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Introduction

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Two apparently contradictory things are both true about the anthropology of ethics. It is true that the academic discipline of anthropology has been concerned with ethics and morality throughout its whole history. It is also true that until the last couple of decades there was nothing that could reasonably be called the anthropology of ethics. Its advent has been felt to be such a distinct development that we are routinely said to have undergone an 'ethical turn', yet people also feel moved, equally routinely, to point out that anthropologists have been writing about morality all along, and they are indeed correct in saying this. So, what exactly is new?

As the chapters in this book demonstrate, there is no single theoretical orientation that defines or dominates the anthropology of ethics. Approaches are diverse and by no means straightforwardly reconcilable. There is not even agreed nomenclature. The title of this volume uses 'the anthropology of ethics' as a broad encompassing term for several overlapping styles of enquiry. I shall also use 'morality' both as a rough synonym for ethics, in line with normal English-language usage, and in a slightly technical sense for a subset of the wider phenomenon, as described later. Some anthropologists (including some contributors to this volume) prefer to talk of the anthropology of moralities, or the good, or values, or 'moral anthropology'. Significant differences lie behind some of these choices. The field is united only by a very general proposition: that enough of the time to make a difference, people act in accordance with evaluations they make, including affective responses they have to their own and others' conduct, and they do this in light of ideas, ideals, and values that they hold. Explicitly and implicitly, consistently and inconsistently, concertedly and by-the-way as they go about their everyday lives, they act in ways that constitute at least partial answers to the questions of how one ought to live and what kind of life is a good life. This pervasive evaluative dimension of human social life, whose conditions, forms, affordances, and variations we have hardly begun to delineate, is the subject of the anthropology of ethics. The ideas, ideals, and values involved in these processes are of course social phenomena, as are the relationships, practices, and

institutions in which they are embodied and expressed, and so the impli-
cation of this proposition, for anthropologists, is that studying human
social life necessarily involves the study of ethics, and equally, to study
ethics is to study forms of social life. This last point is one reason why the
anthropology of ethics has important implications beyond anthropology.

Given the very general nature of this underlying proposition, it is unsur-
prising and indeed productive that the anthropology it has motivated has
taken diverse forms. But the diversity is not without limit. Although little
else may be agreed upon, any form of the anthropology of ethics must,
I think, constitutionally oppose two positions that are quite widely held,
though often unconsciously, and not only by anthropologists. It must deny
that the ethical is unimportant or illusory. And it must deny that we
already know what it fundamentally is. Understanding why these denials
need to be asserted, and why they are related, helps to clarify what is new
about the anthropology of ethics as it has developed in recent decades.
That said, it must be added that the interpretation that follows of these two
precepts is mine alone: once again, the anthropology of ethics is
a vibrantly diverse field characterized by lively disagreements and debates.
Contributors to this volume are not committed as such to any, still less to
all, of what follows in this introductory chapter.

The idea that the ethical is unimportant or illusory is not incompatible
with acknowledging that moral rules and values vary between societies, or
with ethnographic description, even quite rich and detailed description, of
this variation. It is possible, and for a long time in anthropology it was
fairly routine practice, to describe the varying rules and values found in
diverse societies, to see and acknowledge that human social life is shot
through with ethical language, reflection, affect, response, and inter-
action, but for this not to give rise to sustained theoretical reflection on
this ethical dimension of human life or on what its implications might be
for how we understand social relations. Anthropological theorizing
focussed very little on trying to understand ethics. In what kinds and
aspects of interactions, practices, and institutions is it manifest, and how
do these differ across space and time? What implications does it have for
what we can know about human sociality? Not asking such questions was
possible because and insofar as it was thought, or implicitly assumed, that
all this is relatively unimportant or epiphenomenal in relation to more
determinant structures or forces.

