

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02846-3 - The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom

James Laidlaw

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## ONE

**Beyond the science of unfreedom**

What is the place of the ethical in human life? It is not only academic philosophers who ask questions such as ‘How should one live?’, ‘What is a good life?’, or ‘What sort of person should one be?’. And it is not only religious preachers or political reformers either. Everywhere human conduct is pervaded by an ethical dimension – by questions of the rightness and wrongness of actions, of what we owe to each other, of the kind of persons we think we are or aspire to be – so it is an inescapable part of what anthropologists study. How then might anthropologists learn from what philosophers have had to say about ethics? And how might philosophical reflection on ethics be informed by anthropological analysis of the ways in which people in all parts of the world have variously ordered their affairs? What might be required for a dialogue between anthropology and moral philosophy to be developed, and with it a sustained empirical study of ethics that takes into account the widest possible range of human experience? How might social theory need to be rethought in order to make this possible, to enable it to address directly the ethical dimension of social life?

This book sets out a prospectus for the anthropology of ethics, an enterprise that has been developing rapidly in the last couple of decades. I shall be suggesting that, while the anthropology of ethics does open up new topics for ethnographic research, it should not be thought of as a new sub-discipline or specialism. Instead, its mission should

### Beyond the science of unfreedom

be an enrichment of the core conceptual vocabulary and practice of anthropology, and its proper place an integral dimension of the anthropological enterprise as such. The reason for this is that ethical considerations pervade all spheres of human life. The anthropology of ethics, if it is to be successful, will have to find ways of bringing into focus and making amenable to empirical, comparative, ethnographic study dimensions of human conduct that have hitherto been largely invisible to – or sidestepped or denied in – social analysis. A recent precedent for this is the study of gender, which in anthropology, as in most humanities and social-science disciplines, began with all the appearance of an emergent sub-discipline but which, as it came to maturity, turned out instead to be a pervasive modification of the discipline: from a neglected set of subjects ('the anthropology of women') and a specific attitude to them ('feminist anthropology'), through a neglected subject matter ('the anthropology of gender'), then recognition of its ubiquity ('men have gender too'), to become the introduction of a new dimension into anthropological thought.

A transformation of a similar kind is necessary with regard to ethics, because modern social theory suffers from a propensity to describe social life as if ethics were a superficial, marginal, illusory, or fraudulent dimension of it. This is not because social scientists necessarily think this. As Michael Lambek has recently pointed out, the kinds of interactions and relations afforded by ethnographic fieldwork mean anthropologists especially have good reason to think otherwise. They commonly find, says Lambek, 'that the people they encounter are trying to do what they consider right or good, are being evaluated according to criteria of what is right and good, or are in some debate about what constitutes the human good' (2010a: 1). Ethical considerations – recognition of persons, attributions of agency and responsibility, evaluations of states of affairs – are ubiquitous, and built into the very structure of language and interaction (Keane 2010; Rumsey 2010; Lambek 2010b). This is not to say, of course,

### Beyond the science of unfreedom

that all or most people choose to conduct themselves well, all or most of the time. It is important not to confuse the claim that the ethical dimension is pervasive in human life with the quite different question of how often people meet or disappoint their own or anyone else's expectations or hopes. The claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is not an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative.

Now it is of course possible to concede that ethical considerations are pervasive on the surface of human social life, but to maintain that the consciousness people have of the essential features of ethics such as freedom and responsibility, and their experiences of reflecting on and deciding what to do, are nevertheless all subjective illusions, and that the real determinants of human behaviour are wholly material. Such claims come in a number of forms. Those founded on some versions of evolutionary and/or cognitive psychology, which hold that our subjective impression of freedom is an illusory by-product of evolved cognitive processes (e.g. Wegner 2002), have limited support even among cognitively inclined anthropologists, and for that reason among others will not be discussed further here. We should merely concede (see Faubion 2011: 38) that, if such claims were ever to be substantiated, there would be nothing for this book to be about. But other, equally uncompromising assertions that freedom and therefore ethics are systematic delusions (e.g. Althusser 1971) elicit a much less resounding repudiation among most anthropologists, and in one sense this is not surprising, because they are no more than the rigorous working through of bodies of theory (in this case, structural Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis) that enjoy widespread assent among them.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1988: 5) thus had a point when he described sociology in particular and social theory in general as the 'science of unfreedom'. However much individual social scientists may or may not be comfortable with the fact, social explanation, as it is standardly understood, makes its claims to efficacy precisely by

