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PART I



An anthropology of ethics

ONE



Precedents, parameters, potentials

The anthropology of ethics that I seek to develop has many precedents. Those that are theological, those that are grounded in an aprioristic rather than an empirical and thus unresolved concept of human nature and those that pursue the reduction of ethics to or its dissolution into alleged psychological or biological interests or instincts or needs are of little relevance. Or to be more precise: it does not follow but instead diverges from them. Its central precedent resides in the second and third volumes of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and in several of the interviews that Foucault saw published while he was engaging in the thinking and the research that resulted in those volumes.

Framing Foucault's work of that period are several versions of the concept of governmentality, a concept ranging over not merely such formal and often directly coercive apparatuses of intervention as state administrations and their police but also the great variety of more informal incitements and incentives that ask or invite human actors to govern themselves. Among such incitements and incentives are those that ask or invite actors to make themselves into subjects of esteemed qualities or kinds. Actors who take up such requests and invitations freely and self-reflexively are ethical actors, and their distinctive domain is the ethical domain, of which Foucault identifies four basic parameters. One of these he calls "ethical substance." It refers to that stuff – carnal pleasures, the soul, or what have you – which demands

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attention and fashioning if a given actor is to realize himself or herself as the subject he or she would be. The second parameter he calls the “mode of subjectivation.” It refers to the manner in which a given actor evaluates and engages the criteria that determine what counts as living up to being a subject of one or another quality or kind. The third parameter is that of “askêsis,” from the Greek for “training” or “exercise.” It refers to the particular work that a given subject has to perform on his or her ethical substance in order to become a subject of a certain quality or kind. The fourth parameter is that of the “telos.” It refers precisely to the subject that is the end of any given actor’s striving.

Foucault more precisely thinks of the actor as striving toward the occupancy of a “subject position,” and does so for at least two good reasons. First, actors are never born ethical subjects. The matter is not merely one of wearing the shoe that fits but also – and crucially – the converse: actors must always also adapt themselves to fit the styles and sizes available to them. Second, indefinitely many actors might strive toward the same telos; indefinitely many of them might thus end up being the same subject, if with idiosyncratic variations from one case to the next. That they thus end up as occupants of the same “position” does not, however, imply that they are prisoners of that position as it stands. Subject positions are malleable, if some more than others. Their legitimacy – or illegitimacy – is susceptible to contestation. As a consequence, they are susceptible to alteration, to coming and going. Positions available at any one point of time may accordingly not be available at another. They are subject to replacement, but also to displacement. Nor is the universe of such positions static. Invention is possible – and as Foucault himself demonstrates, it actually occurs.

Another virtue of Foucault’s approach is its analytical and methodological parsimony. It conforms assiduously to the principle that one should not presume any more of the domain under one’s investigation than is absolutely necessary; it is an exquisite exercise in the application of Occam’s razor. Just such an exercise is all the more obligatory when

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the domain at issue is that of human action and human affairs. Parsimony does not, however, result in poverty. Foucault's approach is not identical to but still compatible with a systems-theoretic framework grounded in the distinction between an organized process capable of reproducing or rearticulating its organization in something longer than the shortest of short runs and the environment or environments in which it does so (Faubion 2001c: 98–100; cf. Luhmann 1990: 8–9). Any such process is more or less systematic, but as a consequence of those of its features and processes that enable its maintenance through time, it is also “autopoietic” and capable of “autopoiesis” – these latter two terms deriving from the Greek for “self” and “making” or “creation.”

Autopoiesis is central to Niklas Luhmann's theoretical enterprise, as – under a somewhat different definition – it is to mine. Luhmann for his part distinguishes three general kinds of autopoietic systems: living, psychic or experiential, and social. Plants exemplify the first but not the remaining kinds. Human beings are not the only but for Luhmann as for me an especially relevant example of the second kind. Human beings constitute the central (but not the sufficient) condition of the existence of the social system. The environment of the autopoietic system may for its part provide not merely resources but also any number of what Luhmann refers to as “irritants” (Luhmann 1998: 62), other autopoietic systems perhaps among them.

It is doubtful that Foucault had ever even heard of Luhmann. Yet he was deeply familiar with at least one version of a systems-theoretic framework through the tutelage of his mentor, the historian of biology Georges Canguilhem. The history of biology is less mechanistic and more vitalistic for Canguilhem than for the classic Darwinist (Rabinow 1994). It is a history not merely of the adaptive match between an organism and its niche, but first and foremost of the maladaptive mismatch between the demands of the organism and the demands of its environments. Summarily, but in what also appears to be something of an endorsement, Foucault himself thus characterizes Canguilhem's

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view of the history of life as the history of “that which is capable of error” (Foucault 1998: 476; cf. Canguilhem 1989).