Social life might, on the surface, be full of talk and action that seems to
refer to ethical values and ideals, but it might nevertheless be that under-
neath, something harder is determining what really happens, which
makes it possible to explain prevalent moral rules and values and their
variation, and how people abide by them or not, as the effects of causal
forces such as biological and social evolution, stages in technological
development, systems of production, class conflict, or the interplay of
forces of power and domination. Moral ideas and values might be edifying,

and people might genuinely believe in them and think they are motivated by them, but because these ideals and values are detached from and contrary to the underlying realities of life, they have only a superficial impact on how things are really organized and who does what and to whom. Really, whatever people may think or say, social life is driven, in the most influential versions of this reductionism, by the realities of power and the pursuit of self-interest. Beneath the surface, it is a zero-sum game of power and domination and maximization of advantage in wealth and status. Everything else is ideology: insubstantial illusion, strategic disguise, or self-deception.

Probably few anthropologists have ever really thought this consistently, especially about the people whose lives they have shared in extended participant-observation (or indeed in their own lives). And good ethnographic description always makes clear that there is much more than this to any given form of social life. For these reasons, the tendency to take an explicitly dismissive and eliminative approach to ethics has been rarer, and more often protested against, among anthropologists than in most other social-science disciplines. Throughout its history, beginning with figures now recognized as immediate precursors to modern social and cultural anthropology such as Marett (1902) and Westermarck (1906–8) as well as Durkheim (1973 [1914]), through mid-century figures such as Evans-Pritchard (1950), there were eloquent recognitions that anthropology is a 'science of moral life' and concerned with 'moral facts', and that this made the discipline distinctive among approaches to the study of humanity. But although there were repeated attempts to give this conviction sustained expression in the formulation of social theory, and to conceive of a form of anthropological theory for the study of morality (examples include Firth 1951; Kluckhohn 1951; Read 1955; Edel and Edel 1968 [1959]; Gluckman 1972; Wolfram 1982; Pocock 1986), none prevailed against the persistent and mostly unarticulated tendency to think that explanation requires the critical *reduction* of the phenomena of ethical life to a purportedly underlying reality. Metaphors of appearance and substance, or base and superstructure; imagery of 'structure' as a reality that lies deeper than experience, or of 'ideology' as inversion, mask, or disguise; and ideas of culture as a local idiom in which universal global dynamics are expressed all make possible – though, of course, they never require – the explaining away of what people understand to be their motivations, values, ideals, and aspirations as no more than the effects of postulated entities, structures, or forces, imagined as existing on a larger scale or at a deeper level or in a different temporal realm to the people whose conduct they are said to cause. For much of the history of social theory, many have assumed that performing a reduction of this kind is just what it is to practise (or commit) a social science. Given this inheritance, it takes a concerted effort to resist these reductionist tendencies, to subject the phenomena of ethical life – so routine and pervasive as to be

easily taken for granted – to reflective focus and analytical attention, as realities in their own right and irreducible, essential facets of human social life.

I think that part of the explanation for why this concerted effort began to be made in anthropology around the turn of the millennium was that at that time its negation was being asserted so uncompromisingly. But one needs to begin slightly further back. In 1984, Sherry Ortner published an influential survey of anthropological theory since the 1960s (Ortner 1984), in which she proposed that the central theoretical problem social theory should concern itself with was the relation between structure and agency: how to theorize the determination of social life by larger structures in such a way as to make it compatible with the agency of individuals. This was the agenda for what became known as 'practice theory'. From the point of view of the anthropology of ethics, it has obvious drawbacks, not least the imagination of social order as part–whole relations between 'the individual' and 'larger' entities. But it was at least an attempt to moderate the reductive ambitions of theories of structural determination, interpellation, and so on, and to acknowledge some obvious aspects of what human life is like. In 2016, Ortner published a sequel to that paper, updating her narrative of the major trends in anthropological theory to cover the period roughly from the mid-1990s to the time of writing. In this latter paper, although Ortner does not comment on the fact explicitly, the structure–agency problematic is not mentioned at all, which confirms that in its own terms the 'practice theory' project had failed. The proponents of the kind of anthropology Ortner rightly presents as preponderant in the later period – what she calls 'dark anthropology' (Ortner 2016) – had lost interest in maintaining the balancing act it required. The relevance of this here is that the cluster of meta-narratives and explanatory moves characteristic of what Ortner identifies as dark anthropology have in common the implication that the ethical can only ever be epiphenomenal at best. No place exists for it to have any kind of substantial role in human life as understood in that paradigm.

