76–136.
- Turnbull, Colin (1972) *The Mountain People*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Zigon, Jarrett (2007) 'Moral Breakdown and the Ethical Demand: A Theoretical Framework for the Anthropology of Moralities', *Anthropological Theory* 7(2): 131–50.

DIDIER FASSIN is a professor of sociology at the University of Paris North and director of studies in anthropology at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales. He is director of IRIS, the Interdisciplinary Research Institute for Social Sciences (CNRS – Inserm – EHESS – University of Paris North). He has been Vice-President of Médecins sans Frontières and is currently President of the Comité médical pour les exilés. His recent publications include *Le gouvernement des corps* (coeditor, Éditions de l'EHESS, 2004), *Des maux indécibles* (La Découverte, 2004), *Les constructions de l'intolérable* (coeditor, La Découverte, 2005), *De la question sociale à la question raciale?* (coeditor, La Découverte, 2006), *When Bodies Remember: Experience and Politics of AIDS in South Africa* (University of California Press, 2007), *Les politiques de l'enquête. Epreuves ethnographiques* (coeditor, La Découverte, 2008) and *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (coauthor, Princeton University Press, forthcoming). Address: École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 54, Boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris, France. [email: dfassin@ehess.fr]