A commitment to vitalism might worry us. Yet Foucault asserts that Canguilhem’s vitalism is merely “methodological” and what he seems to mean is that, Occamist in its own right, it resists relying on the presumption that vital structures and their dynamics are in all cases simple enough to be susceptible to the structural–functional resolutions that have dominated biological analysis from Aristotle to the neo-Darwinist evolutionary psychology of the present day. Whatever other biologists might think, investigators of human action and human affairs should thus be able to appreciate a systems-theoretical framework that is less teleological, less mechanistic, and less in danger of presuming the very conclusions that it purports to prove than the sort of (quasi-Darwinist) frameworks that they might find in A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Talcott Parsons or – at least in the most abstract of his typically abstract turns of mind – even Luhmann himself.

I follow Luhmann in distinguishing human beings from the social. The former, again, are psychic or experiential systems (cf. Luhmann 1990: 67). The latter emerges from the communicative and practical interaction of psychic systems (1990: 167). The systematicity of the social has two strata. One is structural. It comprises institutions, statuses, roles and communicative codes. It is systemically open; institutions differentiate; statuses and roles are lost and acquired; codes display historicity, Derridian play, dissolution and reformation. Above that stratum, however, is yet another, which Luhmann terms organizational. It is cybernetically closed – above all, closed off from anything but mediated interaction with its environment, self-monitoring and self-referential. Whatever else, a social system remains a social system – for as long, at least, as it remains capable of autopoiesis and so is not the victim of its environment. Luhmann thus characterizes the social system as such as the “recursively closed organization of an open system” and so can insist that systems theory as he proffers it

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transcends the common presumption of the opposition between closed and open systems (1990: 12).

The result has its model-theoretical rationale; not least, it insulates the theory itself from the paradoxes that can arise when self-reference has no limit. That virtue, however, comes with a cost that I am unwilling to accept. Its cost is all the more clear in considering Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's development of a theory of the recursively closed organization of an open system, to which Luhmann himself is greatly indebted. The theory at issue has cognition as its primary object (Maturana and Varela 1980, 1992). Maturana and Varela treat cognition as an emergent phenomenon and the precondition of its emergence the brain itself. Its cybernetic closure off from its environment has its putative guarantee in the mediatory buffer of the perceptual apparatus. Such closure is, however, disputable even in the case of cognition. It is all the more disputable in the case of the social system. As I shall argue at length in the chapters that follow, Luhmann's rationale for the organizational closure of the social system is neither analytically nor empirically compelling enough to sustain. Among other things, it is insufficiently Occamist.

Even if opened up all the way, the theory of the social system as a communicative system is not the source of the logic of ethics. It is the source instead of the structural and processual hallmarks of ethics as a distinctive orientation of action. Whether or not Foucault might have cared to endorse it, such a framework – once rendered resolutely open and thus a framework in which neither the autopoietic system nor its environment can be conceived as closed (or, more technically, as definable) – will fill a good portion of what will literally appear as the fine print of the chapters that follow. I will also cast in fine print a variety of other technical and scholarly considerations that readers whose inclinations are as pedantic as my own will likely find of interest, but that readers of the educated lay sort (of which, I admit, there may be few) will likely care to ignore. What is indispensable about the

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framework at issue is its raising the question of the ethical – ontologically and epistemologically – to the level of the collective from the level of the individual (or “subjective”), at which, as Habermas especially has recognized, the very intelligibility of the ethical dissolves in the end into nothing but the unintelligibility of what is typically put forward as personal opinion.

At no point will readers find me attempting to derive from the facts of autopoietic systems and their environments or, for that matter, from any other facts, any axioms or imperatives of a properly ethical order. The naturalistic fallacy that G. E. Moore (1903: 9–15) and many others would accuse me of committing were I to do so probably is a fallacy, though whether this is so remains something of a matter of philosophical dispute (e.g. Hare 1967; Searle 1967). If to commit it is indeed to err, then doing so is broadly and widely human and certainly doesn't exclude the commissioner from the ethical domain. (The Greek cynics were enthusiasts of it, though not in so many words; cf. Foucault 2009: 234). Yet Occamist rigor once again advises against embracing an inferential license that is neither essential nor uncontroversial. Hence, in accord with Foucault's precedent in *The History of Sexuality*, my project here is not “normative.” In other words, I neither begin nor conclude with some collection of directives of judgment and conduct that would constitute what is usually called an “ethics” or a “moral philosophy.”

If of necessity I exercise introspection throughout this project, and if the ethical system that I have internalized – that is, my own, recognizably Western – is as good an example of an ethical system as any other, I nevertheless do not rest with introspection alone and do not take what I might find through introspection as the irrevocable conceptual bedrock on which anything cognizable as ethics must be built. This is the primary methodological respect in which an anthropology of ethics as I understand it departs from the typical moral philosophy. As will become apparent, it does not preclude but nevertheless qualifies my

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appeal to philosophical precedent. Moral and ethical philosophers count as much among my natives as they count among my advisors. My project – like many other anthropological projects – deploys the data of introspection and the data of empirical investigation dialectically, in the sense that the former guide and must guide the formulation of my working postulates of what constitutes the ethical domain just as the latter must correct, enlarge and enrich what intuitively I presume the ethical domain to be. It is, in short, a project of interpretation – with one important qualification. It belongs to the *Geisteswissenschaften*, but always under the control of what is ultimately a cybernetic or more broadly information-theoretic metric, a metric both corrective and having explanatory force and function.