The mission of dark anthropology, as Ortner puts it, was to emphasize 'the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them' (2016: 49), in circumstances in which 'a new and more brutal form of capitalism was expanding rapidly over the globe' (2016: 48). And crucially, it was and remains a key tenet of dark anthropology that we *already possess* not only an understanding of the fundamental underlying 'harsh and brutal' nature of human life, and a narrative that identifies the only really important thing – neoliberalism, however defined – that is currently happening to the world but also the theoretical concepts we need to describe and explain all its local manifestations. 'Dark theory', a selective melange of Marxist political economy, the Gramscian concept of hegemony, and some ideas derived from a partial reading of Foucault (see Chapter 4), 'asks us to see the world almost

entirely in terms of power, exploitation, and chronic pervasive inequality' in which 'there is no outside to power' (Ortner 2016: 50). A seemingly unlimited range of widely dispersed and apparently diverse phenomena – revival of established practices, startling innovations, intensified conflicts, and changing aspirations and concerns – all demanded to be understood as 'local' responses to the globalization of modernity and neoliberalism, so that the anthropological challenge became to re-translate 'local vocabularies of cause and effect' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1998) back into critical social theory's concepts of capitalism and exploitation, power and resistance, and to assign them their place in the paradigm's meta-narrative.

The mission of bringing to light the many and widespread forms of cruelty, systematic domination, exploitation, injustice, and suffering in the contemporary world is undoubtedly an important and urgent one, and anthropologists who can do so in a manner that conveys the intimate experience of individuals and communities in emotionally affecting ways make a distinctive contribution (Robbins 2013). Fine works have been produced within this paradigm. But the value and impact of such works are blunted rather than otherwise by a partiality and one-sidedness that is, in Ortner's own account, all but explicitly avowed, and by routine repetition. Early in the development of this paradigm, Marshall Sahlins (1993) observed and ridiculed its unimaginative predictability and gloom. But more dispiriting than the unremitting miserabilism of this anthropology has been its theoretical aridity.

Presenting what she calls, following Joel Robbins, 'anthropologies of the good' as a complement to dark anthropology, Ortner describes the relation between the two as a matter of difference of mood and tone, and as if the former's value were as a sort of therapeutic remedy for the emotional effects of the latter. They are 'a positive and humane counterweight' and 'a refreshing and uplifting counterpoint' (2016: 60). But there is no reason why the anthropology of ethics should be necessarily cheerful, and its glasses ought not to be rose-tinted. It would be no more defensible for it to exclude brute and difficult truths than is dark anthropology's exclusive focus on them. Importantly, it must include the study of forms of ethical life whose contemplation will not necessarily make most academic anthropologists feel good. Not coincidentally, some of the most influential formative ethnographies (notably Mahmood 2005) have been attempts to take seriously, precisely as forms of ethical life, religious movements that are rebarbative to Western 'progressive' opinion and sensibility. Identifying an instance of the ethical does not imply approving of it. And contemplating some of the ways in which people have pursued what they have conceived to be human excellence (extreme asceticism, mysticism, utopianism, artistic vision, military prowess), including the costs they and others have paid for their quest, can and should be sobering in many instances rather than necessarily 'refreshing'. After all, can we be sure that more harshness and brutality have not been exercised in the

furtherance of attempts to make the world perfect and the people in it pure or heroic than from the shamefaced pursuit of personal wealth and advantage?

The important objection to dark anthropology is theoretical rather than being a matter of emotional colour, or even accuracy in representation of the world. The reason dark anthropology is a dismal kind of 'normal science' for anthropology is that theoretically it leaves no room for 'local vocabularies of cause and effect' to be anything other than grist to its dark satanic mill, to tell us anything we didn't already know about the world, or to contribute to the conceptual repertoire we have for thinking about it. We might pile up examples and provide ever more personal, emotive, and outraged descriptions of them, and we might show ingenuity in adding to the existing catalogue of institutions or situations whose deformities are explained by the dark workings of power and domination; we might take more interest than heretofore in different vectors of oppression and different categories of victim; but the narrative and explanatory frameworks are essentially complete. There is no invitation for ethnography to contribute new insights or concepts of general applicability that might enable or require us to *think differently*.

The anthropology of ethics was not the only new departure in the discipline founded, in at least partial reaction to dark anthropology, on the ambition that the ethnographic study of diverse forms of life might fuel more radical revisions to our conceptual vocabulary and to our understanding of the world. The roughly contemporaneous 'ontological turn' (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Henare et al. 2006; Costa and Fausto 2010; Holbraad 2012; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Heywood 2017), different in many respects, has in common with the anthropology of ethics a rejection of the 'analytical high-handedness' (Englund and Leach 2000) of this style of anthropology, as for instance in Morten Axel Pedersen's (2011) rich account of the not-quite-revival of shamanism in northern Mongolia (see also Laidlaw 2012). Pedersen carefully shows how much would be missed by understanding Mongolian shamanism in the aftermath of the collapse of state socialism as an 'occult economy': the 'local' expression on a symbolic 'level' of the real 'structural' forces of advancing neoliberalism. One way in which proponents of the ontological turn expressed their central concerns was as an attempt to 'take seriously' the terms in which their ethnographic interlocutors communicate their interests and aspirations and their understandings of the world. This involves actively seeking to make it the case that the forms of life we study can tell us something about how things are that we do not already know. This means holding that not everything about them is necessarily comprehended by existing social theory, considering that our understanding of human sociality might require substantial correction if it is to be able to account for the full range of human social experience, and aspiring to learn not only *about* but also *from* the people and forms of life we study. Notwithstanding their well-rehearsed differences, these shared ambitions,

requiring as they do a rejection of the hegemony of dark anthropology, are a substantial matter of convergence between the recent ontological and ethical turns in anthropology.

The caricature of human life as a bleak zero-sum game of power gains a degree of plausibility from the idea that the only alternative to the narrow set of motivations it recognizes is an idealization of 'morality' as a set of precepts and principles that is fundamentally at variance with – perhaps even a symmetrical inversion of – the hard realities of life thus conceived: 'altruism' as opposed to 'self-interest'; the 'moral point of view' as a singular perspective on the world excluding any but its own pure principles as sources of motivation; an abstract, de-personalized, universalizing view from nowhere in particular; the impartial benevolence of the 'point of view of the universe'. It is a necessary precondition for an anthropology of ethics to problematize this concept of morality because ethical life can take many other forms. This concept of morality is not an artefact of academic philosophy only. It has considerable currency in public and general discourse, but this has not always been so. In broad comparative and historical terms, it is singular. Philosophers as different as Friedrich Nietzsche (1994 [1887]), Elizabeth Anscombe (1958), Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), and Bernard Williams (1985), and also in slightly different terms Michel Foucault (1986 [1984]), have suggested that it is the result of a contraction in Western moral thought that has occurred in the modern era: a formalization, conceptual impoverishment, and narrowing of what is recognized as morality. Although their views about the nature and causes of the change have differed, they have all argued that morality is not a timeless, trans-historical concept but requires to be understood genealogically, in the way that anthropologists have learned to understand the category of 'religion' (Asad 1993).

