

Books Discussed

Michael Banner. 2014. *The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology and the Imagination of the Human*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Didier Fassin, ed. 2012. *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

James Laidlaw. 2013. *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

THE GENRE OF JUDGMENT

Description and Difficulty in the Anthropology of Ethics

Patrick McKearney

ABSTRACT

What part should description play in coming to judgment? Questions about genre have become more important in religious ethics as many seek to reform “thin” models of ethical arbitration by recourse to artistic, literary, and historical descriptions in their texts. In this book discussion, I explore what the consequences would be of pursuing this reform by turning to social anthropology—a discipline that relies on extensive empirical descriptions. I do this by considering the anthropology of ethics: a movement that seeks, for the first time, to devote systematic and sustained attention the moral lives of ethnographic informants. I focus on the ways that authors within this field attempt to arrive at more realistic portraits of the different ways societies play out the familiar ethical themes of freedom, responsibility, suffering and agency. In doing so, their work challenges religious ethicists to consider what ethical conversation across these differences would look like, and thus to reconsider the relationship between description and judgment in their work.

KEY WORDS: *anthropology, description, ethics, genre, freedom, judgment, morality, risk, tragedy, value conflict*

What role should description play in coming to judgment? Religious ethics has wrestled with this question to a greater extent than many other academic disciplines. But in trying to integrate empirical studies into the process of ethical deliberation, it has found as many questions as answers. There is always a temptation to imagine that this is just a problem for religious ethicists in particular, or humanities scholars in general. It is easy to look over one’s shoulder at empirical disciplines and imagine that, if only religious ethics were more in touch

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with actual people, these problems would not arise.

Anthropologists, long admired for their ability to understand and describe the ethical lives of distant societies, inspire a particular kind of longing in some ethicists (for example, Scharen and Vigen 2011). Ethnography appears so perfectly to embody a kind of personal engagement that it is easy to see it as a way to overcome the supposedly sterile and distorting distance from ethical life that academic practices seem to create. But in its zeal for engagement with the real world, such a longing neglects the significant debates about the relationship between description and judgment within anthropology itself. If the existence of these difficult discussions dispels the illusion that anthropology might provide an easy answer for religious ethicists tired of not knowing how to relate description and judgment, it should at least provide some comfort that they are not alone in struggling with the issue. This commonality suggests both that there are real problems with relating empirical description to ethical judgment that need thinking through, and that the two disciplines might have something to say to each other in their respective attempts to do just that.

But until recently anthropology would have had little to say to religious ethics, and even less interest in saying it. Anthropologists tend to be much better at thinking about their informants than about themselves. And so the discipline's debate about how to relate description and judgment is surprisingly fierce, showing little of the analytical flair and insightful discussion that tends to characterize ethnographic or theoretical work in the discipline. It has taken the form of a more repetitive than constructive patrolling of the borders of opposing tribal camps. As a result, anthropology has tended to be all too simplistically divided into what I will call here "intellectualist" and "activist" positions: those who think descriptions should be kept clean of moral judgments, and those who think descriptions have no worth if they are not in service of engaged moral work (Fassin 2011, 245). It has remained, in other words, a rather stagnant and insular debate about methodology

that, even if it had escaped its intensely inward focus, would have been of little use to religious ethics—except to remind them of the intractability of the matter.

Perhaps worst of all, as a number of authors (who constitute the focus of this book discussion) have recently argued, the ferocity of this debate has tended to confine anthropological interest in ethics to these questions of method. As a result, anthropology has tended, at best, to only faintly sketch the richness and diversity of the ethical dimension of social interaction. At worst, it has systematically translated it into obscurity. In other words, these anthropological scholars echo John Milbank's (2005) fears that social science sifts out the ethical fluid to find the solid substances of competition, conformity or violence. This inclination, so Joel Robbins argues (2006), has only been compounded by the discipline's lack of engagement with established traditions of ethical reflection. Until recently, anthropology's use of moral philosophy has been largely non-existent or occasional (Laidlaw 2013), and religious traditions have often been imagined as ethnographic objects to be explained, rather than potentially constructive partners in dialogue.

