BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Anthropologies of ethics

Where we've been, where we are,
where we might go

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Comment on LAIDLAW, James. 2014. *The subject of virtue: An anthropology of ethics and freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zygmunt Bauman . . . 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 means of discounting the ethical dimension of people’s conduct . . . insofar as their experience of freedom is deemed illusory. (Laidlaw 2014: 3)

The diagnosis—Bauman’s and Laidlaw’s after him—is compelling. Examples in support of it are as ubiquitous as they are influential. Weber’s modernity locks us within a cage of steel, and even the callings he suggests we still might pursue in the sciences or in politics have much more the force of imperatives, or at least the only options available, than they do of values actively embraced. Durkheim’s society is a normative tissue shaping the common affect that is its glue, formalized in a law from which one deviates at one’s peril. If his individual has become the locus of the sacred in modernity, it is a locus of the merely personal, of self-interest, of the anti-social and the threat of anomie. Tarde, Latour’s muse, may not assume the priority of society over the individual, but his psychology of the development of collective order is a psychology of laws, and laws that unfold into the global socialism of a future written in stone. Marx is our prophet of overcoming our chains—but the great shadow that has always hung over the tradition he founded is the shadow of

an ideology from whose escape he himself came to recognize could not securely be won. Even the rational actor of the economists and political scientists is in the thrall of practical reason—or else a mere dimwit.

If any qualification of the diagnosis is in order, it is a qualification that only further underscores its lesson. The other side of the science of unfreedom has always been freedom, but as Laidlaw is well aware, a freedom that has as its pole of attraction the pole of autonomy, of an autarchy that, if ever fully realized, would constitute our radical liberation from all constraint, from every form and mode of the restriction of our wills. Whether they've been longing for liberation or horrified at the prospect of it, the scientists of unfreedom have tended with great regularity to code freedom as the achievement of autarchy for one and for all. "Hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, rearing cattle in the evening, criticizing after dinner, just as you have a mind to do, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic": it's a particularly eloquent (if now rather quaint) expression of a dream that quite a number of individual social scientists—and their fellow travelers—have been holding dear for a long time. It's a dream that many of them—including a good number of those who, as Laidlaw altogether appropriately points out, wrongly think they have Foucault on their side—hold dear still.

It's a case of long-standing countervailing tendencies astride which stands that paradoxical epistemological figure that Foucault called "Man" (1970: 322). It's a case of tendencies whose relation has been intellectually (and not just intellectually) schizmo-genetic. The result—we've been living with it since the early nineteenth century—is the establishment of a binary opposition the one pole of which is with striking regularity conceived as being the contradictory of the other. It has various terminologies. Philosophically, we frequently encounter it as the opposition between "determinacy" and (indeed) "freedom." Social scientifically, it's more familiar as the opposition between "structure" and "agency" (on the terminological ironies of which, Laidlaw is a singularly acute commentator). Diagrammatically, the valences are reversible. If you're a liberationist, determinacy and structure are negative, their counterparts positive; if you're an authoritarian or disciplinarian, the reverse. In any case, the dichotomy remains. As Foucault has taught us, it gave birth to and was the epistemological impetus of the development of the empirical social sciences at the same time that it sent ethics into transcendental exile. In *The order of things* Foucault writes of "morality" rather than ethics, but there's no need to worry (at this juncture) about the difference between the two. If Man is the prevailing figure of modernity, then "modernity has no morality" (Foucault 1970: 323). Rabinow explicates: it has no room in which to formulate, much less accommodate, "a philosophical anthropology that [could produce] firm foundations concerning the nature of Man and, thereby, a basis for human action" (1997: xxvi). No wonder that, for all the past efforts that Laidlaw identifies in the ethnographic corpus and whether or not it can be thought of as striving toward a "philosophical anthropology," an anthropology of ethics had such a hard time getting off the ground.

