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Focus on  
Recent Work  
in Moral  
Anthropology

## RECENT WORK IN MORAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Maria Heim and Anne Monius

### ABSTRACT

This special focus issue brings to the *Journal of Religious Ethics* fresh considerations of moral anthropology as practiced by four emergent voices within the field. Each of these essays, in varying ways, seeks not only to advance an understanding of ethics in a particular time, place, and context, but to draw our attention to shared aspects of the human condition: its discontinuities and fractures, its practices of perception and attention, its interplays of emotion, intuition, and reason, and its thoroughly intersubjective nature. To learn something of Thai Buddhist life-worlds, contemporary Russian modes of being, or the experience of immorality in today's China, each essay argues in turn, is to gain new insight into ourselves.

**KEY WORDS:** *moral anthropology, temporalization, agency, care, social body, immorality*

This special focus issue brings to the *Journal of Religious Ethics* fresh considerations of moral anthropology as practiced by four emergent voices within the field. "Moral anthropology" can have two referents, and both are relevant here. First, it can refer to a growing subfield in anthropology in which ethics is a central concern. While questions of morality and ethics have of course not been absent from anthropological studies in the past, a recent turn to studying them systematically represents an important shift in a field long preoccupied with other questions. Not only are recent studies developing important new tools for identifying and analyzing moral data in fieldwork, they are, at the same time, and most provocatively,

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advancing—sometimes in quite vigorous rapprochement with philosophical ethics—new conceptualizations of what ethics and morality might be and how to study them. These formulations are described variously as an “anthropology of ethics” (Laidlaw 2002), an “anthropology of moralities” (Zigon 2008), and, simply, moral anthropology (Fassin 2012).

A second sense of “moral anthropology” to which we wish to draw notice evokes the older use of “philosophical anthropology” as the study of the nature of human beings. The idea of *moral* anthropology, then, is the study of what human beings are like morally: what are the resources for and limitations of human moral capacity? This concern with empirical ethics, what human beings are actually like, is not a matter of formal reasoning about duties and obligations, deliberation about ends, or discernment of ideal virtues—the stuff of much modern Euro-American philosophical ethics. Older traditions of western philosophical ethics of course did concern themselves with such empirical questions, from Kant<sup>1</sup> to the moral psychology of the British moral sense theorists such as Hutcheson, Shaftesbury, Hume, and Smith.<sup>2</sup> Beyond western philosophical ethics, scholars of religion and nonwestern textual traditions considering particular conceptions of human nature offer broader cross-cultural conceptions of moral anthropology. Of course a burgeoning industry of cognitive scientists, evolutionary biologists, and behavioral economists forging scientific approaches to empirical ethics has become very familiar in the last two decades.<sup>3</sup>

While the study of moral anthropology in this second sense may be practiced by scholars from many disciplines, we wish to foreground here the distinctive contributions that cultural and linguistic anthropologists are making in this area. These contributions have taken several routes, but a dominant approach has centered on the quotidian, on the “everyday” ways in which morality and ethics are experienced, constructed, discussed, and lived, often tacitly, in particular ethnographic contexts (Das 2007; Zigon 2008; Lambek 2010). Ethics is not a discrete category of human experience, but “a quality or dimension of the full range of human action or practice,” as Michael Lambek puts it (2010, 11). It thus does not constitute a single locus of study somehow sequestered from the workings of power, religion, gender, economics or any other sphere of social practice. Moral anthropology in this vein becomes the attentive study of the way ethical experience and concerns are inscribed in everyday contexts in potentially all spheres of life. The terrain can thus include, for example, etiquette and manners, reflections on raising children, attentiveness to

<sup>1</sup> Although Kant’s legacy has been almost entirely his work on formal ethics, he also lectured on the empirical study of morals. See Loudon 2000.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the British moralist tradition, see Schneider 1967.

<sup>3</sup> For a philosophical treatment of these approaches, see Appiah 2010.



how people are embedded in and experience time, the possibilities for agency, contexts of moral disruption and immorality, and discursive practices about all of these. In addition, ethics is increasingly conceived not as a matter solely of social practice or life lived with others; it can also involve one's relationship with the self and can include the study of moral psychology and subjectivity (with many of these scholars drawing upon the later work of Michel Foucault). Some scholars have gone deeply into moral sensibility, and how perception and attention can themselves be ethical practices (Desjarlais 2003).