### Beyond the science of unfreedom

means of discounting the ethical dimension of people's conduct. Invoking 'the social' – or 'ideological state apparatuses', 'the global system', 'neo-liberalism', 'colonialist discourse', or whatever – can be supposed directly or straightforwardly to explain why people do one thing rather than another only insofar as their experience of freedom of decision is deemed illusory. This is why social scientists have so rarely felt the need actually to deploy any concept of freedom in their analyses. Bauman himself, commissioned to write a book on freedom as a 'concept in the social sciences', explicitly rejects this possibility, as he does various points of view from which freedom might be thought to be an important aspect of the human condition, in favour of the view that it should instead be an object of sociological analysis. What is of sociological interest, he writes, is the peculiarly modern and parochially Western ideology that values freedom so highly (1988: 28–9). As we shall see, the anthropology of ethics has already achieved enough at least to 'provincialize' that claim, or accusation, of Western exceptionalism. But the assumptions on which it rests are stubbornly entrenched.

It has not then been merely an oversight that until recently morality has been, depending on how one looks at it, either only intermittently or uncertainly an object of anthropological analysis. (I shall introduce some conceptual distinctions between ethics and morality later, but in the meantime and for the most part it may be assumed that these words are interchangeable.) To illustrate how pervasive and intractable the difficulty is, it will be useful to consider briefly one of the most influential recent paradigms in social science, one that appears at first sight to have been formulated explicitly to escape it.

### The economy of practices

Since Sherry Ortner (1984) drew attention to a confluence of interests between Bourdieu, de Certeau, Giddens, Sahlins and others, and bestowed on it the convenient label 'practice theory', there has been a

### The economy of practices

tenacious hope that the idea of a ‘dialectic of structure and agency’ would enable anthropologists to make theoretical sense of their human conviction that people really do decide their own actions – that intentional action is something different from caused physical motion – without relinquishing the traditional sociological belief in the causal efficacy of social and cultural structures. Practice is the mediating term, the recursive process whereby agents’ perceptions and dispositions are structured by objective, material conditions, and their actions, generated by those perceptions and dispositions, in turn tend to reproduce those same material conditions.

Pierre Bourdieu developed what is undoubtedly the most comprehensive and influential working out of this position: a general social theory that integrates much structuralist and post-structuralist as well as psychoanalytic thought into an overarching Marxist framework, as ambitious in scope as those of Marx and Durkheim themselves. But in the end, whether in the writings of Bourdieu or the many influenced by him, the promised ‘synthesis’ of agency and structure has turned out, through all the interminable sentence inversions, to be no more than either splitting the difference or a prolonged oscillation, a to-ing and fro-ing recognition of the force first of one and then of the other side of the agency-structure polarity, and in the end it comes down always on the side of the latter.

‘Agency’ in this paradigm – this is true alike of Bourdieu (1977; 1984; 1990), Giddens (1979; 1986), Ortner (1984; 1989; 2006), and many others – is defined directly in relation to structure, as the efficacy of individuals’ actions in reproducing, resisting, or altering structures. So it systematically conflates any question of freedom – of whether or in what sense peoples’ actions are unconstrained and really their actions – with that of their structural or transformative efficacy, and therefore recognizes as ‘agency’ only actions conducive to certain outcomes: those that are structurally significant. At this point, because analysts writing in this framework always take it for granted that what social agents are or ought

### Beyond the science of unfreedom

to be ‘really’ doing is aiming at their own advancement – resisting and challenging structures that limit their capacities, and improving their position within them – agency becomes identified with the efficacious pursuit of one’s own power and position (on this see Lambek 2000; Laidlaw 2002; Keane 2003; Mahmood 2005; Evens 2008; Sykes 2009; Laidlaw 2010b; Faubion 2011). This concept of agency therefore differs from any everyday notion of freedom in smuggling analysts’ views of what people ought to do with their freedom – the pursuit of their ‘real interests’ – into its very definition.