But thankfully these authors have not indulged in Milbank's gloomy conclusions about the future of the social sciences. Over the past fifteen years, they have tried to develop ways to place people's ethical deliberations, moral imaginations, and particularly formed moral characters at the center of ethnographic description. In many ways this new project is filling the old intellectualist wineskins; it is primarily interested in producing better descriptions of social life. But to achieve its ends it has been necessary to enter into dialogue with more normative traditions of ethical thought, and to take more seriously the ethical practices of informants. As a result, this new conversation sits uncomfortably in both the intellectualist and the activist camps. In doing so, it threatens to at least unsettle the impasse between these opposing positions, and perhaps offer a way beyond it. The emergence of this

“anthropology of ethics,”¹ in as much as it pushes anthropology into new and uncharted territory, thus restores hope in the possibility of a conversation between religious ethics and anthropology about what part description can and should play in moral judgment.

1. Reforming Judgment: *The Ethics of Everyday Life* by Michael Banner

Michael Banner argues that moral philosophy and moral theology are odd (2014, 8, 18). Philosophy of music, language, and science seek to identify, and bring into critical dialogue, the logics implicit in existing practices (2014, 21). But moral philosophy—in its dominant strains—has no interest in understanding morality as it is practiced in everyday life. Instead, the discipline relates to lived morality as its arbitrator and judge, taking what it sees as the muddle of conflicting claims and prescribing a clear course of action in the face of them (2014, 19). If description plays any role in this practice of judgment, it is to provide external examples on which to practice arbitration.

This has made moral philosophy, and in turn moral theology, into an ethics of hard cases (2014, 9). A textbook of either shows an overriding concern with points of contention such as abortion, euthanasia, and IVF (2014, 8). The disciplines seek to discover whether or not a certain way of conceiving or aborting a child is legitimate, but not what role having children plays in people’s ethical imaginations, aspirations, and life patterns (2014, 14–15, 35). Much of Banner’s argument has strong resonances with the movement away from utilitarian or deontological ethics in twentieth-century moral philosophy (for example, Anscombe 1958; MacIntyre 2007; Williams 2011). He wants to understand the ways that different modes of ethical subjectivity² come to be formed in different social circumstances, and how ethical decisions make sense in light of them. In other words, he seeks to step into a

¹ Also referred to as the “anthropology of moralities” (Heintz 2009) and “moral anthropology” (Fassin 2012a).

² On this see Heim and Monius 2014.

different kind of conversational encounter *with* alternative moral practices and different ethical subjects, before attempting to stand in a more critical relationship to them. In doing so, Banner makes us consider not only what a particular ethicist's judgment is, but the way they come to and express it.

In this respect, Banner's book resonates with Rowan Williams's essay "The Judgment of the World" (2000, 29–43). This piece, echoing the turn to virtue ethics in moral philosophy, argues that when we imagine judgment as a one-off decision, we fail to attend to the way that acts of arbitration can be part of strategies to reinforce positions of power, or to avoid the vulnerability and mutuality of ethical life. What would happen, he asks, if we saw judgment, not as getting to the right decision, but as a creative, imaginative, and transformative encounter in which each party is mutually converted? Williams, like Banner, wants to talk not just about the content of our moral decisions, but the form in which we take them and reflect on them (2000, 39). He speaks of judgment as not a process of gathering information, but rather the coming together of two differently formed moral subjects. Both Banner and Williams agree that if theological ethics does not take seriously the potentially tragic possibilities for misrecognition and misunderstanding in this kind of encounter, it will fail. If it does not adopt a more descriptive genre—one that brings it into dialogue with moral subjects and their ethical practices, rather than simply condemning them—then the discipline will have no purchase on people's lives.