The four scholars whose essays are included in this issue are each concerned with different contexts and spheres of moral practice and deliberation, but each brings an anthropological sensitivity to what Jarrett Zigon calls "the radical finitude of human existence" (Zigon 2014, 445). Human beings are always circumscribed by our local contexts, the narratives of which we are a part, and the social bodies we help constitute. We do not sit above or abstracted from these contexts and the confusion and competing claims they impose upon us. At the same time, we operate morally with complex psychologies and subjectivities to which we have varying access and resources to interpret.

In her essay, "Everyday Morality: Constructing a Buddhist Ethos in Rural Thailand," Nancy Eberhardt focuses on hierarchical relationships in a northwestern Thai village as the "real loci of moral behavior and sentiment" rather than egalitarian relationships of the kind assumed in child development research in the west (and on which "universal" scales of moral value and development have long been articulated; Eberhardt begins her research in conversation with the early developmental psychology initiated by Jean Piaget and his followers) (Eberhardt 2014, 399). Social hierarchy and the cultural practices inscribing it are highly salient in the moral practices and reasoning of her Shan informants. Moreover, age and stage in the life course are key markers for social status and thus highly relevant to the moral reflections of her informants. It is, for example, seen as much worse to lie to an old person than to a young one. How one attends to and treats others, how one comports oneself bodily, and how one controls one's desires are all seen as highly inflected by the relative ages of the people involved.

Moreover, human moral capacity is seen to differ significantly over the life course. Eberhardt shows both how people in this community formulate moral ideas differently depending on age (eight-year-old children do not see morality in the same way as adults, or even slightly older children). People internalize moral expectations from their cultural experience, and these make very different demands on them depending on the life-stage they inhabit. Most notably, perhaps—and in striking contrast to western developmental psychology—old age is conceived as a site for continued and demanding moral development.

Eberhardt's essay makes an important contribution to recent anthropological work on agency, particularly in exploring contexts in which agency is expressed not in opposition to normative claims of society and religion, but in conformity to them. As Saba Mahmood (2005) has helped us to see, agency is not always a matter of resistance (as it has usually been construed in the liberal tradition of the modern west). It may rather be expressed in conformity or even deference to social and cultural expectations—and to the modes of self-transformation and moral development these make possible. In a related vein, in Felicity Aulino's essay, "Perceiving the Social Body: A Phenomenological Perspective on Ethical Practice in Buddhist Thailand," individual agency is sometimes viewed as expressed and enacted through formal deference to others and to the social group in which social harmony, and thus individual well-being, are realized.

An important feature of several of these essays, though one perhaps easy to miss, is the way in which each depicts religion in relationship to the moral values and practices each describes. The two essays on Thai contexts (Eberhardt and Aulino), for example, see Buddhist discourses as relevant in certain ways to the moral lives of their informants, but they eschew deliberately any notion of "Buddhism" or "Buddhist ethics" as useful categories of analysis for them. Particular Buddhist cosmologies, ideologies, or discourses may inflect the way their informants conceptualize raising children or enact hierarchy, but they do not exhaust them; nor are Buddhist ideologies, in these particular cases, more salient than other local cultural premises. This locally situated approach to religion avoids culturalist and holistic conceptions of traditions and reminds us that people everywhere appropriate and deploy religious discourse selectively and strategically alongside other explanatory systems to account for what they do and how they think.

Eberhardt's essay brings this point home particularly effectively by charting the different ways her informants invoke the Buddhist moral precepts. We might think that talk of the precepts is relatively straightforward moral and religious code, but, in fact, the larger contexts and discourses in which the precepts are prescribed and practiced suggest that such codes are entangled with other social and cultural concerns. Taking the precepts might, under certain conditions, be invoked as a practical strategic tool for people seeking health or supernatural powers, in which case their moral dimensions recede. Eberhardt claims that "any specification of 'the moral' will always be an abstraction from a messier reality" (2014, 410). Just getting at the object of study—"morality" sifted out from other domains of life—is harder (but perhaps more honest) in this kind of anthropological approach than is usually assumed in abstract moral philosophy.

Insofar as Eberhardt is concerned with locating her ethical subjects in specific temporal structures of the life course, thereby suggesting that

human subjective moral experience differs significantly across time, she prepares us to see the ways that “ethical time” is not homogeneous or undifferentiated. Jarrett Zigon’s essay, “Temporalization and Ethical Action,” goes further with this idea and discusses it at a different level by explicitly thematizing the processes of temporalization in moral experience and reflection. Zigon practices here what he calls “an anthropological hermeneutic” in which he shows how the anthropological project can involve systemic and comparative analysis of concepts which can substantially reconceptualize them (2014, 444). His essay engages in a radical reconceptualization of both temporality and morality. Anthropology is not just ethnography, but at its best reconfigures how we might think about and study basic categories of human experience.