As a project of thus qualified interpretation, it addresses among other things ethical discourses, and addresses them as distinctive semi-otic fields that invite such treatment as the philosophical analyst of concepts as well as the anthropological analyst of symbols might offer. If possible at all, ethical inference is possible only intra-discursively, unless precise semantic equivalences can be established across discourses. Short of that, the casuistic drawing of analogies remains possible, but as with any casuistic procedure, always liable to dispute. An anthropology of ethics that left matters just at that, however, would risk substituting a “discursive relativism” for an older “cultural relativism” that itself fell short of generating an explanation of anything at all, even when it was still possible to believe that cultures were integrated wholes of insular specificity as veritably and irreducibly individual as any of the individuals whose cultures they were. A systems-theoretical framework is one of the devices to which I resort in aspiring not to beg many of the questions that a discursively relativistic framework would continue to beg as much as a culturally relativistic framework did before it or does still. Such questions include those that arise in noting the striking similarities among persons of similar class and status everywhere. They include those that arise in noting that, for all its

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variety, the ethical imagination seems not to vary endlessly and that its basic schematics are considerably fewer than the relativist allows. They include the question of what ethical discourse distinctively communicates and what ethical action distinctively effects. They include the most fundamental of questions: Why ethics? Why is there this thing that we call “ethics” at all? It is difficult to see how either the discursive or the cultural relativist could even begin effectively to pose such questions, much less avoid triviality in answering them.

Jointly and severally, these questions point to precedents beyond that of Foucault alone. Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* (1956) is an inescapable if troubled one. The sociology of religion after Nietzsche remains a particularly plentiful source. The most imposing of its precedents lies with Max Weber’s exploration of the “elective affinities” (or lack of affinities) between various religiously sanctioned directives of conduct and the structural-functional imperatives of various means and modes of economic production, with special reference to industrial capitalism. His exploration yields not merely the diagnosis of Calvinist discipline secularized to serve the god of profit that is the centerpiece of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958a). It also yields a diagnosis of the existential core of the world religions, the grand dichotomy between mysticism and asceticism, and the norm of calculability as the regulative principle of a technically rationalist modernity (1958a: 24). Among its successors are Robert Bellah’s analysis in *Tokugawa Religion* of Ishida Baigan’s eclectic recalibration of Confucian, Daoist and Shinto doctrines in order to allow them to accommodate the legitimacy of the merchant’s life and practices (Bellah 1957). A notable parallel is Jacques Le Goff’s analysis of the gradual theological accommodation of the charging and collection of interest in medieval Christian Europe (1980). Peter Brown has pursued an array of Weberian themes in his many contributions to the social and cultural history of late antiquity and early Christianity (Brown 1980, 1982, 1988, 1995,

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2003). Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005) and Nikolas Rose (2006) have sought to update Weber's original argument; Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens have also contributed to doing so along the way (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994; Giddens 1991).

In anthropology, Clifford Geertz treads some of the territory that Weber did not reach in his research into the correlates of class, status and religious sensibilities in Java, elsewhere in Indonesia and in Morocco (Geertz 1960, 1963, 1968). As James Laidlaw (2002), Joel Robbins (2004) and Jarrett Zigon (2007) have all argued, Durkheim's effective reduction of morality to social norms has done as much to foreclose as to stimulate an anthropology of ethics. Yet it has not foreclosed it as thoroughly as they jointly suggest. Philosopher Alexander Macbeath draws on Durkheimian anthropology in his *Experiments in Living* (1952) though – perhaps not as self-consciously as Durkheim before him – may well commit the naturalistic fallacy along his way. Mary Douglas' discernment of the correlations between modalities of social organization and modalities of cosmology in *Natural Symbols* is hardly less large than Macbeath's in its reach, but it is logically more cautious, as is her later work on class standing, the perception of risk and danger and the assignation of blame (Douglas 1970; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982). A large number of American anthropologists in both the Boasian and the psychoanalytic traditions have contributed to the ethnographic documentation of ethical variation, though rarely with the theoretical direction that the Weberian and Durkheimian programs both provide in their way (see Graeber 2001: 3–5).

The ethical domain is also very much a part of contemporary anthropological horizons, and not merely because anthropologists continue to worry over their own professional ethics or because a number of them suffuse their own research and writing with the ethical position that they personally hold most dear. Unsurprisingly, the best of recent contributions to an anthropology of ethics tend to acknowledge Foucault as at least one forerunner. Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion*