MORAL ENGINES: EXPLORING THE MORAL DRIVES IN HUMAN LIFE

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Abstracts

Michael Lambeck
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'On the Immanence of Ethics'

I attend to relatively pre-objectified ethical dimensions of everyday life and ordinary action. I argue that ethics is immanent to the social. It is intrinsic to practical judgment, embedded in the performativity and temporality of action, and evident in the ironic acknowledgement of the limits of criteria. My approach attempts to go beneath issues raised by cultural difference or local theories of, or rationalizations for, ethics, without resorting to a universalism grounded either in abstract reason or in human psychology or biology. Instead I ground ethics in human sociality and language. This reframes the comparative question from one of the source, force, or Œquantity of the moral to its thickness, internal differentiation, and accessibility (distribution of its vehicles), hence to matters of its Œquality. It would also lead us to ask not where ethics comes from but what are the forces and circumstances that limit, inhibit, or conceal it (for example, the lowering of temporal horizons, the impoverishment of language, the undermining of liturgical orders, the elaboration of forms of social exclusion and shaming).

François Raffoul
Louisiana State University, Dep. of Philosophy & Religious Studies

'The History of Responsibility'

The concept of responsibility has traditionally been identified with accountability, that is, in terms of will, causality, and subjectivity. Engaging a genealogy of the concept of responsibility in the philosophical tradition, I will wonder whether there might not be other ways to think responsibility, once the categories just-mentioned are put into question in Nietzsche's work. What would responsibility mean if not thought as the consequence of free-will? If it no longer designates the capacity of a subject to "own" its thoughts and acts? If the category of causality is no longer operative or at least problematized? The questions allow us to reconfigure the grounds of ethics. I will attempt to draw these post-metaphysical senses of responsibility in the works of Nietzsche, Sartre, Levinas, Heidegger and Derrida.

Jarrett Zigon
University of Amsterdam, Dep. of Anthropology and Sociology

'An Ethics of Dwelling and a Politics of World-Building'

In this essay, I consider an ethnographic example of anti-drug war political activism to show how a critical hermeneutics allows us to disclose the emergence of ethical demands from a world. The first step of such a hermeneutics is the recognition that although many of our informants may utilize the dominant moral vocabulary available today, ethical imperatives may exceed that which is intended by this vocabulary. As such, we may recognize these concepts as a marker of the problematic of ethics – a place from which our analysis can begin – but not as the end or aim of ethics. Critical hermeneutics, furthermore, seeks to counter the deep moralism that has to a great extent saturated much of our social, analytic, and political lives, and as a result attempts to rethink the link between ethics and politics. Thus, I argue that a critical hermeneutics of moralities provides a theoretic-analytic for rethinking a moral tradition characterized by metaphysical humanism, as well as the social and political worlds in which the concepts and assumptions of this tradition are mobilized.

Jonathan Lear
University of Chicago, Dep. of Philosophy

'Waiting for the Barbarians'

I would like to use the novel by John Coetzee and the Cavafy poem of the same name as the basis for investigating the logical structure of confrontation between cultures. I will explore how logical structure shows up in individual psychological manifestations. I would also like to explore how "waiting" is actually a form of remembering that does not quite understand itself as such.

Cheryl Mattingly
Aarhus University, Dale T. Mortensen fellow at AIAS

'The Flight of the Blue Balloons: Narrativity, Possibility and the Good Life'

This paper concerns the cultivation of a subjunctive narrative self. It is based upon long-term research among African American parents raising children with chronic or severe illnesses and disabilities. These parents often find themselves propelled to imagine and try to transform their lives. The moral engine of their efforts is a crucial "ground project" (Bernard Williams 1981) that I am calling "care of the intimate other." There is a temporality to such projects of care that strongly suggests an inherent narrativity to ethical practice and its self-constituting nature. However, the notion of a narrative self has been widely unfashionable in many quarters. Challenges are the product not only of postmodern/poststructuralist "death of the author" declarations but also emanate from concerns that a narrative self suggests too much coherence and a simple linear life story. Drawing upon one of the parents in my study whose daughter faces probable death, I complicate this coherence portrait by examining how she tries to cultivate uncertainty through the simultaneous nurturing of multiple and mutually exclusive life plots.

