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Lillehammer, Hallvard (2023) Moral and political philosophy. In: Laidlaw, J. (ed.) The Cambridge Handbook for the Anthropology of Ethics. Cambridge Handbooks in Anthropology. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 9781108591249. (In Press)

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Moral and Political Philosophy

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Anthropology and Philosophy

A contemporary student could reasonably be forgiven for thinking that anthropology and philosophy are completely separate areas of study. To some extent, this impression is borne out by how these disciplines are presented in the specialist literature. Yet this impression hides a more interesting and complicated story. Prior to the institutional emergence of the social sciences, philosophers would not generally have considered anthropological questions as beyond the limits of their 'subject area' (see e.g. Aristotle 350BC/1988; Hume 1739/1978; Nietzsche 1887/1967). Until recently, anthropological thought was generally considered continuous with philosophical thought, in the sense that ethnographic and historical facts were recognizable to philosophers as part of what they ought to know about. Also after the emergence of anthropology as a separate 'discipline', anthropologists and philosophers have continued to make use of arguments and theories from the other discipline, even if this is not always explicitly recognized or reflected on (see e.g. Westermarck 1906; 1932; Macbeath 1952; Brandt 1954; 1979; Ladd 1957; Winch 1958; Schweder 1991; Moody-Adams 1997; Lear 2006). In this chapter, I describe some of the areas of interaction and overlap, as these are reflected in contemporary moral and

political philosophy. In doing so, I shall set aside the history of how discussions in anthropology and philosophy have intersected over time (see e.g. Hylland Eriksen & Sivert Nielsen 2001). I shall also be extremely selective in the choice of topics to illustrate the interface between anthropology and philosophy, taking as my examples a small number of issues that have recently preoccupied both disciplines. For example, I shall have little to say in this chapter about the philosophical reception of recent empirical work in moral psychology. (For a discussion of moral psychology and cognitive science, see the chapter by Natalia Buitron and Harry Walker in this volume. See also Blackburn 1998; Doris 2002; Nichols 2004; Joyce 2005; Prinz 2007; Haidt 2012.) Finally, I shall approach these issues almost exclusively through the lens of recent work in Anglophone philosophy. This is obviously not the only way to exhibit the links between these disciplines (c.f. Das, Jackson, Kleinman & Singh 2014; Cahill et. al. 2017). It is, however, one effective way of doing so.

Ethics, morality and the political

In accordance with recent convention, it is natural to divide moral philosophy into three intersecting branches, the integration of which would constitute a 'system' of philosophy in the sense of the systems produced by Plato and Aristotle in the ancient world; or Hume, Kant and Hegel in the modern. The first of these branches, sometimes called 'moral theory', investigates the nature and connections between basic concepts of ethical interpretation and criticism, including 'the good' (e.g. value or utility); 'the right' (e.g. duty or obligation); and 'the virtuous' (e.g. character or self-cultivation). The connection between moral

theory and anthropology is revealed once we ask which of these concepts to employ as the central units in the interpretation of human behavior. Thus, it has recently been argued that an anthropology focused exclusively on rule-based concepts, such as duty or obligation (or what Bernard Williams (1985) called 'the morality system') fails to make sense of the contextually situated agency and deliberation of ethical subjects and should therefore be supplemented by an anthropology of 'virtue', or 'the good' (see e.g. Lambek 2008; Robbins 2013; Laidlaw 2013). At the same time, the idea of virtue, understood as a stable character trait, has been criticized by philosophers who are skeptical of appeals to character traits in the interpretation of human action (see e.g. Harman 1999; Doris 2002). I explore these connections between the anthropology and philosophy in the Section entitled 'The Good, the right, and the virtuous' below.

The second branch of moral philosophy, sometimes called 'applied ethics', investigates ethical problems that individuals, groups, or institutions face in the real world. Thus understood, applied ethics is a branch of social criticism, and is often focused on complex and divisive issues such as assisted reproduction, the ethics of sex and gender, human rights, or other topics at the forefront of public debate (see e.g. Frey 2005). The point of contact between applied ethics and anthropology extends beyond the fact that anthropology itself has an ethically ambiguous history when it comes to some of the issues it investigates, such as questions of legitimacy in a 'post-colonial' world (see e.g. Mbembe 2005; Goodale 2017). Anthropologists also need to reflect on the terms they apply to describe the topics investigated, such as 'regime', 'socialism', or 'neo-liberal' (see e.g. Ortner 2016); and they need to do so with as much critical scrutiny as they apply to the main targets of their interpretation or criticism. The case for 'applied

ethics' taking account of work in anthropology is equally overwhelming and arises partly from the danger of thinking that the main task of social criticism is to take a moral theory formulated in the abstract and then applying it without being sensitive to context (see e.g. Singer 2011; Keane 2016). I explore this issue further in the Section entitled 'Equality, justice and the cosmopolitan ideal' below.

The third branch of moral philosophy, sometimes called 'metaethics', investigates the nature of ethical claims, including their cognitive status ('Are ethical statements expressions of emotion?'); their epistemological aspirations ('What is moral knowledge?') and their metaphysical foundations ('Is there a single true morality?'). The close connection between metaethics and anthropology is revealed once we ask how to interpret different social practices or groups (including our own), and how this question relates to the plausibility of ethical relativism (see e.g. Plato 380BCE/1997; Westermarck 1932; Williams 1985; Rorty 1991; Moody-Adams 1997; Harman 2000; Prinz 2007; Wong 2007). For example, the extent to which we should expect to discover 'sameness in difference' or 'difference in sameness' is a question to which both the conceptual tools of the philosopher and the interpretative data of the anthropologist are equally relevant (c.f. Keane 2016, 3-12; 260-62). I explore this theme in the Section 'But isn't it all relative?' below.

So far I have said very little about what is known as 'political' philosophy, as opposed to 'moral' philosophy, or 'ethics'. This omission is indicative of a deep controversy within philosophy itself. On the one hand, political philosophy is often thought of as a branch of applied ethics, namely the branch that applies moral theory to public and other social institutions, such as the state (see e.g.

Rawls 1971; Dworkin 2011). This view of political philosophy has deep roots in modern philosophy and in some parts of the Anglophone sphere it has, until recently, been largely dominant. On the other hand, the idea of regarding political philosophy as a form of applied ethics has been criticized by those who claim that the ‘moralism’ embodied in this idea involves a mistaken detachment of philosophical thought about politics from the real world, a detachment that results in a set of theoretical abstractions that fail to capture how the social world actually works (see e.g. Badiou 2002; Williams 2007). According to this criticism, the correct place to locate political philosophy is ‘outside’ ethics as conventionally understood (see e.g. Geuss 2005; 2010). I shall make no attempt to adjudicate this controversy here. (For a parallel controversy about the anthropology of ethics versus the anthropology of politics, see e.g. Fassin 2015; Ortner 2016.) What I shall do instead is take as the focus of my discussion a set of issues from the recent literature on international justice that vividly bring out what this disagreement between ‘moralist’ and ‘realist’ approaches to political philosophy is about.

The Good, the right, and the virtuous

Moral theories provide conceptual tools for the interpretation of attitudes, actions, or states of affairs. As normally conceived, they are ‘normative’, as opposed to ‘descriptive’, theories of human behavior. There is a vast literature that warns us against confusing ‘descriptive’ claims with ‘normative’ claims; inferring an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’; or committing what has come to be known as ‘the Naturalistic Fallacy’. (Hume 1738/1978; Moore 1903; Sinclair 2019.) Yet in

practice, descriptive and normative claims are always likely to be somewhat entangled, and anthropology is one of the areas of social thought where the presence of such entanglement is at its most poignant (see e.g. Geertz 1973, 3-30; 140-141; Williams 1985). It is therefore worth considering what relevance (if any) a substantially normative moral theory might have for the anthropology of ethics and morality.

One answer is that much work in anthropology has itself got a substantially normative agenda, the concepts and assumptions of which can in principle be mapped onto one, or more, of the moral theories that have been articulated by philosophers. I shall return to this possibility shortly. A second answer is that normative assumptions can sometimes enter into description, explanation or interpretation because what we are doing is 'describing' something as an approximation to (or 'in the light of') some normative standard, or 'ideal' (see e.g. Hurley 1989; Moody-Adams 1997; Davidson 2004). There are at least three reasons why a project of interpretation could employ substantially moral assumptions along these lines. First, by making what is a simplifying assumption about the beliefs and attitudes of the people they are trying to understand, a theorist may succeed in improving their ability to predict or explain what those people are up to. Second, by making such an assumption, a theorist may succeed in making the behavior of the people in question look less unfamiliar and more 'like their own'. Third, by making such an assumption, a theorist may succeed in making the people in question come across as reasonable or good, and therefore less exotic or offensive, to an initially skeptical or biased outsider. In each case,

the moral theories developed by philosophers can be of use in working out what the substantially normative assumptions in question might be.

According to one way of interpreting the current state of moral theory, it is a contest between Consequentialism and 'the rest' (see e.g. Scheffler 1988). The issue in contention is what kind of ethical ideas (such as thoughts about 'the good') we should regard as basic in the interpretation of ethical thought, and whether we can interpret all other ethical ideas in those terms. Contemporary Consequentialism is maximally ambitious in this respect, as it seeks a foundation for all ethical thought in terms of one single idea, namely the idea of a *good*, or desirable, *state of affairs* (such as the reader of this chapter experiencing pleasure). Stripped of their bells and whistles, consequentialist theories can be thought of as having two parts (see e.g. Pettit 1991): i) a theory of desirable states of affairs (its 'theory of the good'), and ii) a theory about how these states of affairs should be realized (its 'theory of the right'). On a consequentialist account, what is right is always a function - however complex - of the good. And a good consequentialist, it is natural to assume, is a person who (in some way or other) *acts for the best*.

The idea that a theory as reductively simple as Consequentialism is philosophically standard might strike contemporary anthropologists with a combination of horror and surprise (but see e.g. Barth 1966; Kapferer 1976; Popkin 1979; Bailey 1996). Yet in other parts of the human sciences, from decision theory to economics, the interpretation of people in broadly consequentialist terms is frequently considered a default option for anyone seeking to interpret human action in terms of the rational pursuit of desires in

light of beliefs. It is important to bear in mind, therefore, that in its purely schematic form the Consequentialist framework is in principle consistent with the good consisting of virtually anything whatsoever, one content-neutral label for which is 'utility'. (Hence its alternative name, 'Utilitarianism'.) Indeed, ever since the original rise to prominence of Utilitarianism in the works of Bentham, Mill and others, much attention has been devoted to the question of how to understand the consequentialist notion of 'the good'; in particular whether to restrict this idea narrowly to features of mental states such as agreeable experiences, or to include a wider range of desirable states of affairs as well, such as physical health; human perfection; social equality, individual freedom or natural beauty (see e.g. Feldman 2004).

Understood as a normative theory, Consequentialism is not a descriptive account of how people actually behave. It is a theory of how they *ought* to behave, or of that towards which they ought to *aspire*. Yet one of the most important features of Consequentialism is that it does not automatically tell people to *think* like consequentialists. Indeed, in one of its most influential manifestations (associated with another one of its early champions, Henry Sidgwick) it does not even tell people to *believe in* Consequentialism (Sidgwick 1907). This feature of the view derives from its schematic structure, from which it follows that what agents ought to do is think, feel, believe, or act in such a way that more good will be produced, *whatever it takes*. Another way of putting the point is to say that you cannot directly infer from a consequentialist *criterion* of right actions a decision procedure for how to *guide* your behaviour in the course of ethical thought. It all depends on what will, in fact, produce more good; and that could (at least in principle) be most effectively achieved by way of many, or

even most people, rejecting Consequentialism in favour of traditional moral codes, such as local religious precepts. Bernard Williams's label for this idea, 'Government House Utilitarianism', is one that has stuck because of the way it brings out the paternalistic implications of a view that lets the average member of the 'polis' carry on as normal within structural constraints imposed by a class of 'enlightened' consequentialist rulers (Williams 1995, 153-171). In any case, Consequentialism is consistent with a view of ethical thought according to which ethical insight is *esoteric*. It is an interesting question at the interface of anthropology and philosophy to what extent these and comparable ideas of ethical insight as esoteric have been similarly embodied in the self-understanding of ethical subjects in different times and places, and in the context of different cosmologies and systems of religious belief (c.f. High, Kelly & Mair 2012).

Much of the philosophical controversy over Consequentialism concerns its theory of 'the right', according to which (in some way or other) it always turns out that *the ends justify the means*. A potentially more interesting source of controversy from an anthropological perspective is the fact that in its schematic form Consequentialism treats all goods as malleable (or in principle possible to aggregate) across time, place, persons or institutions. To oversimplify somewhat, as long as there is more good in the world, it does not matter where that good resides, or with whom. Critics therefore complain that Consequentialism fails to respect 'the separateness of persons' (see e.g. Rawls 1971). The fact that this is thought of as a serious problem brings out that both consequentialists and their critics have tended to assume that persons really are 'separate' in the required sense, and that the fundamental locus of ethical value is the individual human

being (or 'soul'), understood independently of its relation to other individuals or a greater whole. (See e.g. Parfit (1984) for an interesting exception.) I shall return to this issue, and its relevance for anthropology, in the next Section.

If moral theory is a dispute between Consequentialism and 'the rest', then who are 'the rest'? It is common to identify two separate strands of 'non-consequentialist' moral theory, widely known under the labels 'Deontology' and 'Virtue Theory' respectively (see e.g. Miller 2011). Where Consequentialism takes the idea of 'the good' as basic, Deontology takes the idea of 'the right' as being prior to (or at least as basic as) 'the good', thereby potentially inverting the interpretive schema employed by Consequentialism and giving an account of moral goodness and virtue that makes essential reference to the idea of *right action*, or *action according to the right principles* (see e.g. Kant 1785/1998). Although it is in principle neutral about the exact origin or source of these principles (but see Nietzsche 1887/1967; Anscombe 1958), arguably the most influential form of Deontology in contemporary philosophy is a family of secular (or partially secular (c.f. Taylor 2007)) views focused on the idea of hypothetical agreements made between rational individuals for the regulation of society in accordance with their independently specifiable desires or interests (c.f. Gauthier 1984). According to one of the currently most influential versions of this idea, morality is a system of shared principles that no one already motivated to find such principles could reasonably reject (see e.g. Scanlon 1998).

The idea that morality constrains the behaviour of ethical subjects by prescribing a set of moral principles, at least some of which may be thought of as exceptionless or 'absolute', is arguably as old as ethical thought itself (c.f. Durkheim 1912/2008; Irwin 2007). Yet, as critics have pointed out, the idea that

a 'morality system' is derivable from some rational agreement or 'contract' is an historically quite specific manifestation of ethical thought, and one that finds its most important roots in the philosophical theories developed in Europe during the 'early modern' period (Williams 1985; Geuss 2001; see also Hobbes 1651/1994; Locke 1689/1988; Rousseau 1762/1997). Moreover, in its contemporary manifestations, this kind of Contractualist Deontology has a number of striking limitations that have led many critics to look elsewhere.

At least three limitations of Contractualist Deontology are worth noting in the context of a discussion of the relationship between anthropology and philosophy. First, a Contractualist Deontology has comparatively little to say about the place in ethical thought of vulnerable persons or non-human beings who are not candidates for playing the role of contracting parties to rational agreements. One important area of ethical thought is therefore left 'off stage' by Contractualist Deontology (see e.g. Held 2005). Second, although by focusing primarily on the question of what contracting parties *cannot reasonably reject* Contractualist Deontology might offer a viable account of what is morally permissible or impermissible (where what is impermissible is thereby obligatory to avoid), it does not thereby offer an account of what, among permissible ways of carrying on, is good, better, or best. Thus, it has been argued that a Deontological morality focused exclusively on the notion of duty and permissibility will struggle to make sense of the fact that some things people admire or aspire to are so favored precisely because they are *beyond the call of duty*, 'supererogatory', or otherwise excellent (see e.g. Heyd 1982; Raz 1986). Third, the model of the ethical subject as an independent and rationally calculating individual whose commitment to other ethical subjects is conditional

on their acceptance of principles agreed to as a matter of contract is not obviously suited to make sense of how individuals actually identify themselves as ethical subjects whose ethical lives are structured by special ties and particular histories, where the ties in question are often regarded as historically 'given', and are therefore not in any interesting sense 'contracted' into at all (see e.g. Taylor 1989). This gap between model and reality gives rise to two further challenges for Contractualist Deontology. The first is that insofar as the model of the ethical subject as morally committed 'subject to contract' fails to describe a self-conception that is reflectively available to that subject, there is an aspect of intrapersonal ethical understanding that the model fails to capture (c.f. Skinner 1969). The second problem is that insofar the model of the ethical subject as morally committed 'subject to contract' is meant to provide some critical leverage on the self-conception available to that subject, it puts the interpreter in a position where the conceptual tools employed are potentially at odds with those accepted by the people they are trying to understand. It is an interesting question whether some aspect of this problem is present in all anthropological fieldwork, even at the absolute limit where the 'fieldwork' in question is conducted on oneself (c.f. Geertz 1973; Moody-Adams 1997). However that may be, the risk of 'missing the point' is always a real one where the model of the ethical subject employed by an interpreter diverges from that accepted by the subjects being studied, or (assuming that we can get our head around that notion) from what they are 'really' like. Thus, it is a frequent complaint about the Deontological moral theory attributed to Immanuel Kant, for example, that it attributes to human beings a kind of 'transcendental' freedom, independence and

rationality that human beings do not actually have (see e.g. Williams 1985; Kant 1785/1998).

Whatever else one might think of it, Contractualist Deontology has the advantage of placing the concept of *agency* at the center of attention, where entering a contract or accepting a principle is something that agents are assumed to be able to choose or decide freely, or for themselves. A different model of the ethical subject that equally puts the concept of agency at center stage is that of the ethical subject as a 'subject of virtue' (see e.g. Lambek 2008; Laidlaw 2013; c.f. Foucault 1997). This model of analysis, which in philosophy goes by the name of 'Virtue Ethics', takes as its primary focus the idea of an admirable disposition or character-trait; the aspiration, cultivation or manifestation of which is regarded as a basic factor in ethical interpretation (see e.g. Hursthouse 1999; MacIntyre 1984; Foot 2001). The introduction in recent anthropology of the model of the ethical subject as a subject of virtue raises a number of questions that strike right at the heart of Virtue Ethics considered as a 'third way' in moral theory. Two of these questions are of particular interest here. The first is whether talk about admirable character traits attributes to people a set of stable dispositions they do not actually have. The second is how Virtue Ethics relates to Consequentialism or Deontology, and whether it is helpful to think of Virtue Ethics as a distinctive kind of moral theory at all. (The anthropology of virtue is treated at greater length in Jonathan Mair's chapter in this volume. The anthropology of freedom is treated at greater length in Soumya Venkatesan's chapter. For the relationship between virtue and freedom, see e.g. Laidlaw 2013, 47ff.)

The first question arises from studies in social psychology that claim to establish that the manifestation of ethical behaviour by human beings is highly situation specific and sensitive to contextual cues that are frequently not apparent to the subjects who display them and that are, in any case, often of dubious ethical significance (Doris 2002; Haidt 2012). Among well-known studies of the kind are the infamous Milgram experiments, where apparently normal people were enticed to inflict serious pain on others during the course of their professional activities (Milgram 1974), but also more recent experiments where responses have been elicited to actual or imaginary scenarios involving arbitrary subjects being hit and sometimes killed by lethal trolleys and the like (Greene 2013; c.f. Keane 2016, 6ff). The problem is that an ethics of virtue seems to presuppose the existence of character traits that experiments like these reveal either not to exist, or to be ethically misguided.

Recent work in anthropology not only speaks to, but also contains an important critical perspective on, arguments against Virtue Ethics based on skepticism about character traits. There are at least two reasons for this. First, as described in recent ethnographies of self-cultivation, it is a common assumption that virtue can be extremely difficult to achieve, or perhaps not even be fully achievable at all, for most human beings (c.f. Humphrey 1997; Pandian 2009). It is no objection to virtue thus understood that ordinary people can be easily enticed to act contrary to virtue in a wide range of circumstances. Indeed, the fact that they are so easily enticed is arguably embodied at the very heart of much organized religion (see e.g. Mahmood 2004; Hirshkind 2006). There might be very good reason for someone to pray five times a day, for example, if the aim is not to stray from a narrowly prescribed path of pious action, thought, or

feeling. Second, another common assumption is that virtue is irreducibly *social*, and so – in many cases – not achievable by one person in isolation. Thus, Webb Keane has argued that social practices function as ‘exo-skeletons’ that make our character traits more robust than they would be if they were to depend entirely on what is ‘within’ us alone (Keane 2016, 97). It is no objection to Virtue Ethics thus understood that individuals are easily enticed to act contrary to virtue in a wide range of ethically inhospitable scenarios. Indeed, the fact that people are easily so enticed is implicitly recognized in the idea that the achievement of virtue is only likely against a background of shared practices of socialization in which such enticements are either absent or explicitly proscribed (c.f. MacIntyre 1984). And even if attributing stable character traits to real human beings does involve an element of idealization, this is hardly a compelling argument on its critics’ behalf (c.f. Weber 1970). After all, it is not as if competing models of the ethical subject as a ‘utility-generator’ (Consequentialism) or a ‘rational contractor’ (Contractualist Deontology) do not equally involve some degree of idealization.

The second question concerns the classification of Virtue Ethics as a distinctive, or ‘third way’, in moral theory. There is a good case for thinking it is not. First, both Consequentialist and Deontological theories have historically included a ‘theory of virtue’ that interprets the idea of self-cultivation on their own distinctive terms. Thus, Consequentialists are likely to interpret virtuous self-cultivation in terms of someone striving to ‘act for the best’ (c.f. Adams 1976). Deontologists are likely to interpret virtuous self-cultivation in terms of someone striving to live as ‘a person of principle’ (c.f. O’Neill 1996). Second, the very idea of virtue is one that involves the idea of some *good* (namely a good way

for people to be) towards which individuals, groups and institutions are meant to *aspire*. To this extent, Virtue Ethics shares with Consequentialism its teleological structure and can therefore be thought of as a species of the genus 'ethics of the good'. This ambiguous feature of Virtue Ethics has direct implications for the anthropology of ethics and morality, where the label 'anthropology of the good' has recently been used to describe a model of interpretation that includes both consequentialist and virtue theoretic elements (see e.g. Robbins 2013), and which could therefore benefit from conceptual disambiguation. The case for disambiguation arises partly from a problem that is as old as philosophical discussion of virtue and the good itself (see e.g. Irwin 2007). This problem can be summarized in the question: 'What is virtue *for*?', a question that could be variously answered by saying that some virtue (such as generosity) is: i) 'its own reward'; ii) a 'means' to the achievement of good things (such as happiness); or iii) only present when the subject of virtue is in fact *both* displaying her virtuous character *and* reaping the rewards (such as being both generous and happy). Once we have these distinctions to hand, we can see that there is a sense in which the paths of different kinds of Virtue Ethics are importantly distinct. (See e.g. Kraut 1989; Annas 1993; Irwin 2007.) On the one hand, there is an interpretation of Virtue Ethics that understands the value of character traits as being essentially a matter of their conduciveness to the promotion of independently specified (or 'good') states of affairs. On some interpretations of Aristotle, for example, virtue is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for living a 'good life'. A Virtue Ethics of this kind is arguably indistinguishable (except in emphasis) from some versions of Consequentialism. On the other hand, there is a kind of Virtue Ethics that understands the value of

character traits as being a basic feature of ethical appraisal that does not need to be independently explained or justified in consequentialist terms. On some interpretations of Plato and the Stoics, for example, virtue is both necessary and sufficient for living a 'good life'. A Virtue Ethics of this kind is clearly distinguishable from most versions of Consequentialism. (It might also be the kind of Virtue Ethics that has the better claim to be an 'ethics of freedom' (c.f. Laidlaw 2013).) Either way, the task of accurately describing and evaluating such virtues (and vices) as have actually been thought to exist is one that any plausible moral theory will benefit from. An anthropology of the good can contribute to this task, whether it is focused on virtue as interpreted in terms of some religious framework, or along more secular lines (see e.g. Faubion 2011; Lambek 2010; Lambek, Das, Fassin & Keane 2015).

One theme emerging from this discussion of moral theory is that of different theories approximating each other by explaining or incorporating the insights of the others. This is not an accident. The Utilitarian Henry Sidgwick, writing towards the end of the Nineteenth Century, argued that when properly thought through the morality of 'common sense' will emerge as a version of Consequentialism (Sidgwick 1974/1907). Derek Parfit, one of the most influential Anglophone moral philosophers writing at the beginning of the Twenty-first Century, argued that when properly thought through Consequentialism and Contractualist Deontology describe complementary ways of 'climbing the same mountain'. (Parfit counted Kantian Deontology as another attempt at the same summit, and therefore named his result the 'Triple Theory' (Parfit 2011; 2017). Yet if different moral theories shade into each other this

way, what's the point of having all of them? One response is to point out that moral theories provide alternative models of interpretation, the different versions of which may be variously suitable to capture the ethical experience of historically located ethical subjects on terms that they themselves would understand. The fact that there are alternative ways of doing so is no indictment if the different ways of conceptualizing ethical thought end up endorsing broadly the same forms of life. A second response is that they don't shade into each other at all, or at least not perfectly so. In order to make it look otherwise philosophers have arguably had to ignore crucial aspects of 'common sense' (in some times and places), or have had to twist the interpretation of ethical experience to cover up remaining issues of deep disagreement (c.f. Huddleston 2016). Consider, for example, the various ways in which people have historically understood the allegedly self-evident claim that '*All men are created equal*' (US 1776; my italics). Recent work in anthropology has much to contribute to the evaluation of this response insofar as it is likely to put pressure on our 'shared' understanding of: i) who to include in 'everyone'; ii) who to count among the 'men'; iii) what to understand by being 'created'; and iv) what to understand by the term 'equality'.

Equality, justice and the cosmopolitan ideal

In contrast to influential currents of European thought during the latter parts of the Twentieth Century (see e.g. Dumont 1967/1980; Lévi-Strauss 1974; Bourdieu 1977; but see Fassin 2014), much of Anglophone philosophy during this period was narrowly *individualistic*, with the systematic study of the nature of collective and institutional agents, such as business corporations or 'group

minds' only having gained prominence towards the end of the Century (see e.g. French 1984; List & Pettit 2011; Searle 2010). In the Anglophone tradition, the study of collective, corporate or institutional entities has traditionally been the preserve of political philosophy, with particular focus on the nation state and its duties of primarily 'distributive' justice (Rawls 1971; Nozick 1974). This primary focus of political philosophy is currently a source of much controversy. Part of the controversy concerns whether the focus of interpretation is better confined to individual ethical subjects, or whether it is more helpful to focus on the structures, institutions or collectives within which these ethical subjects are embodied as vehicles, incubators, or victims of power or constraint (see e.g. James 1984; Young 2011). Another part of the controversy is focused on the idea that political philosophy is a branch of moral philosophy; namely the moral philosophy of large institutions, the nation-state being the paradigm example of these (see e.g. Geuss 2005). On this topic, there is a furious debate between those who subscribe to a so-called 'realist', as opposed to a so-called 'ideal theory', interpretation of political thought (see e.g. Galston 2010). To see what these debates are about, and to illustrate their significance for issues at the interface of anthropology and philosophy, it will help to have a concrete example to hand. There is no better example of the kind than the topic of *social* (including *global*) *justice*.

Two paradigm examples of the dominant methodology in Anglophone philosophy can be traced to a particular moment in recent history, when the professional literature took a 'practical turn' in response to the social and political upheavals of the 1960's. In his 1971 monograph, *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971), John Rawls introduced a thought experiment in which the basic

distributive principles of a reasonably 'well-ordered' society were to be arrived at by imagining mutually disinterested persons choosing such principles behind a 'veil of ignorance' in which they don't know how well off they will be once the principles chosen are applied. (The reader may recognize this model as a version of Contractualist Deontology discussed in the previous Section.) Rawls argued that the individuals in question would prefer a 'risk-averse' solution that guarantees that inequalities are only permitted if they benefit the worst off. In his 1974 monograph, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Robert Nozick objected that Rawls's egalitarian solution is incompatible with the freedom of individuals to responsibly exercise their natural rights to control themselves and their property through continuous voluntary exchange (Nozick 1974). In effect, Nozick accused Rawls of licensing a form of 'theft' when the state appropriates the legitimately acquired benefits of the best off and redistributes them to the worst off. At roughly the same time, in his 1972 paper 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', Peter Singer introduced the 'Shallow Pond' thought experiment (Singer 1972). In this thought experiment, you are to imagine walking past a pond in which another person is drowning who can easily be saved at little or no cost to yourself. The question is whether you have a duty to do so. The expected reaction is to think that you should obviously save the drowning person, from which Singer argues – by parity of reasoning – that you should equally save any other person in dire straits, whether they are nearby or far away; drowning or dying of starvation, etc., for example by making such moderate sacrifices as giving money to charity or supporting worthy causes in other ways. Later commentators have argued that with respect to vast numbers of afflicted people across the globe, the relationship of the average citizen in the affluent West is

more like that of someone faced with a person drowning who either they, or some member of their community, have previously pushed into the pond in the first place. Some of these commentators have gone further and combined the conclusions of Singer and Rawls's thought experiments into a single theory that interprets the duties of distributive justice on a global scale along the same egalitarian terms that Rawls proposed for individual states (see e.g. Pogge 1989; 2008). The result is a comprehensive system of prescriptions for moral and political thought that applies equally across the world; conceived of as one gigantic and increasingly connected 'global village'.

What matters for present purposes are not the details of these and other similar philosophical thought experiments (c.f. Kamm 2007; McMahan 2009). What matters here is to understand how these arguments are supposed to work, namely by deriving practical recommendations for individual and institutional behavior in highly complex circumstances from schematic hypothetical scenarios interpreted in moral terms. There are at least three controversial features of this methodology, each of which is directly connected to questions of interpretation and criticism at the intersection of anthropology and philosophy (c.f. Banner 2014).

The first is that *all else is never equal* (c.f. Fassin 2012). When people find themselves in a situation that is structurally similar to Shallow Pond they will do so at the end of very different histories; with very different beliefs and expectations; with very different ways of describing the wider context, and with very different degrees of knowledge and confidence in their ability to make the right kind of difference by acting in one way or another. The anthropological study of particular situations where similar issues have arisen (e.g. of the way

that actual historical persons have conceptualized their place in events of varying degrees of extremity) arguably offers some hope of protecting people from the distortions that can result when interpreting current and historical events in terms of abstract, schematic and moralized templates like Rawls's Original Position or Singer's Shallow Pond (c.f. Das 2007; Humphrey 2008).

The second controversial feature is the generally *individualistic* way in which the dominant methodology have tended to cast the agents involved in its schematically described thought experiments. (It is an ironic fact that the subjects in Rawls's original thought experiment were imagined to be 'heads of households'.) This feature has the unfortunate potential to obscure from view that ethical subjects face moral and political decisions not only as arbitrary individuals, but as people who identify as participants in collective histories; religious communities; or ethnic groups, where relative to each of these different 'social identities' the question of who should decide, and on what basis, will often vary across conflicting but simultaneously embodied identities in the same situation (c.f. Kymlicka 1991; Sandel 1998). As already noted, the philosophical literature on joint, collective and corporate agency and responsibility in Anglophone philosophy has expanded considerably in recent years (see e.g. French 1984; List & Pettit 2011; Bratman 2013; Gilbert 2014; Hutchinson et. al 2018). Having said that, there are few signs of Anglophone philosophers abandoning their basic individualistic instincts; and even less of them seriously contemplating the idea of treating entities like information systems or other ontologically heterogenous 'networks' as ethical subjects in their own right (c.f. Latour 2005). One explanation for this might be the politically unfortunate entanglements with totalitarian ideologies that philosophical systems appealing