Although much rhetorical embellishment tends to obscure the fact, Bourdieu is faithfully Marxist in his materialist determinism in relation to consciousness: a person’s dispositions inevitably correspond to his or her class and social position because they are ‘engendered by the objective structures, that is, in the last analysis, by the economic bases of the social formation in question’ (1977: 83). The agent is afforded tactical room for manoeuvre, but his or her values and motivations are given in the rules of the game of class reproduction. And a great deal of ingenuity goes into demonstrating that everything that might be thought to lie outside the economic logic of competition and struggle can really be reduced analytically to another modality of the movement of capital (see especially Bourdieu 1984; 1986; 1991; 1993). Kin relationships, friendships, collegial and neighbourly relations, any social connections with any degree of obligation attaching to them, are ‘social capital’; education, manner of speech and dress, and taste in everything from food through music and sport to holiday destinations are understood as investments in ‘cultural capital’; the concept of ‘symbolic capital’ does the same reductive work for all forms of ritual and ceremony and anything that confers prestige or renown, including any apparently generous, kind, or disinterested action. Disinterestedness indeed is an ideological illusion. Taking part in a sponsored charity run, offering your seat on the bus to an expectant mother, giving directions to a lost tourist in the street: all these

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02846-3 - The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom

James Laidlaw

Excerpt

[More information](#)

### The economy of practices

are really small investments to build up future cultural and social, and ultimately therefore real economic, capital. All are convertible forms of 'capital-in-general' and, like economic capital itself, ultimately derived from the accumulation of congealed labour (1986: 46). Thus it makes sense for social analysis to be conceived as a 'general science of the economy of practices', since whatever their visible form, their real dynamics are 'objectively economic'.

In social analysis carried out in this vein, it passes for hard-headed insight to portray any state of affairs in any part of the world as always the same self-interested contest of power and resistance: an ethnocentric projection of the modern West's most self-hating self-image. But the impression of quantified precision is largely just that. The imagery of investment and conversion is rarely cashed in with specified rates of return or exchange. Instead, industry is directed towards imaginatively including further dimensions of life in the same simplifying – and in its way touchingly naïve – picture. So to social, cultural, symbolic, and then political and academic, has recently been added 'erotic capital'. The author of this proposal acknowledges that quantifying erotic appeal will be difficult, but insists that this is 'not an excuse for failing to recognize the social and economic importance of erotic power in all areas of social activity' (Hakim 2010: 499). However, it cannot be that the only way to recognize the importance of eroticism is to imagine it as a single form of capital that makes beauty, charm, liveliness, social presentation, and sexuality all neatly convertible, and reliably responsive to pseudo-rational investment strategies ('women generally have more erotic capital than men because they work harder at it'). It seems indeed a pretty certain way to miss everything distinctive about its overwhelming and unfathomable power. The calculated jockeying for advantage imagined in this rendering of erotic life (all, not coincidentally, tidily hetero-normative) seem laughably inadequate to both the comic and the tragic extremities to which we all know erotic desire can take us. Characteristically,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02846-3 - The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom

James Laidlaw

Excerpt

[More information](#)

### Beyond the science of unfreedom

morality appears in this account entirely as a mechanism of social control: ideologies that inhibit women from exploiting their erotic capital (as otherwise of course would be natural) to maximize their economic and social advantage.