For Zigon, “temporalizing” is a practice people impose on their experience; they *temporalize* the ethical moment by consciously or unconsciously locating it variously in reference to a mythic history, a reasserted memory, a constructed past, or a projected future. They pull in and impose other temporalities on a singular ethical moment (but not in any linear, homogeneous, or fully predictable way) to create possibilities for moral reflection and action. The “ethical moment” for Zigon is a reflective process of stepping back from unreflective being-in-the-world wherein one draws upon and constructs one’s resources to respond. The ethical moment is itself conditioned and historical, of course, but it is a stepping back and a creative “filling in” of possible responses to the moment. The ethical moment, the Now, is singular, but it is created through the interplay of both the past and future. As Zigon explains the meaning of the Russian *opyt*—carrying the dual meaning of both “experience” and “experiment”—one “can conceive of experience itself as the active practice of trial and error” (2014, 456). In other words, Zigon continues, “one ‘derives’ an experience in the Now of ethical action” and simultaneously experiments (2014, 456).

Yunxiang Yan’s essay, “The Moral Implications of Immorality: The Chinese Case for a New Anthropology of Morality,” also rests on temporal distinctions, namely those between moments of action and subsequent moments of reflection in contemporary Chinese society, specifically in the seldom studied under-belly of ethics, immoral acts. In examining two recent cases of immoral action that were publicly and vehemently discussed in China—the extortion of Good Samaritans and the deliberate tainting of food—Yan argues that immorality tends to be intuitive and emotional in actual social situations, and only in later moments of recollection is it reflected upon with reasoning and justification. His work contributes to a growing body of work in other disciplines studying the central and prior role of sentiments and intuition in empirical ethics (as for example, Haidt 2001). This research suggests that both moral and immoral acts, and our experience of and reactions to them, involve first emotional and visceral response, and only later rational consideration.

Like Zigon, Yan is perceptive to (at least) two moments, in his case the immoral action, and then, more pointedly, the subsequent experience of the immoral act. The way an individual or a social community experiences and discusses immorality and the effects it produces are multiple and complex. His essay is as much about social perceptions of immorality as it is about immoral acts, and the effect those perceptions have on both the social fabric as well as individuals' subjectivity. At the social level, these immoral acts set off firestorms of media attention, public debate, social critique, and, in some cases, activist civic response that demonstrate a moral desire to repudiate the immoral act and decry the social distrust such acts generate. At the same time, widespread discussion of the perceived pervasiveness of societal moral decline influences individuals' moral response, making people less inclined to behave as Good Samaritans themselves. Perhaps most fascinating is how individuals come to perceive their own moral capacity as highly circumscribed by the moral deterioration of their social reality, lamenting simultaneously their own moral coarsening and cynicism, as well their "shame of being incapable of doing the right thing" that their perceived lack of agency engenders (Yan 2014, 476).

All of the essays here show how social structures, processes, and perceptions shape individual moral subjectivity. Interest in subjectivity does not foreclose, and in fact may require, attention to the social. A key insight and practice anthropologists can bring to the study of morality is their attentiveness to how local social worlds shape and constitute individual moral experience (while not subsuming it entirely). Aulino's examination of "the social body" in Thai society builds upon the individual/collective distinctions of Yan to consider the ways in which body metaphors represent the complex hierarchical relationships at work in contemporary Thailand. Taking up a phenomenological approach, Aulino examines in particular "how Thai subjects feel themselves to be part of a group (on large and small scales) as well as how social, religious, and political structures are embodied through habituated means of perceiving as part of the collective" (2014, 416). Her essay challenges those of us reared on modern egalitarian and universalist frames of reference to perceive the workings of moral experience in highly marked hierarchical social worlds. Where Aulino describes affirmations and reaffirmations of social hierarchy and difference in Thai society (even in academic and cosmopolitan contexts), and looks for the ethical possibilities within such contexts, Yan sees a movement in Chinese society (though not always a smooth one) toward a "new morality" of care and concern for the stranger and the individualist, egalitarian, and universalist ethics that represents.

Each of these essays, in varying ways, seeks not only to forward an understanding of ethics in a particular time, place, and context, but to

draw our attention to shared aspects of the human condition: its incapacities, discontinuities, and fractures, its practices of perception and attention, its interplays of emotion, intuition, and reason, and its thoroughly intersubjective nature. To learn something of Thai Buddhist life-worlds, contemporary Russian modes of being, or the experience of immorality in today's China, each essay argues in turn, is to gain new insight into ourselves.

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