Williams (1985), following Nietzsche (1994 [1887]), sees what he calls this peculiarly modern 'morality system' as representing in important respects a secularization of Christian asceticism, but also as scientistic in form and adapted to the needs of the bureaucratic state, and although it has become powerfully institutionalized and influential on how we think we ought to think, it has not yet wholly colonized everyday life and judgement. He also shows that it suffers from a number of unresolvable internal contradictions. These might mean that it would be impossible to live by it consistently, which might in turn explain why its dominance in everyday life remains incomplete. However that may be, it is clear that, anthropologically, this 'morality' is just one form of ethical thought and an anthropology of ethics needs resolutely to free itself from many of its peculiar and parochial presuppositions.

For much of human history and in many parts of the world – and even in societies in which the morality system is discursively dominant – when people more or less reflectively consider what kind of life they wish to lead, they have reference to values other than those the 'morality system'

considers to be good. And still more perhaps as they go about their every-day lives, responding to situations as they arise, their conduct is informed by values other than those. Noting this, and following many of Williams's arguments, the philosopher Susan Wolf (2015) observes that a society composed entirely of what she calls 'moral saints' would be highly dys-functional, and that such people are by no means wholly admirable. A life lived by the light only of 'moral values' is a narrow one, and she makes a persuasive case for the importance of non-moral values, including espe-cially personal love. This is helpful in many ways, but because Wolf takes a purely analytical rather than a genealogical or comparative approach, she takes for granted that there is, in the abstract, a universally relevant question to which morality is the answer, that question being to what extent and in what ways people should 'constrain and guide their choices for the sake of others (or the common good)' (2015: 4). The abstractness of the 'others' in this formulation, and the casual identification of them with an imagined social whole, places this formulation squarely within a modernist social imaginary, as does the egalitarianism which Wolf takes for granted must be a central element of morality. It is a formulation that presupposes a specific sociology: addressed implicitly to formally equal citizens of a modern polity, unencumbered by unchosen social relations. That indeed is why Wolf thinks this set of values must be supplemented by and to some degree subordinated to others in the living of a worthwhile life. But the de-socialized nature of her understanding of the question of morality means that Wolf takes it as a given that philo-sophical reasoning alone might be able to arrive at a determinate, univer-sally applicable answer to it.

Williams takes a significantly different approach. He distinguishes phil-osophy conducted within the terms of the morality system – 'moral phil-osophy' – from the very much wider range of ways of reflecting on the question of how one ought to live, which he calls 'ethics'. Broadening the object of study from 'morality' to 'ethics' helps to free us from ethnocen-tric and historically parochial assumptions that hinder our ability to rec-ognize forms of life that do not conform to our unreflective expectations of the morally good. Williams noted that for this an ethnographic sensibility is required, and in that spirit he attempted to carry out a historical-anthropological reconstruction of the ethical life of classical Greece (Williams 1992). And a number of anthropologists have, at least for some purposes, adapted Williams's terminology in preferring 'ethics' and 'eth-ical life' to designate the very broadly conceived object of our enquiries, while also noting the possibility of institutionalized forms of ethical life that share some of the features Williams identifies as distinctive of the morality system, and which might not be confined to the modern West (e.g. Laidlaw 2002; Stafford 2013; Keane 2016). But adopting this termin-ology is not of course the only way to achieve the important objective, which is to avoid pre-emptively assuming that everywhere and always

ethical life must take forms we already recognize from the morality system: hence the terminological diversity noted earlier.

If what is new in the anthropology of ethics is therefore systematic reflection on the forms and variation of the ethical dimension of social life, this does not give rise to a new sub-discipline within anthropology, defined by a subject matter separate from that of the rest of the discipline. It is very important not to imagine that the anthropology of ethics implies the study of a distinct domain of social life that might be supposed to be separate from (or to overlap with) other domains, such as politics. Instead, it consists of a way of looking at the subject matter of the whole discipline, which is new insofar as it is motivated by attention to a pervasive and constitutive aspect of that whole subject matter that had not been properly attended to before. It involves recognition that there is an ethical dimension to *all* human social life, and a conscious effort to reckon with that. This turns out to require revision to much of our conceptual vocabulary, rethinking some long-established key concepts, bringing others to a new prominence, and casting some very venerable anthropological topics in a new light. It requires, in other words, work towards something of a conceptual re-tooling for social analysis. The structure of this book and the themes of the parts into which it is divided are designed to facilitate this re-tooling.

