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Afterword

Michael Lambek

How to live and to what ends? The contributors to this special issue suggest that there is noisy debate about what matters to Africans today and some difficulty in putting publicly enunciated ideals into practice. These are subjects that have generally been approached by social scientists through the lens of religion or politics. The contribution here is to rephrase these matters explicitly with respect to ethics. The authors thus draw on the recent attention to the ethical in anthropological theory and in turn attempt to contribute to that somewhat abstract literature by attending to the messy complexities of contemporary life. They assert resolutely that questions of what matters or how to live are not simply for each individual to confront privately or for each of us to resolve in the face of scepticism or anomie, but collective and public in nature.

The issues arise within particular social collectivities, constituting people as common ethical subjects, and they are also applied to *others*, constituting them as common ethical objects. This is most obvious in encounters of missionaries with their target populations but is evident in society at large. Not only are missionaries supplemented by NGOs of various kinds, but topics of concern embrace such matters as education, public health and security as well as faith. The social uncertainty (precarity, political unrest, crime, HIV, and so on) that many commentators on contemporary Africa have described generates what were once called revitalization movements in anthropology, attempts at reviving a sense of direction and purpose within one's own community, as well as attempts to reform other communities or categories of persons, ones whose states of ostensible disarray appear threatening to one's own well-being. Social identification as same or other, common or opposed, is in open question and constant motion, and affiliations multiply and crosscut one another. In drawing on authors such as Barth, Bourdieu and Gluckman, one could say that the editors of this special issue try to formulate a kind of sociology of public ethical life.

In recent years, a number of anthropologists have been writing explicitly and somewhat abstractly about ethics. The authors collected here address some of this literature and attempt to apply it to, or measure it against, contemporary life in Africa. They range across the continent, including one article from West Africa, two from East Africa and three from Southern Africa. One of their points of departure is a book I edited, *Ordinary Ethics* (Lambek 2010), in which I invited contributors to attend to the play of ethical considerations in everyday life. I did so precisely because I thought that the subject of ethics did not pertain exclusively to issues of broad public or professional debate (especially as

Michael Lambek is Professor of Anthropology and Canada Research Chair at the University of Toronto Scarborough. He has published on the western Indian Ocean and on ethical practice, including the books *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte* (1993), *The Weight of the Past: living with history in Mahajanga, Madagascar* (2002) and *The Ethical Condition* (2015). Email: lambek@utsc.utoronto.ca

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they play out in bioethics, a field that could be said to have somewhat captured the subject of ethics). To focus exclusively on such matters (abortion or informed consent, for instance), I argued, distorts and thins out our understanding of the place of the ethical in human life. I suggested there and later (Lambek 2015) that the exercise of practical judgement is intrinsic to the human condition. I also argued that anthropologists should pay more attention to what philosophers have said on the subject and attend more closely to the place of the ethical in speech and action. While I myself did not delve deeply into what is meant by the ordinary or what we can draw from philosophy to appreciate it, that project has been pursued with remarkable perspicuity by Veena Das (2007; 2012; 2015). To follow through requires close ethnographic attention and sensibility, as perhaps best realized here in the article by Thomas G. Kirsch.[1]

The contributors invoke the ordinary but they also wish to correct my correction, as it were, and to return attention to the public, institutionalized and politicized dimensions of the ethical (by 'correction' here, think of the navigator adjusting the rudder to keep the ship on course). Thus 'ideals in practice' are located in these articles in the public sphere and the authors attend to what one might call the public life of ethics – in weddings, schools, trafficking, policing, medicine and public health. Of course, the point of *Ordinary Ethics* was never to objectify ethics as a discrete province of social life, distinct from politics, or to sever the ordinary from the public domain; on the contrary, it was to understand the ethical as a dimension of all forms of social action, pervasive in and intrinsic to all spheres of life. Conversely, I argued that analyses of politics and political life should not rest exclusively on power or interest but need also to take into account the ethical dimension: that is, values, ends, reasons and judgement. The authors take up this invitation to observe the ethical widely – here in concerns around schooling, with respect to economic livelihood and supporting one's kin, as a factor in healing and harming, as a dimension of getting married, preventing crime, and so forth.