In Bourdieu's classic analysis of gift exchange, which he describes as a 'collectively maintained and approved self-deception' (1977: 6), status competition takes on the appearance of disinterested giving. The system reproduces itself because it works 'behind the backs' of those who participate in it. And on his account generally symbolic, social, and cultural capital all operate to the extent that their true nature is invisible – 'mis-recognized' or 'euphemized' – and accumulation in all cases depends in the last analysis on economic means. He insists that his approach is not mechanistic, and that consciousness has a real 'autonomy', but this turns out to consist merely of the fact that the deceptions the system plays upon it – people's misrecognition of what they themselves are doing – are causally important for the reproduction of the system (1990: 41). The incorporation of the objective structures of the social order into the agent in the form of bodily *habitus* ensures that his or her perceptions and dispositions are such as to generate the conduct that will in turn reproduce those objective conditions. The *habitus* perceives only what it is primed to perceive, its 'selective perception' ensures that whatever 'regulated improvisation' it engages in along the way, it will adjust itself, 'to a probable future which it anticipates and helps to bring about because it reads it directly in the present of the presumed world, the only one it can ever know' (1990: 64). Whatever one thinks one is doing, one is always in fact playing a maximizing game in such a way as to reproduce the structures in which one is placed:

The network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term. (1986: 52)



### The economy of practices

It is fair then for T. M. S. Evens to conclude that, in Bourdieu's theory, 'moral force, although often invoked, is only simulated (as symbolic capital), while mechanical process, although repudiated in principle, is proffered in fact' (2008: 115). Bourdieu's is a sophisticated account of how social reproduction accomplishes itself, of how material structures produce agents with the dispositions required to reproduce those structures, in a world in which the impression that there are reflective, intentional, self-responsible persons is no more than a useful device for the reproduction of the system. It is therefore a relentlessly watertight explanation of a world in which it would be a miracle if anything were ever to change, one also from which cruelty, pride, and jealousy are quite as absent as love, and in which, I am pleased to report, we do not in fact live.

John Stuart Mill famously observed that political economy is premised on an abstraction from the complex reality of human motivation and action. It treats of human action, he wrote, only insofar as people act in the pursuit of wealth and it 'makes entire abstraction of every other passion or motive' (1864: 137). Sociological theory descended from Comte, Marx, Durkheim, and Bourdieu similarly abstracts from freedom of action. Were it equipped only with the concepts and standards of explanatory adequacy of these forms of 'the science of unfreedom', anthropology would remain in a position still more dismal than Mill's economics: able to treat of human conduct only by abstracting from its ethical dimension. Fortunately, not all the resources provided by the tradition of social thought, broadly conceived, conform to Bauman's prescription for the 'science of unfreedom' – among those whom I would to varying extents exempt would be David Hume, Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Michel Foucault (a varied list, avowedly) – and as we shall see as this book proceeds, there is much in the anthropological canon that escapes it. But undoubtedly Baumann is correct that his still-more-dismal science has been dominant. The reason then that an anthropology of ethics must be more than merely a new sub-discipline is that for it to succeed requires the development of a

### Beyond the science of unfreedom

notion of explanatory adequacy – of what an effective social explanation might be – that does not re-describe the conduct of responsible agents as the effects of causal ‘forces’ or the mechanical self-reproduction of ‘objective structures’. This, obviously, requires making ‘freedom’ a part of our conceptual vocabulary: not just a ‘discourse’ that is an object of ideology-critique, but a concept we think about and also think with. Unless we can develop conceptual resources to enable us to do this, ethics will remain necessarily outside our purview, and an anthropology of ethics a contradiction in terms.

### Anthropology and morality

I have said that the anthropology of ethics has developed largely within the last couple of decades, and in the relevant sense that is true. It is only since the 1990s that anything like a sustained set of discussions and debates has developed, or a sense begun to dawn generally that the ethical is a dimension of social life to which any anthropological inquiry ought at least to attend. But it is also and equally importantly true that morality has never been absent from anthropological thought. Many of the greatest ethnographies written throughout the discipline’s history have at their heart sophisticated discussions of moral concepts and reasoning. And the idea that anthropology is fundamentally about ‘the moral’ has been voiced many times, including by some extremely influential thinkers, although what they have meant by this has been diverse.

It is well known that towards the end of his life Emile Durkheim (1953; 1979) announced his ambition of subsuming what had been moral philosophy into an empirically grounded positive science of ‘moral facts’. This, for Durkheim, was to be the ultimate triumph of Positivist social science, a demonstration that the fundamental bases of social life – moral rules and values – are subject to knowable laws and therefore amenable to expertly guided improvement and reform. A few decades later Robert Marett simply stated, without appearing to think that it