In the past (Laidlaw 2014: 2), I have compared the ethical turn to the anthropology of gender in the 1980s. What previously had seen itself as a specialism of one kind or another – the 'anthropology of women' and then 'feminist anthropology' – gave way to a recognition that the gendering of persons, practices, and processes is a pervasive aspect of all social life, and an aspect of what needs to be discussed, whether one is studying the state, new media, religious movements, or whatever, as much as kinship or labour. This meant that over time, the sense that there was a distinct 'anthropology of gender' dissipated somewhat as it became expected that some attention to matters of gender would be integral to any anthropological study, whatever else it was about. Although this no doubt meant a loss of camaraderie among those who had pioneered the movement, and perhaps disappointment as the spotlight of academic fashion moved on, it was an index of success. The anthropology of ethics, which requires a still more thorough refocussing of attention and revision of analytical habit, cannot yet lay claim to that level of success. This volume may be seen as a large collective effort towards that end.

Part I: Intellectual Sources and Disciplinary Engagements

The development of the anthropology of ethics has been built upon, and has in turn fuelled, renewed dialogue between anthropology and neighbouring disciplines that are also concerned with understanding the nature and dynamics of ethical life. The most obvious of these is philosophy, and

Hallvard Lillehammer in Chapter 2 provides a wide-ranging guide to moral and political philosophy in the Anglophone analytical tradition, which brings out the many substantive points of contact with the anthropology of ethics. On a number of fronts, as Lillehammer shows, engagement with anthropology contributes to debates within philosophy, including those which challenge venerable assumptions that both ethical life and ethical theory are adequate only if characterized by universality and internal consistency. As this dialogue develops, philosophers are coming to see that anthropology provides them not only with material for exotic thought experiments (designed according to methodologically individualist principles that tend to entrench those rationalist assumptions) but also with the conceptual resources to develop an altogether richer understanding of the intrinsic sociality of ethical life.

We then have two chapters that deal with two overlapping bodies of writing within Anglophone philosophy that are of special interest for anthropology. 'Virtue ethics' is a problematic category, as Lillehammer notes. Some of its proponents present it as a species of 'ethical theory' to rival consequentialism and Kantianism, while others maintain that its value lies precisely in its not being a 'theory' of like kind as them. Whom to number among its proponents is also not agreed. The three authors discussed in Chapter 4 are often treated as virtue ethicists, but this is not how any of them have represented themselves. So despite its undoubted far-reaching influence in the development of the anthropology of ethics, it remains unclear just what kind of beast virtue ethics is. Rather than attempting an anatomy of this chameleon in Chapter 3, Jonathan Mair focusses on the feature that has most attracted anthropologists – the potential to enable us to think outside the assumptions of the modern 'morality system' and establish a much wider comparative framework for understanding the full diversity of human ethical thought and practice. Mair notes that despite good intentions, the historical and ethnographic imaginations of most virtue ethicists have remained somewhat parochially Euro-American, and he argues that attempts to incorporate non-European ethical traditions have not generally been well formed. He sets out an agenda for remedying these deficiencies. In Chapter 4, Patrick McKearney and I compare and contrast the thought of three philosophers, Bernard Williams, Charles Taylor, and Martha Nussbaum, who have all been influential in the development of the anthropology of ethics, as references to them in chapters throughout this volume demonstrate. This chapter makes the case that it follows from the pluralism of which they are in different ways exponents that moral philosophy needs to depart radically from its traditional de-contextualizing and universalizing tendencies, and needs in fact to re-constitute itself as something like a form of anthropology, a concerted practice of theoretically reflective comparative social description.