Jason Throop
University of California, Dep. of Anthropology

'On Regret: Morality, Possibility, Mood'

Building upon my recent theorizing of mood and morality, this talk focuses upon the moral mood of regret. In particular, I will engage the question of how regret is implicated in shaping our orientation to, what Edmund Husserl termed in the context of his phenomenological ethics, a striving toward "the best possible." That possibilities for being are not only oriented to the future in the context of an anticipation of becoming otherwise, but may also arise in an opening up and re-inhabiting of the past to engage with the possibilities that might have been, is a particular aspect of the ethics of the "best possible" that I will foreground in my discussion of regretful moods as particular forms of attunement to the specific worlds we inhabit and the shifting moral currents palpably coursing through them.

Lotte Meinert
Aarhus University, Dep. of Culture and Society

'Everyday as moral machinery - Beginnings after war in Northern Uganda.'

How do you move on after unimaginable atrocities of war? How do you live with those who violated the most valuable to you? After decades of war and dislocation in Northern Uganda people have moved back to their homes and have started everyday life anew. The ongoing political discussions are highly moralized and concerned with trial justice vs. restorative justice, reconciliation rituals and economic compensation. Yet the focus of this paper is on the power of everyday actions as moral engines of forgiveness and promise. Based on fieldwork in Gulu district the paper explores the profoundness of everyday life in morality, in a discussion with Arendt's ideas of forgiveness and natality (1958), Mattingly's concept of everyday moral laboratories (2013) and Das' points about words, violence, and the ordinary (2007).

Rasmus Dyring
Aarhus University, Dep. of Culture and Society

'The provocation of freedom'

Contrary to the Durkheimian and post-structuralist traditions of thinking the fashioning of moral subjects in terms of constraint and 'unfreedom', there seems to be wide shared agreement in the bourgeoning anthropology of the ethical, that some notion of freedom must be assumed at the core of properly ethical phenomena and that the nexus of that freedom and of the ethical phenomena is to be found in the active registers of human existence; that freedom is to be found in *praxis*, that it is something *exercised*, something crystalizing in the *work*-of-the-self and in *reflective* practical reasoning. This paper argues that freedom originarily is not something we exercise, but something that imposes upon us, something that provokes, calls forth in us a response. Already by virtue of the responsiveness to this call, the mere fact that we hear it, and hence prior to any active, concrete action taken in response to it, freedom has taken place in the world as a matter we cannot dispose of, only attempt to evade and to overhear.

Uffe Juul Jensen
Aarhus University, Dep. of Culture and Society

'Virtues and vision: Caring for the self and for the distant other'

In Sovereignty of the Good Iris Murdoch claims that 'the moral life ..is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices'. I'll explore situations we all experience as individual persons or as participants in communities: situations of hopelessness and despair, situations where we don't see any possibilities of action. Literature and art can learn us about ethical bewilderment and deliberation in such situations (I'll point to such different sources as John Donne's Devotions upon Emergent Occasions and Julian Barnes' Levels of Life). But – also stressed by Murdoch- theory is important too. What kind of theory? What has anthropology in particular and social theory in general to offer? From a philosophical point of view, I'll stress the importance of recognizing the role of two different kinds of virtues in developing ways of caring: The Aristotelian virtues necessary in caring for ourselves and the intimate other: justice, temperateness, truthfulness and courage, and the like; and the virtues of acknowledged dependence e.g. what Aquinas called misericordia, or what the political left has called solidarity. Finally I'll ask how virtues of acknowledged dependence - crucial for caring for the distant other (the mentally ill, the marginalized and excluded)- could be developed and promoted in the competition state?

Joel Robbins
University of Cambridge, Dep. of Archaeology and Anthropology
'Where in the World are Values? Exemplarity, Morality, and Social Process'

I begin by linking moral motivations to values and go on to discuss some difficulties in determining the sense in which values exist. I argue that for those who do not want to rely on models in which cultures supply values, it might be argued that values exist in the form of socially concrete exemplars or exemplary actions. I define exemplars as representations that model the realization of single values in unusually full form – forms that are not common in daily life because most actions are driven by a mix of diverse value considerations. Having established this theoretical framework, I go on to make the further argument, illustrated with ethnographic materials, that some persons and rituals are key social forms in which exemplary representations of values are made socially available to people and are able elicit moral motivations in them.