Many in religious ethics have responded like Banner to the themes of Williams's essay by becoming skeptical of a certain genre of judgment. Even a cursory survey of contemporary work in the field shows that many have taken up his invitation to pursue a more conversational and creative kind of judgment by incorporating description into their ethical reflections, and focusing more on how distinctive kinds of moral character are formed

by particular ethical practices.³ In this respect, we might locate Banner's book as part of a broader movement in religious ethics to reform moral reflection by recourse to historical, scriptural, artistic, and literary descriptions. We can see that, in contrast to a certain kind of "hard cases" ethical arbitration, the work of description is central and internal to the process of taking a stance in whole swathes of theological and religious ethics (and for that matter, parts of contemporary moral philosophy). Banner's book thus offers one articulation of what is at stake in religious ethics' turn towards description: the relationship between judgment and description in texts, or the genre of ethical reflection itself.

However, Banner's book is concerned not just with any kind of description, but with social and cultural anthropology's empirical texts in particular. He draws extensively on ethnographies of birth, suffering, death, and remembrance in order to put classic Christian imaginations of the human in dialogue with contemporary moral practices. And so, while Banner is certainly part of this broader trend in religious ethics (and others too are interested in empirical description) his extensive reliance on social anthropology in particular raises some distinctive questions. How will engaging with the descriptive tradition of anthropology affect the broader project of reforming judgment in religious ethics? Can anthropological descriptions fit into this reformed practice of judgment as easily as literary or artistic ones do? Might anthropology even take this project further by bringing its engagement with real people to the table?

The history of anthropology's relationship to description and judgment suggests otherwise. Anthropologists have long been wary, like Banner, of top-down judgments. They have generally argued that ethnographic research requires chastening our universalistic and ethnocentric tendencies, in order to let a novel understanding of a different social life emerge. For many anthropologists a good ethnography is one that radically contextualizes,

³ See, for example, the transformation of some textbooks in recent years such as Hauerwas and Wells 2006.

particularizes, and challenges our assumptions about the correct ways to organize social life, or what a well-ordered person looks like. But this kind of gleeful iconoclasm has often been articulated as a relativistic opposition to judgment altogether. On this view, anthropological descriptions should never be tainted by the presence of moral judgments. The two are to be kept separate at all costs.

The edited volume *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) threatened to unsettle this division between description and judgment and move the discipline towards a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the two. Inspired by post-colonial critiques, it highlighted and scrutinized the moral complications of anthropology's tradition of searching out, studying, and representing distant Others as if they were fundamentally different from and unconnected to ourselves. After this movement, anthropology could no longer pretend to be detached from the situation it studied, that its research practices were morally neutral, or that it described people who had no relationship to ourselves. This should have provoked a far-reaching reconceptualization of the relationship between judgment and description implied in relativism. But instead the opposition between description and judgment only became further entrenched; the two becoming totems around which opposing responses to the book gathered.

During this period Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) exemplified what I have so far called the "activist" position, when she argued alongside *Writing Culture* that anthropology has been inattentive to injustice, oppression, and violence. But she went further by advocating that others follow her example of standing in political solidarity against apartheid with her South African informants. Anthropology, she said, must witness to the evils of the world in both writing and deed. She was criticized, though, for simplistically rendering the situation in South Africa as an obvious division between good and evil. What I call the "intellectualist" camp was suspicious that Scheper-Hughes, rather like Banner's moral

philosopher, was simply applying a pre-existing moral judgment and an intuitive understanding of universal moral personhood rather than letting the work of description transform her. Taking a moral stance seemed to come at the expense of a complicated account of the situation and of the subjectivities of those involved. But these intellectualist critics also failed to move beyond this point. They offered little articulation of how one might be involved in producing good descriptions and still take an ethical stance. They, too, seemed to imagine that description and judgment were mutually exclusive practices.

Even now the discipline is too often unimaginative about how that relationship can be reformed, and that is precisely why the anthropology of ethics is a movement worth commenting on. It is testament to Banner's intellectual creativity that he is able to use ethnographies as part of his program of reforming judgment despite these major tensions in anthropology's own relationship with normativity. But attending to these difficulties raises the question of why anthropologists are so plagued by them in the first place. It is tempting to believe that religious ethicists are simply better at putting description and judgment together. But might it be the case that the tensions within anthropology are inherent in empirically investigating the social life of the distant Other? I submit that anthropology's typical and deliberate focus on different societies brings a certain tension between judgment and description into sharp focus.

