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

James Laidlaw

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THE SUBJECT OF VIRTUE

An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom

The anthropology of ethics has become an important and fast-growing field in recent years. This book argues that it represents not just a new subfield within anthropology but a conceptual renewal of the discipline as a whole, enabling it to take account of a major dimension of human conduct which social theory has so far failed adequately to address.

An ideal introduction for students and researchers in anthropology and related human sciences.

- Shows how ethical concepts such as virtue, character, freedom and responsibility may be incorporated into anthropological analysis
- Surveys the history of anthropology's engagement with morality
- Examines the relevance for anthropology of two major philosophical approaches to moral life

JAMES LAIDLAW is a Lecturer in the Division of Social Anthropology, and Fellow of King's College, at the University of Cambridge.

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Even the term ‘science of morality’, considering what it describes, is much too arrogant and offends *good* taste – which always tends to prefer more modest terms. We should sternly admit to ourselves *what* will be required in the long term, *what* the only right course is for the moment: that is, to gather the material, establish the concepts, and organize the abundance of subtle feelings and distinctions in the area of values, as they live, grow, procreate, and perish; and perhaps we should also attempt to illustrate the more frequently recurring forms of this living crystallization – in preparation for a *taxonomy* of morals.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1998 [1886]: 74)

We need to free ourselves of the sacralisation of the social as the only instance of the real and stop regarding the essential element of human life and human relations – I mean thought – as so much wind. Thought does exist, both beyond and before systems and edifices of discourse. It is something that is often hidden but always drives everyday behaviours. There is always a little thought even in the most stupid institutions; there is always thought even in silent habits.

Michel Foucault (2000 [1981]: 456)

Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduit, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face. All these are objects which he cannot easily see, which naturally he does not look at, and with regard to which he is provided with no mirror which can present them to his view. Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. It is placed in the countenance and behaviour of those he lives with, which always mark when they enter into, and when they disapprove of his sentiments; and it is here that he first views the propriety and impropriety of his own passions, the beauty and deformity of his own mind . . . Bring him into society, and all his own passions will immediately become the causes of new passions.

Adam Smith (1976 [1790]: 110–11)

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