to collective social entities like 'spirit', 'Dasein', or 'the collective unconscious' got themselves into during the Twentieth Century (see e.g. Hegel 1821/1992; Heidegger 1927/1978; Jung 1969; Berlin 1952/2014). More relevant for present purposes is a concern about the legitimacy of power; in particular the power accorded to collective or corporate agents in virtue of assigning them the status of ethical subjects. If we are really to assign institutional systems (such as multinational corporations) moral duties towards the individuals their activities affect, then what – if anything – are we thereby committed to assign them by way of moral rights against those individuals? (As 'legal persons', corporations are granted both legal rights and duties in many jurisdictions.) A third explanation is the widely held view that individual subjects can be morally responsible not only for what they *do*, but also for what they *participate in* (see e.g. Arendt 2003; Kutz 2000). The issue here is that in moving our focus from individuals to collectives or structures we shall only succeed in 'throwing the ethical baby out with the bathwater' by letting ethically responsible individuals 'off the hook'. In the background of this and similar concerns is a deeply rooted assumption in modern moral philosophy that concepts such as *right*, *duty* or *responsibility* only make sense if interpreted in terms of goings on that are somehow *internal* to individual human beings who are - at least potentially – rational, in control of themselves, mutually independent, and otherwise free from external constraint (see e.g. Kant 1785/1988). There is a currently growing literature in moral philosophy that explores the potentially distorting defects of this view, and how it has tended to underplay the social dimensions of moral agency and responsibility (see e.g. Strawson 1962; Williams 1992; Hutchison, MacKenzie & Oshana 2018. See also Laidlaw 2013; Venkatesan in this volume).

A third controversial feature of the dominant methodology is that far from merely 'abstracting' from context, it also tends to *idealize* the relationships between individuals by describing them in normatively tendentious terms, e.g. as mutually independent rational individuals ethically constrained (only) by the voluntary exercise of natural rights over self and property. This is an assumption that, in Raymond Geuss's provocative formulation, is then left 'flapping and gasping for breath like a large moribound fish on the deck of a trawler, with no further analysis or discussion' (Geuss 2010, 64; see also Gray 1989; 2000. Geuss's complaint was directed at Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*). The point is that by interpreting the relationship between real historical actors in these idealized terms, the theoretical schema fails to do justice to how, in any given time and place, all social thought is practically embodied in a complex psychosocial ecology the precise contours of which are rarely visible from the philosopher's armchair. The recent anthropology of 'ordinary ethics' vividly illustrates this point. Thus, when in *Life and Words* Veena Das describes how women are especially vulnerable to rape and murder in conditions where they have to leave the comparative safety of their dwellings in order to defecate, the issue is not so much that an abstract theory of justice is in principle incapable of addressing the issue (of course it *could*), as that from the perspective of abstract idealization the significance of something so ordinary as the passing of bodily waste is unlikely to be given much of a hearing among theorists whose primary interest is in how to 'divide the cake', or similar questions of traditional concern in recent political philosophy (Das 2007; c.f. Levinas 2005).

The trade-off between abstraction and context cuts both ways, however. This point is readily observable in recent anthropological discussions of

multiculturalism; global justice; human rights; and the interpretation and criticism of the 'post-colonial world order' (see e.g. Asad 2003; Goodale 2017). Much as one has to strongly agree with the compelling diagnoses contained therein of the blinkered prejudice, hypocrisy, internal inconsistency and covert oppression embodied in various manifestations of this 'world order' (see e.g. Rabinow 1996; Mbembe 2001; Žižek 2015), the ethical terms in which these diagnoses are standardly articulated is often the very same terms in which the distinctively Modern, Western (and sometimes Christian) culture that is held responsible for this 'world order' has historically articulated its universalistic, or cosmopolitan, ethical aspirations (see e.g. Appiah 2007; Lillehammer 2014a; 2014b). These are ethical aspirations the articulation of which owes more than a trivial amount to the kind of philosophy that finds its expression in thought experiments like Rawls's Veil of Ignorance and Singer's Shallow Pond (c.f. Rousseau 1762/1997; Kant 1793/1996). Exactly what to make of this in practice, such as when interpreting appeals to human rights from groups who explicitly reject the assumptions that have given human rights discourse its wide social currency in the first place, is a notoriously difficult question to answer (see e.g. Kuper 1994). Whatever one makes of it, there is no doubt that while a conceptually perspicuous anthropology has the potential to contribute to progress in moral philosophy in virtue of correcting for a range of common distortions or omissions, an empirically tractable moral philosophy has the potential to contribute to progress in anthropology in virtue of being conceptually perspicuous.

But isn't it all relative?

Is there a single true morality? The ethnographic and historical data might be thought to speak for themselves. The ubiquity of ethical difference and disagreement presents a formidable obstacle to the view that if only we get straight about what we really (dis-) approve of we will realize that at bottom we really (dis-) approve of the same things. Whether it be the ethics of what we kill and eat (e.g. in vegetable, animal or human form); how we manage and reproduce our families (e.g. gender norms; the number and kinds of partners we have; what counts as 'our own' children); or how different social groups relate to each other (e.g. as 'equals'; hierarchically; or as little as possible), the claim that there is a single and unified object of thought called 'morality' is one that stretches the limits of empirical plausibility. Moreover, the fact that people often tend to approve of a certain kind of life *because they happen to live that life*, as opposed to live that life *because they approve of it*, is evidence that whatever people get up to in cultivating an ethical sensibility, this is not a matter of grasping some single and unified body of truth called 'morality' that exists independently of our contingently evolved psychology and social practices (Mackie 1977; Joyce 2005). Short of drawing the skeptical conclusion that there is no such thing as getting it right or wrong in ethical thought at all, the most reasonable view might seem to be some form of *relativism*, such as the claim that actions are right or wrong (or people good or bad) only in relation to the norms that are approved of within a given group, society or culture (Harman 2000; Prinz 2007; Velleman 2015).

The problem of relativism is one of philosophy's interminable puzzles which arguably goes back as far as the subject itself, as witnessed by Plato's discussion of Protagoras's claim in the *Theaetetus* that 'man is the measure of all things'. Yet even if there is no prospect of conclusively resolving this puzzle, there are other important questions nearby on which progress can be made, and to which both anthropology and philosophy can speak in illuminating ways. To illustrate this, it may help to draw some simple distinctions that are easily missed in discussions of ethical difference and disagreement in both disciplines, sometimes to deleterious effect.