In many ways of doing religious ethics, the author, the situations they describe, and the reader are part of the same society broadly conceived. As a result, at least some sort of conversation already exists between the writer and reader. Because religious ethics has such ease in getting a conversation going with the subject and object of its inquiry, it can imagine there is no need to engage with ethical lives empirically. Creative engagements with the imaginative worlds of art, liturgy, and literature may seem sufficient to overcome the problematic relationship with the Other that Banner identifies in moral philosophy. In other

words, the relationship between description and judgment may not *appear* so fraught because religious ethicists frequently imagine themselves to be speaking to and about people who share a broadly similar ethical subjectivity to themselves.

This appearance is quickly dispelled by doing even the most rudimentary of anthropological work. In order to make sense of the ways that different modes of personhood are formed through particular ethical practices, or even just to do justice to the sheer complexity of social life as it exists in any one place, anthropologists must do much more than engage with imaginative descriptions. Understanding ethical subjects and practices that sit uncomfortably outside the categories and norms of our own conversations requires careful empirical research and lengthy analytical work. As a result, anthropologists are more keenly aware of the need to hesitate before claiming understanding. Because of their obligation to stay faithful to the empirical, they may actually be better at practicing the kind of “contemplative attention to the unfamiliar” that Rowan Williams argues is so essential to a reformed practice of judgment (2000, 39). The hesitation before the Other in anthropology may not simply be a quirky disregard for normativity, but a helpful caution against slipping into a “talkative and confident activism” which has no real therapeutic purchase on social life (Williams 2000, 39, 37; Banner 2014, 13).⁴

But it is not all smooth sailing. Instead, this intense focus on holding back in order to understand generates a heightened awareness of the lack of shared discursive space between the object, subject, and reader of anthropological work. This means that, in order to process local ethical conversations in anthropologically productive ways, most scholars re-describe them in different, more analytical, and less involved terms. And so, the very process that enables anthropological reflection to be so successful—positioning oneself awkwardly between worlds (Evans-Pritchard 1973)—may intrinsically undermine the conditions

⁴ It is a helpful reminder that we need, as Charles Mathewes puts it, to develop “a more rigorous and serious attention to the world as it really exists, not as we would *like* it to” (2010, 335).

necessary to do the kind of normative work that religious ethics does. To write good anthropology, to generatively explore contrasting moral subjectivities, ethnographers are required to constantly question their assumptions, to step *back* from the workings of a particular ethical practice in order to understand its internal logic, historical genealogy, and present-day politics. The work of judgment, by contrast, seems to require stepping *into* a shared space, on the presumption that the person I am addressing has enough in common with me that they will be able to respond. Empirical research on distant others may require a distinction from, and therefore a fraught relationship with, taking a moral stance. Anthropology's commitment to understanding distant social lives may therefore inherently tend towards a bifurcation of judgment and description.

Anthropology might not simply be failing to reconcile description and judgment where religious ethics succeeds. It might instead be better at bringing to light, rather than effacing, important tensions between the two modes. Indeed, a number of scholars have contended that this tension is inherent not just in academic work but in moral life itself.⁵ The moral philosopher Christine Korsgaard, for instance, turns to Kant's distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal to articulate one version of this argument. She describes description and judgment as two laws: there are "laws that describe and explain our behavior . . . [and] laws which are *addressed to us*" (1992, 318). Following Peter Strawson (2008), she argues that these are two ways in which we relate to others. When we are *involved* with others we address them directly, hold them responsible, and therefore imagine that they have freedom to choose how they respond to us (see also Langton 1992). We are *detached* when we speak about and not to others, do not hold them responsible, and imagine that their actions are caused just as other natural phenomena are. For Korsgaard, these two laws are logically

⁵ At the very least, the above discussion of Williams's "The Judgment of the World" suggests that anthropologists are not alone in failing to find a meaningful register for ethical discourse; in encountering difficulty in speaking faithfully, respectfully, and engagingly about and with the distant Other; and in struggling to reconcile a contemplative attention to the intricacy of conflicts with the need to find our place within them (Williams 2000, 39).

irreconcilable ways to relate to others: we hold them responsible or not, we want to form reciprocal relations with them or not (1992, 315; see also 1986).