Dorothée Legrand
École Normale Supérieure, Husserl Archives

'Stranger in the clinical room'

The clinician does not dominate the patient; the clinician does not empathize with the patient; the clinician is commanded to respond to the patient who addresses her. Interactions between a clinician and a patient consist of a continuous series of microethical events, often inconspicuous to the participants. Confronted to unceasingly unprecedented questions, clinical practice is a practice of ethics committed to heterogeneity, to the singularity of each patient, to the irreducible otherness of the other. This irreducibility is what allows the clinical encounter to be a locus of articulation of un-integrate-able perspectives. Life and death cannot be identified with each other, cannot neutralize each other, cannot be translated into each other; likewise, one's perspective and the perspective of the other cannot be integrated into any uniform experience of oneself as a harmonious whole: they remain irremediably foreign relative to each other, and it is as such that they can jointly compose our multidimensional experience of ourselves.

Michael D. Jackson
Harvard University, Divinity School

'The Paranomic'

In Kuranko storytelling sessions, people are licensed and inspired to suspend conventional moral and legal understandings, think outside the box. Virtue, therefore, consists less in achieving or exemplifying goodness than in doing the best one can, given the limits of any situation and considering the abilities and resources one possesses. There are clear connections here between the discursive and imaginative strategies that emerge in a Kuranko storytelling session and James Faubion's notion of paranomics (beside or parallel to the law) – which suggests that ethical praxis is not a matter of adjusting to or conforming to moral, legal or customary protocols but of bending rules without necessarily breaking them. Virtue is thus a matter of virtuosity – skill in getting around obstacles, overcoming difficulties, and resolving moral dilemmas.

Thomas Schwarz Wentzer
Aarhus University, Dep. of Culture and Society

'Responsiveness and the demand of well-being'

There will always remain more to be said, to say it appropriately, as there is more to know, to know the truth and more to be done, to do it well, rather than well enough. And yet: we have to live our lives. This paper presents a phenomenological approach to the question of the roots of ethics, defending a *responsive* conception of human agency. According to this idea, human agency implies an orientation towards well-being or the good. However, this orientation is not the product of our making or of our intentions, but rather a demand we have to answer, no matter what particular social norms might sanction our doings. In this perspective we do not primarily 'strive' for the good or 'pursue' our happiness, but respond to its request. The good always transcends the requirements of social rules, and yet we could not understand what it means to act at all, if we would not conceive of ourselves as responding to the demand of the good. – The paper will develop these thoughts by drawing on Plato, Aristotle and Heidegger, thinking of the human as the responsive being.

Maria Elisabeth Louw
Aarhus University, Dep. of Culture and Society

'Discarded Moral Engines'

My paper will focus on haunting and potentiality as central to moral experience. It will take an ethnographic point of departure in the efforts of Uzbek Sufis who, through a continuous work on the self, seek to approach God as well as to realize Sufism as this-worldly virtue ethics. What stands out as central in their experience of this process, however, is neither the encounter with the Divine, nor their own ethical perfection. Rather, it is insistent feelings of vulnerability, doubt and imperfection, as they are haunted by alternative moral choices they could have made, moral acts they could have engaged in, and moral persons they could have become – in short, by the moral potential in all that which is discarded in the search for moral perfection.

James Laidlaw

University of Cambridge, Dep. of Archaeology and Anthropology

Title: 'Fault Line in the Anthropology of Ethics'

Anthropologists have recently shown a greatly heightened level of interest in taking seriously and developing a richer understanding of the ethical dimension of social life: the literature has developed rapidly the last decade and a half, and is still gathering pace. Although the field is still changing, and still rather inchoate, it is becoming possible to see certain debates taking shape and certain positions emerging. This talk attempts to identify the questions around which debate seems to be forming up, to suggest connections between some of the issues currently causing contention, and to delineate the most significant emerging positions.
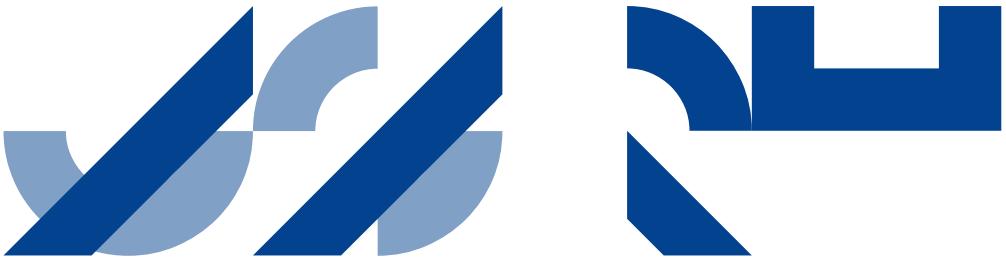
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