[T]o portray idealization of autonomy, conceived as autarchy or external independence, as if it were a feature or failure specifically of "liberalism" is not only a misleading perspective on European thought, but also parochial in relation to the ethnographic record more broadly. It distracts

us from the properly empirical questions of which kinds of relations of dependence are to which degree reciprocal, and which make people more or less subject to the will of others. Which relations enable, and which impede, the achievement of which kinds of freedom? (Laidlaw 2014: 161)

The early Foucault couldn't himself find a way through the impasse. As Laidlaw observes, in the aftermath of *Discipline and punish*, he began to work beyond it. He recognized that he had to begin to think of power not only as constraining but also as "productive." His venture into the domain of ethics as such was on the horizon. Laidlaw and I are both well aware that his breakthrough, such as it is, is not simply his own, that it must instead be placed in a much broader epistemic ecology, of which MacIntyre and Williams are also manifestations. Still, "Foucault" can serve well enough to mark what Hans Blumenberg (1985) refers to as the opening of a new "question position." In his vast study of the shift of European scholarly attention from the irresolute contradictions of late-medieval realism and nominalism toward the possibility that human beings might actually be able to exercise their own volition in deciding to pursue one or another alternative course of action that a particular set of circumstances affords them, Blumenberg treats that opening as epochal. It is the rupture that presages the great divide between the Middle Ages and modernity (a modernity, it should be added, that looks very different from the modernity that Foucault depicts in *The order of things*). It wouldn't merely be immodest, it would also be wrong, similarly to treat as the marker of an epochal rupture the question position in which Foucault can ask speculatively how we might increase our capacities without simultaneously increasing our oppression and Laidlaw can invite social scientifically(?) the investigation of which kinds of relations enable, and which impede, the achievement of which kinds of freedom. If it isn't the marker of an epochal shift, however, it isn't the sort of question that the sciences of Man could pose, nor the sort of question position that those sciences could more than passingly occupy.

So, well, maybe a little immodesty can be tolerated. Maybe it isn't too immodest to cast the epistemological and ontological grounds from which the anthropology of ethics appears to be proceeding as just a bit of a game changer. It retains—and it had better retain—the classic pole of the determinative, the structurally confining, the genuinely oppressive. What it doesn't retain is the opposite pole—and as Laidlaw emphasizes, for good Foucauldian reasons. It's been staring us in the face for a very long time that freedom—as autarchy, as external independence—simply doesn't exist. It's not that we're without any freedom. It's rather that our freedom never is and never can be absolute. Truly autarchic, we would be asocial—attitudinally, but ontologically as well. We would be acultural. We would, as Geertz put it some time ago,

not be the clever savages of Golding's *Lord of the Flies* thrown back upon the cruel wisdom of their animal instincts; nor would they be the nature's noblemen of Enlightenment primitivism or even, as classical anthropological theory would imply, intrinsically talented apes who had somehow failed to find themselves. [We] would be unworkable monstrosities with very few useful instincts, fewer recognizable sentiments, and no intellect: mental basket cases. (1973: 49)

The acquisition of any skill, the embodiment of any disposition, the focalization of any mood or emotion: all of this is a matter of limitation. It's a matter of external dependency and it is often also a matter of self-dependency, precisely when we exercise techniques of the self upon and through ourselves. To state something so obvious is not yet to raise, even speculatively, the issue of how we might increase our capacities without simultaneously increasing our oppression. It's not yet positively to constitute any programmatic design of the investigation of which kinds of relations enable, and which impede, the achievement of which kinds of freedom. It doesn't go very far—if it goes any distance at all—in helping us articulate the distinctive features of an anthropology of ethics. That doesn't make it any less obvious or important—even if the sciences of Man seem never have quite been able to see it.

[I]t seems that participants in the piety movement [Mahmood 2005] do freely aim at acquiring certain virtues, . . . but that what they aim to achieve is different from the reflective freedom that is the precondition and medium for that effort. It is not only different from that freedom: it is more valued than it, and achieved, insofar as it is, at its expense. (Laidlaw 2014: 177)

The advocates of an anthropology of “ordinary ethics” urge us to conceive of the anthropology of ethics as part and parcel of anthropology itself. They urge us to recognize that ethical concerns are everywhere. This does not entail that—as the familiar half-witted riposte would have it—they are thus nowhere. It entails instead that ethics is among the pervasive constituents of collective life, just as constitutive as power relations or gendered relations or kinned relations or what have you. It's a perfectly coherent position. It's eminently arguable and perhaps, in most sectors of everyday life, it needs heeding. People more or less everywhere are indeed concerned with the right and the wrong, the worthwhile and the pointless, the admirable and the despicable. They are concerned more or less everywhere with what constitutes the virtuous, the good life, and what might be required to live it. The anthropology of ethics is a comparative project, and it might be plied just about anywhere.