Banner's recourse to Social Anthropology thus raises questions for the project of reforming judgment in religious ethics. How can this kind of anthropological stepping back be related to the work of stepping forwards to make a judgment? What role should specifically empirical description play in a reformed practice of judgment? How can we come to understand the difference that different moral subjectivities make, without imagining them to be so wholly other that we cannot talk with them? In other words, anthropology's keen perception of the tensions between description and judgment should force us to reconsider how religious ethicists can learn from and converse with their neighbors, rather than just talking *about*, *to*, or even *at* them. So far I have argued that anthropology has simply pointed towards that difficulty, rather than getting very far in solving it. But my contention in this book discussion is that the anthropology of ethics gets us considerably further.

2. Fragility and Freedom: *The Subject of Virtue* by James Laidlaw

In *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom* (2013), one of the few programmatic and theoretical monographs in the anthropology of ethics,⁶ James Laidlaw tours the emerging movement. Ranging across ethnographies, anthropological theories, and moral philosophy, he develops an argument about the role that considerations of freedom, responsibility and ethical difference should play in empirical descriptions of moral life. Laidlaw shares an aspiration for anthropology to investigate the role of freedom in different ethical practices with a writer more familiar to scholars in religious ethics—Saba Mahmood. But Laidlaw is skeptical about one of the key tropes through which she develops her own configuration of description and judgment. I want to outline Mahmood's arguments about

⁶ Notable others include Zigon 2008 and Faubion 2011.

freedom, commenting on the relationship between description and judgment in her text as I do, before turning to Laidlaw's criticisms of her work. Doing so brings out both the important similarities between her and Laidlaw's work, but also crucial differences. It is these differences in particular that force us to clarify our discussions of the role of freedom in ethical practice, and to reflect more acutely on the relationship between description and judgment.

Mahmood's *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2011) explores "the conceptual challenges that women's involvement in the Islamic movement [in Cairo] poses to feminist theory in particular, and to secular-liberal thought in general" (2011, 2). She describes how the women in this Salafist movement creatively carve out spaces within Egyptian religious life to engage in a regime of Islamic teaching, discussion, and self-discipline. Mahmood emphasizes—showing the clear influence of Talal Asad (1993) and Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) on her work—that they do this only through entering into the pedagogical power relations of Islamic tradition, rather than by escaping from its demands. And not only do these women create these social spaces *through* submission to Islamic norms, they create these social spaces *in order to* submit to them. They hope to gradually bring their desires, actions and whole persons into line with the specific ideals of the piety movement in order to become subjects pleasing to God. The participants are encouraged, through argument and conscious deliberation, to increasingly feel these pious dispositions at an unconscious level.

The challenge this poses is how we are to conceptualize the agency of the women who engage in this movement. In what sense, if any, might they be free? "Practice theory"⁷ has been the way that many anthropologists have approached this question. This analytical framework envisions social rules not as determinants of action, but as the constructs of a

⁷ As it has come to be known (Ortner 1984). Its main, and most famous, proponent is Pierre Bourdieu (1977).

game that people can choose how to play. This approach, then, focuses on choice to locate power or agency in moments when people play that game in such a way as to renegotiate their position within it, or resist its strictures.