As various contributors to this issue rightly remark, there is no sharp line dividing the public from the personal, the ordinary from the objectified, or the quiet and voiceful (Das 2007) from the voluble (or shrill). What they show rather is how publicly voiced ideals are received in personal practice or imposed on it, and how local concerns are articulated with national and transnational ones in various public arenas. The sites in question being within postcolonial Africa, there is much consideration of the intervention of NGOs, as well as other globalizing forces and discourses, like those of human rights and public health. Included here are intensive *internal* missionizing efforts, converting, and reforming practices among and between African Christians and Muslims; indeed, one might

[1]In fact, one of the things that led me to develop ordinary ethics was an ethnography of healers in Mayotte, in a cultural context close to the one that Parkin (this issue) describes (Lambek 1993). It is in large part from following the work of healers and their exercise of judgement (with respect to specific clients and circumstances, with respect to their own lives and practices, and with respect to the relationships between ideas, ritual performances and practices derived from Islam, astrology/divination, and spirit possession) that I elaborated my account. These traditions have been in conversation and posing challenges to one another from the outset, well before the current intensity of reformist opposition. See el-Zein (1974) for a sense of the historical depth of debate among coastal Muslims.

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say that one of the things that Africans learned or appropriated from the colonial encounter was the value and craft of missionizing itself.

The articles illustrate the complexity of ethical life, the 'rough ground' on which people stand and the ways in which virtuous practice or habitus is always disrupted, compromised or transformed by the calls upon it from the state and other powerful actors, including educators, public health officials and drug traders. In the process, goals and values become either more ambiguous, or, conversely, too sharply and starkly defined. The articles also illustrate how ethical horizons are shaped by class and politics and hence that dominant ethical concerns diverge from one country to another, given their disparate colonial and postcolonial histories and economic and political conditions. This is especially striking in the comparison of Botswana with Guinea Bissau and in attempts to understand the particular nature of South Africa. Collectively, the articles redress the overgeneralizations that are frequently made about 'Africa' as a whole. In some instances they show how ethical goals are virtually unrealizable, implicitly suggesting that we add to the vocabulary of the anthropology of ethics not only 'affordances' (Keane 2015) but what one might call hindrances, barriers or constraints – most vividly shown in Henrik Vigh's account of the grievous incapacity of young men to meet their social obligations and thereby become persons of standing or dignity.

In their outlook, the editors and authors of this issue also show how fine the line is between 'ethics' and 'politics' and tacitly follow something of the agenda set by Didier Fassin (2015). Fassin has pursued an ethnographic and analytical account of the public side of ethics, locating his subject, as he says, at the confluence of ethics and politics. This public side often forces a discrimination between a first-person understanding and a third-person one – let's say between doing what is or feels 'right' and what is accepted or legal, or, to put it in another way, as Fassin says, drawing from Weber, between an ethic of conviction and one of responsibility (Fassin 2015: 191). Fassin suggests that the primary distinctions characteristic of the Western philosophical tradition between a (Kantian) ethics of duty, an (Aristotelian) ethics of virtue and consequentialism, which appear mutually exclusive in abstract theory, all come into play in practice. 'It is the articulation of the three and the relative weight given to each of them that ultimately defines the intersection of ethics and politics' (*ibid.*: 188). This articulation, varying from case to case, is evident in the articles here.

In the literature on ethics, various definitions have been proposed. Here the editors define ethics as 'overarching abstract principles', yet what interests them are not the principles themselves, not the 'cultural content', they say, but the ways in which they are put into practice and shape the interpretation of practice. Among other things, they are interested in the explication of ethics itself as a practice and in 'the fact that ethical claims and commitments can and are being used by actors to constitute, negotiate, consolidate or challenge the social and/or institutional boundaries delimiting (self-professed) communities of ethics'. They speak of 'ethical fields' in which ethical claims and commitments should be interpreted by the anthropologist as registers of social connection and disconnection. In this respect, the approach resonates with a long tradition of British social anthropology.

It is the ethnographic exploration of such processes of shifting the boundaries between different subjects of ethics as well as between the subjects of ethics and

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their respective objects that is the primary concern of this special issue. By 'subjects', the authors mean the individuals or social groupings who are assumed to share (or posit themselves as sharing) certain ethical ideals or characteristics, and by 'objects' of ethics, 'those material realities, persons, [and] attitudes … to which its subjects, as defined above, practically direct their respective ethical commitments'. What this means in practice is a concern for the regulation of one's own behaviour and the transformation of the behaviour of others (whether by education, effort, example or coercion). As the authors show, these 'others' (being subjects themselves) may not acquiesce to serving as the objects of the actions of the ethical subjects. Yet the guest editors also state that they 'are interested in people's reactions to and reformulations of individual and institutional agency when confronted with ethical dilemmas. These reformulations concern the question of what it means to "do good", "lead a better life" or "make a difference".' Hence, they return back from practice to ideals. It is not clear how closely they listen to the responses of the (human) 'objects' of their efforts.