The first distinction is that between relativism as a 'metaethical' claim and relativism as a 'normative' claim. Metaethical relativism says that there is no single true morality. Normative relativism says that it is wrong or inadvisable to judge people by standards that they, or their culture, would not accept. (We can imagine the latter claim being made by someone who defends the value of intercultural accommodation.) The importance of drawing this distinction is that accepting one of these claims does not logically force you to accept the other (c.f. Williams 1972). Thus, I might propound a culture of accommodation whereby no one is judged by norms rejected by their own culture because intercultural accommodation is an attitude required by 'the single true morality' (c.f. Mead 1928). In other words, I may accept normative relativism but reject metaethical relativism. Moving the other way, I might think that there is no single true morality while simultaneously rejecting an attitude of intercultural accommodation, instead judging all people according to the norms of my own culture. This would be consistent if the norms of my own culture forbid me from judging people from other cultures with conflicting ethical norms by the norms

of their own culture. In other words, I may accept metaethical relativism but reject normative relativism. It is hard to overstate the significance of this distinction when thinking about interpreting ethical thought. First, the truth or otherwise of metaethical relativism does not in itself tell you what attitude you (e.g. a practicing ethnographer) should take towards the ethical norms of the people you are trying to understand. In practice, you have no alternative but to employ your own judgment in deciding what to think (e.g. whether to judge others by your own standards; play along; suspend disbelief; or ignore the issue as far as possible). Moreover, this exercise of judgment is one that will inform your actions whether you think about it or not. From the choice of what groups to study (e.g. perpetrators of genocide); how to study them (e.g. observing their killings without interfering); how to describe what they are doing (e.g. the slurs with which they describe their victims); what to make of it all (e.g. as an alternative, or revolutionary, 'lifestyle'); and how to disseminate the results (e.g. online, or in a popular science bestseller) ethical questions arise, whether recognized or not, both during fieldwork and beyond. While answering these questions does not depend on first having an answer to the interminable puzzle of relativism, it does involve an exercise of ethical thought (e.g. concerning at what point a 'participant' stance is no longer ethically advisable to adopt in practice (see e.g. Li 2008), or what distance to adopt between the vocabulary employed in interpretation and the vocabulary employed by the people interpreted (see e.g. Geertz 1973, 3-32; 126-141; 193-233; Geertz 2001)).

Metaethical relativists sometimes appeal to the fact of moral difference and disagreement as data in support of the argument that ethical systems or practices are irreducibly plural and distinct (see e.g. Prinz 2007). Yet this only

raises the question of how it is possible for observers external to those practices to understand them in the first place (see e.g. Moody-Adams 1997). Ethnographic data frequently brings to light surprising similarities and analogies that permit an external observer to make at least minimal sense of the norms and values studied on her or his own terms. This may happen, for example, in the context of studying a practice of eating human flesh, where this practice is heavily ritualized and understood to involve some kind of sacrifice (and not only by the person eaten (see e.g. Conclin 2007; Laidlaw 2013)). Once we bear in mind that the intelligent ethnographer does not need to endorse every aspect of the practice observed in order to interpret it (no more than I need to endorse every aspect of my colleague's hostility in order to understand what she's up to when she blanks me in the corridor), the path is clear for an ethnographically informed challenge to the relativist claim that human moralities are irreducibly plural and distinct. Moreover, insofar as this latter claim has traditionally been supported with reference to the persistence of ethical difference and disagreement as depicted against a background of 'descriptive or 'natural' facts about humans that are somehow assumed to independently known, a direct engagement with anthropology can help to identify at least some ways of moving beyond the interminable puzzle of relativism in its traditional form, even if this engagement stops short of embracing what anthropologists know as 'the ontological turn', and according to which the idea of a single world on which different ethical beliefs provide different perspectives is itself put in question (see e.g. Viveiros de Castro 1998; Holbraad 2009). On this, as on so many issues at the intersection of the two disciplines, both anthropologists and philosophers

can find inspiration from some surprising quarters (see e.g. Quine 1969; Goodman 1978; Putnam 1982).

A second important distinction is that between *relativity* and *context dependence*. Let's understand relativism as the claim that there is no single true morality; only irreducibly plural and distinct ones. Context Dependence is the claim that what norms and values apply to people (and how those norms and values apply) is dependent on, and so 'relative to' the particularities of social and historical context. Context dependence does not imply relativism as that view was just defined. Failure to attend to this fact is a potential cause of much confusion. Some element of context dependence is an invariant fact about all norms and values, the interesting question being *how context dependent* those norms and values are. For example, the *Decalogue* tells us not to kill, but philosophers and theologians have been working to specify the range of acceptable exceptions to this (such as when it is permissible to kill in self defense) virtually since its reception (see e.g. Aquinas 1265-74/1989). Even a high degree of context dependence is consistent with the claim that ultimately (possibly at some very high level of abstraction) there is a 'single true morality' that applies equally in all circumstances, but differentially so. Thus, on the 'parametric universalist' view propounded by T. M. Scanlon, all moral claims concerning right and wrong are ultimately explicable in terms of a basic set of principles that no-one seriously interested in coming up with a system of principles for how to live together could reasonably reject (Scanlon 1998). Suppose that everyone so motivated would agree to a principle that prescribes the reduction of avoidable pain during the final stages of life. What this would actually involve in any given situation would obviously have to be very different

in a high-tech urban society with sophisticated systems of palliative care than in a low-tech society of nomadic existence. It does not follow that the two practices of end-of-life care are in serious disagreement. Nor does it follow that the extent of agreement between the two practices will be obvious to the untrained eye. Moreover, while the truth of parametric universalism would provide a foolproof guarantee that any apparently residual disagreement is ultimately resolvable in principle, the ethnographic task of working out what any case of apparent disagreement amounts to does not depend on being able to decide on the truth or falsity of parametric universalism in advance. The task of deciding the latter question is a project so abstract and esoteric as to be likely to play at best a marginal role in the interpretation of actual social practices.

What the distinction between relativity and context dependence teaches us is that whether or not to stop applying 'universalist' pressure at some point of apparent difference or disagreement always involves a decision; a decision that will sometimes have to be sensitive to ethical considerations, such as what to make of the way in which the practice under consideration conceives of itself. For example, we might ask whether the practice in question can be plausibly interpreted as including any universalistic aspirations on its own behalf, or whether the task of adopting a conflicting ethical perspective is something its participants could undertake without engaging in willful ignorance, self-deception or otherwise losing their 'grip on reality'. If the answer to either question is negative, it might be argued that continued insistence on pursuing the question of 'who is right' would be expressive of an ill-informed, narrow-minded, provincial, or otherwise inadvisable attitude that would be better abandoned in favor of the suspension of judgment, or of what Bernard Williams

called a 'relativism of distance' (Williams 1985; for a contrary view, see Moody-Adams 1997).