Laidlaw, however, brings an alternative conception to light. It is an alternative that is foreshadowed in Weber's “Religious rejections of the world and their directions” (1946). It is foreshadowed specifically in his reflections on the compatibility of various discrete arenas and codings of value—erotic, aesthetic, academic, and so on—with an ethics of brotherhood (or, more broadly, any ethics at all). Weber isn't happy about what he uncovers. His results are for the most part negative. Moreover, he had already abandoned any effort to locate the ethical in economic action, or indeed in any other domain restricted to or awash with the pursuit not of values but instead of this-worldly “interests.” Weber's distinction between values and interests is susceptible to critique (Hirschman 1977). The distinction is worth preserving, however, since it allows for the highlighting of certain kinds of action—economic action or, more generally, strategic action—whose logic can be adequately described without resort to a distinctly ethical vocabulary. Bourdieu's nihilist rendering of the logic of practice is a particularly relentless example. This isn't to say that such kinds of action cannot be ethically inflected. It's instead to say that there is nothing intrinsically ethical about them.

That's not all. Weber also invites us—and Laidlaw seconds the invitation—to consider that values may be of two general sorts. Some of them are distinctly ethical. Others are not, and some of those are explicitly opposed to ethical values as such. The implication—that even value-oriented action of certain specific kinds cannot be cast as ethically oriented action—may not win any popularity contest. It may even strike some people as next to intolerable. I often confront something of the same reaction among many of my students when I endorse Foucault's ideal-typical construal of the slave as "having no ethics." Eyes go wide. Expressions turn pained.

I think the reaction rests in the mistaken presumption that action that is not ethically oriented is by definition unethical. The presumption is fallacious. Action that we—or anyone—might deem unethical is so familiar that it barely needs mentioning. Value-oriented action that is not ethical action may also be unethical—as it is, for example, for such a proud and impertinent aesthetist as Baudelaire (or at least for Baudelaire the proud and impertinent aesthetist). Logically, however, a third category interposes itself between the other two—the category of the anethical ("amoral" would also do). I'm not sure whether the category is likely to have any greater appeal than the category of the unethical, but I don't think we can abandon it even so. I've evoked the category in characterizing (ideal-typically) the relationship between the charismatic leader and the charismatic follower. I think we must also be prepared to invoke it in characterizing other relationships of a charismatic overtone or undertone. The aesthetist devotion to art for art's sake is largely an anethical devotion, turning ethically impudent only when it waves in one's ethical face the gay enterprise of cultivating the flowers of evil (or other such evils). I recall an ancient Greek *mythos* in which Ares, who has somehow become the husband of Aphrodite, stumbles across his wife *in flagrante delicto* with Hephaistos. She insists that she not be and has no right to be judged in light of the obligations of matrimony. She insists rather that eros is its own justification, and end in itself. Her position is anethical (if somewhat dubious, given the details of the scene). The Hobbesian political actor, who enslaves himself to the will of the sovereign in exchange for a modicum of security, is an anethical actor (which isn't to say that peace cannot operate as an ethically inflected value in other discourses and other practices).

Taking up Laidlaw's lead, I think we might usefully also entertain the thought that some specifically religious values might themselves not best be understood as ethical, but instead as anethical. I have in mind such values as those of mystical union with the divine, which demands the complete abandonment of the self and all freedom along with it (Faubion 2013). One step away from mystical union, the value of complete submission to the will of the divine is, as Laidlaw at least hints, also an anethical value. Nor does one have to travel beyond the boundaries of the historical West in order to come across it. Augustine's *Confessions* is a celebration of it (and an uncompromising account of how very arduous the path to it is). Two lessons of the *Confessions* are of great relevance to further research in the anthropology of ethics. The first is that neither theology nor cosmology, neither theodicy nor cosmodicy, should or can be reduced to ethical doctrine. Weber already knew this very well, and once again his precedent has to be taken seriously. The other lesson of the *Confessions* is that anethical values—whether conceived as separate from but equal to their ethical counterparts or conceived as superior to them—can

be and often are a powerful source of the critique of ethical systems (see *The city of God*). They can be all the more critically powerful in their confrontation with ethical systems—"liberal," "conservative," or whatever their designation—whose proponents claim their eternal and exclusive legitimacy. Such critiques can be ethically quite disturbing—especially when they are realized in and as action. That doesn't make them any the less worthy of sustained contemplation.

I think we might go there—and elsewhere, to be sure.

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