Taken as a whole, I see manifest two contrasting perspectives on ethics, one of which focuses on the ethical as a dimension of personal and interpersonal practice and the other on the ethical as an object of public discourse: respectively, as embedded and institutionalized. The latter can draw fruitfully on Foucault's work on power and knowledge while the former overlaps with Foucault's later work on the ethical subject and self-formation. What unifies Foucault's work is its attention to the production or formation of subjects, and one can say that Africans (like all of us), qua subjects-in-formation, are both subjected to realms of power/knowledge and able to exercise and direct their subjectivity with respect to them. Much social theory and much philosophy is about articulating these matters – around concepts such as freedom, transcendence, reason, will, judgement, agency – but also affect, patience, responsiveness, responsibility and the like. The questions they articulate cannot be conclusively resolved either intellectually or politically but only lived with, practically and existentially. They provide the means to describe the vicissitudes and horizons of human existence, not to overcome or close them down.

I add a few brief words about the specificity of 'Africa' in depictions of ethical life. As the issue editors suggest, too often a discussion of the ethical in Africa has been limited to witchcraft – albeit some significant counter-examples that come immediately to mind are Fortes (1983 [1959]; 1987) on Tallensi personhood and tragedy; Beidelman (1993 [1986]) on Kaguru moral imagination; Fernandez (1982) on Fang religious imagination; and, more recently, Johnson-Hanks (2005) on honour among Beti women and Klaits (2010) on love and care in Botswana. This is not even to mention the strong tradition of African philosophy or accounts by anthropologists of African philosophizing (Kresse 2007; Werbner 2015), or indeed of the ethics of anthropological engagement (Solway 2005). The emphasis on witchcraft is interesting in light of the fact that some recent commentators on the broader anthropological literature on ethics complain that it attends exclusively to the good (instead of, for example, on how the good and not-so-good are discerned and discriminated). As Bochow, Kirsch and van Dijk write (Introduction, this issue), an unproblematic identification of witchcraft as evil is misguided. This is, first, because conceiving good and evil as absolute and antithetical phenomena is an importation from Christianity and has to be part of what we are examining rather than the frame through which we ought to

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examine it. Second, in much of Africa, at least historically, witchcraft was not an exclusive domain abstracted from social life but rather the dark side of kinship and sociality and understandable only in relation to a series of other forces or principles of connectivity. Looking at witchcraft from the perspective of an anthropology of ethical life would situate it within a larger field. I would add that, insofar as they are born of an urge for purification and renewal, the witch hunts about which earlier anthropologists wrote might be compared with contemporary forms of charismatic Christianity or Salafi Islam bent on uprooting older modes of practice (and which today are perhaps the source of most witchcraft accusation and panic).

Another issue is whether to understand the contemporary African scene as 'in transition' or as a conclusively transformed historical phase from what came before – 'traditional', 'precolonial', pre-mercantile or mercantile, colonial, or Cold War (Piot 2010) regimes – and, if so, is it one transformation or several? I find the models both of continuous transition (to what?) and of conclusive transformation problematic. Some of the authors might have paid more attention to history, for example with respect to self-governance over sexual activity in Botswana (Livingston 2005). Nevertheless, the editors make a useful point when they indicate that the subjects of ethics have often been construed in the older ethnographies as collectivities rather than individuals. There are notable exceptions, but this is a striking difference from the allusion in James Laidlaw's title (2014) where 'the subject of virtue' is at once the field of study and the Foucauldian individual engaged in his or her own self-formation. The literature provides few accounts of *askesis* (severe self-discipline) in African societies, at least in ways that are immediately familiar. The forms described are imposed and collective ('initiation rituals' of age cohorts). It is not fully clear whether this derives from the Durkheimian formation of anthropologists qua subjects or tells us something about African sociality itself. But it is the case that in much of precolonial and colonial Africa ethical subjects were formed through intensive ritual practices connected to the lifecycle and social reproduction and in some instances to the political order. Healers may have undergone additional and more individuated trials (see, for example, Silva 2011). The authors here rightly note the (partial) replacement of ritual forms of social reproduction and subject formation by colonial and postcolonial institutions of mission, school and hospital. Concomitantly, the guest editors suggest that there has been 'a shift in ethnographies of African societies from a focus on communal to more individualized forms of ethical commitments'. Yet, as they also note, older forms of ethical commitment become explicit subjects of recognition, contestation and reformulation in the face of rapid social change. They implicitly raise the question of what or where the 'ordinary' is in such contexts, and on which kinds of principles and practices can Africans rely? Or, indeed, ought they to rely? Moreover, even if Charismatic religion is posited as 'extraordinary' or as individuated or premised on the socially disembedded 'individual', it is remarkable for the amount of conformity it engenders and demands.

Each of these articles invites us to explore more deeply the ethical worlds – the ideals, commitments, practices, affordances, hindrances, obligations, conflicts and aporia – of their protagonists. I imagine there will be several rich ethnographies to follow.

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