A third distinction is that between *relativism* and *indeterminacy*. Whereas ethical claims are *relative* if they can correctly be made only relative to the norms of a given system or practice; ethical claims are *indeterminate* if there is no fact of the matter whether they are correct or not. There are at least three facts to bear in mind about the possibility that some ethical claims are indeterminate. The first is that indeterminacy is not peculiar to ethical claims but is observable wherever human thought is subject to *vagueness*. Consider, for example, how the different colors shade into each other on the color spectrum, with some shades not normally being counted as being one determinate color or another (Williamson 1994). The second is that the presence of indeterminacy in ethical thought (such as in hard cases) does not imply that there are no determinate answers to be had; much less that there are no *better* and *worse* answers anywhere (c.f. Banner 2014). In some cases, the issues in question are so complex and difficult that the most reasonable attitude to take is one of *uncertainty* about *what to think*, as opposed to *certainty* that there is *nothing to think* (Dworkin 2011). The third fact to bear in mind is that indeterminacy can obtain both within and across different ethical systems or practices. In the first case, there might be no determinate fact internal to the norms accepted by a given society whether assisted reproduction involving mitochondrial donation is permissible. Maybe no one in the relevant society has ever thought about human reproduction involving three 'biological parents', and existing practice fails to set a precedent either way. Even so, when the possibility presents itself the people involved will have to decide what their reproductive norms are going to be, as

countries across the globe were actually in the process of doing at the time of writing (see e.g. Clarke 2009). In the second case, there could be no determinate fact about which, among two or more conflicting sets of ethical norms, is preferable or correct. This possibility is arguably easiest to contemplate in cases where the systems or societies in question are located at great distance from each other, whether conceptually, or in space and time (see e.g. Sreenivasan 2001). As Bernard Williams argued, in the context of the world as we currently have it the ethical systems and practices we actually observe are generally so interconnected that the issue of relativism should rarely arise, or, if it does (as when confronting a so-called 'hyper-traditional' society), it is arguably 'too late' (Williams 1985, 158-9). Be that as it may, it would still be the case in any such situation that people have to decide what to think, say or do, and that in some cases the answer to this question could be (within some suitable range) indeterminate. Similar questions arise when we compare the conflicting demands experienced by individuals and groups who embody the norms of more than one ethical system or practice within a given society, such as fellow citizens who recognize their affiliation both to a secular ideal of individual autonomy and a potentially conflicting ideal of communal authority, and who are therefore faced by what David Wong has called a 'fact of ambivalence' (Wong 2007). According to Wong, this 'fact' is symptomatic of a situation in which the ethical subject will experience the pull of competing ethical claims that may each be correct *relative* to some basically acceptable ethical framework, but where the choice between these frameworks is itself indeterminate. Regardless of the overall plausibility of this view, Wong's moderate relativism arguably goes a long way captures one important feature of the sense of *vertigo* that some people

have felt in the face of serious ethical dilemmas that seem to be without a uniquely overriding answer (c.f. Sartre 1946/2007; Derrida 2005). It may also go some way to explain the apparently paradoxical experience, sometimes felt in response to social sanction or punishment, that although what someone did was obviously morally inappropriate or transgressive, it was nevertheless neither bad nor (possibly) wrong (c.f. Stafford 2010).

Wong is one of the few contemporary Anglophone philosophers to have seriously theorized the idea of ambivalence, or the fact that as ethical subjects we are prone to be plural or divided against ourselves as we move between different social roles (e.g. sibling versus professional); social expectations (e.g. legal redress versus claims of personal pride); or foundational worldviews (e.g. being a citizen of secular society and a pious believer in religious truth (c.f. Weber 1970; Gray 2000; Berlin 2002)). Recent work in anthropology contains valuable resources for improving our understanding of this aspect of ethical experience, in particular as it relates to the reflective self-understanding of the ethical subjects involved (see e.g. Robbins 2004; Laidlaw 2005; Rogers 2009). There is some evidence that the underlying lessons of this work are independently recognized in some parts of 'mainstream' philosophy as well (see e.g. Applbaum 1999; Coates 2017). Traditionally, however, the Anglophone philosophical canon has tended to regard it as an aspiration, if not a requirement, that people strive to iron out ambivalence or conflict in their ethical selves (c.f. Seligman & Weller's chapter in this volume; see also Plato 380BCE/1997; Kant 1785/1988; Frankfurt 2004; Lukes 2008). In its most extreme version, the claim is that a commitment to consistency and coherence is part of what *constitutes* a fully developed human morality, and is therefore in a

sense what *makes us what we are* (Korsgaard 2009). In spite of some valiant attempts to temper the most coercive ambitions of this tendency (see e.g. Hume 1739/1978; Nietzsche 1887/1967; Freud 1995; Berlin 2002), its underlying commitment to unity and coherence continues to exercise a formidable pull in moral philosophy. The increasing body of ethnographic work that reveals not only the *existence* of, but also the potential *virtues* embodied in, ethical lives that neither *achieve* nor seriously *aspire to* this kind of coherent unity presents a noteworthy challenge to this philosophical tendency (see e.g. Boellstorff 2005; 2008).

In the end it may sensibly be asked who it is that gets to speak about all of this, and what actually gets heard when they do. The question is partly *epistemological*: why should we assume that external observers are able to fully understand the experiences they purport to describe (e.g. cultural ambivalence, prejudice, discrimination or oppression) if they have never been subject to those experiences themselves, or (as in the case of ‘participant observation’) have not been subject to them as much, as often, or in the same way as the people studied? The question is also *ethical* and *political*: why should we accept that external observers are well placed (or have the *right*) to give an account of other people’s experiences, especially where this account is assumed to take the place of the first-personal accounts of the persons described? In each of its these forms, the question presents a challenge to anthropologists and philosophers alike, insofar as original voices are vulnerable to be ignored, misunderstood, marginalized, trivialized, silenced, or otherwise treated with insufficient respect. (For feminist critiques along these lines, see e.g. Smith 1974; Harding 1991; Fricker 2007; for criticism, see e.g. Bar On 1992; Longino 1992. See also Lukács 1971; Kuper

1994). At the same time, it is an inescapable assumption of any serious study of social life that human beings are in principle able to say something sensible about *how things are with others*, in spite of the social distance or asymmetric power relations that may separate them. The alternative is a form of interpretive solipsism that is likely to be both intellectually incoherent and practically self-defeating.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Editor and three anthropological readers for their helpful comments on a draft version of this Chapter.

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