But this understanding of freedom, Mahmood contends, is alien to her field site where the “distinction between the subject’s own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed” (2011, 31) In this ethical imagination, “submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject’s potentiality” (2011, 31). In short, these Muslim women did not conceive of freedom in terms of liberation from social structure, the ability to change it, or advance within it. They imagined freedom as gradual conformity to a particular normative ideal, to be achieved through submission to those norms. Mahmood’s fieldwork reveals how particular—and therefore problematic—practice theory’s conception of agency and freedom are. In the context of her field site, practice theory’s commitment to “the binary terms of resistance and subordination” at best “ignores projects, discourses and desires that are not captured by these terms” (2011, 15). At worst, though, this theoretical approach translates ethical endeavors out of their own terms and into the analyst’s.⁸ In doing so, it runs the risk of explaining away, and foreclosing an investigation into, the diversity of freedoms that people pursue (Mahmood 2011, xxiv).

Mahmood, Laidlaw, and others in the anthropology of ethics see practice theory as failing to overcome the distinction between the two kinds of laws that Korsgaard identified. It oscillates between, on the one hand, seeing people as the outcome of natural causes, and, on the other, treating them as free and strategic agents who have not been formed in any significant way by their social context. Anthropology, Mahmood and Laidlaw argue, needs to move beyond being either a “science of unfreedom” or a replication of rational choice theory, to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between freedom and cultural formation

⁸ This understanding of agency and freedom thus not only misses aspects of the ethical lives it studies, but actually smuggles the authors “views of what people ought to do with their freedom—the pursuit of their ‘real interests’—into its very definition”(Laidlaw 2013, 6).

(Laidlaw 2013, 1–10). In order to develop this, Mahmood turns to the late Foucault primarily for his concept of subjectivation (2011, 17).⁹ The term plays on an ambiguity in the word “subject” in order to capture the ways in which ethical formation is both a process of submission (or subjection) to external authorities of various kinds, and at the same time the work of becoming a particular kind of ethical person (that is, a subject). Undertaking certain practices of submission and constraint is thus also the work of developing particular “capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of moral action” (2011, 29). Freedom, within this conception, is not necessarily freedom *from* social norms, power relations and bodily practices (such a state is imagined to be impossible on this account), but freedom *through* them.¹⁰ Mahmood draws on this imagination of freedom as “ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed” (2011, 29), because she believes it enables her to investigate different freedoms ethnographically (2003, 838).

These criticisms of practice theory look like a standard intellectualist move.

Mahmood exposes the implicit moral judgments that practice theory imports into anthropological description. She deploys her descriptions of the piety project’s understanding of liberation to smash the parochial idol of what she calls a “liberal” conception of freedom. Rather than taking for granted what oppression is, and simply using anthropology as a way to discern the status of particular instances, Mahmood forces us to challenge our assumptions about it. She practices anthropology as a kind of apophasis, repeatedly taking a hammer to our preconceptions. Ordinarily in intellectualist anthropology, this move would serve to purify the text from any moral judgments—returning it to its primary task of understanding. The task is to smash the idols of normativity to leave only the bare ground of description. But

⁹ Particularly as it is developed in the latter two volumes of *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 2012a and 2012b). James Faubion (2011 and 2001) has provided a distinctive, and the most extensive, elaboration of these themes.

¹⁰ This part of Foucault’s argument is developed in his rejection of the repressive hypothesis in Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality* (2008).

this is not where Mahmood takes her arguments against practice theory. She does not simply want to tear down, with contextualization, anything that her readers hold dear. Instead, she tells us, her commitment to a normative project in feminism means that she resists certain moral judgments not to abstain from ethical reflection altogether, but in order to pursue a more subtle form of it. For her, iconoclasm is a mode of ethical reflection itself—one which has a felicitous relationship to judgment.

For all that Laidlaw and Mahmood agree on, they nevertheless diverge on some crucial points that are instructive for our purposes here. In particular, Laidlaw highlights Mahmood's reliance on a strong contrast between her informants' understanding and practice of freedom, and its imagination and enactment in the secular, liberal West. This binary opposition, he contends, draws attention away from, and leaves unanswered, a question of central importance. Do the women of the piety project "attain a distinctive, non-liberal kind of freedom, [or do they] attain quite other values than freedom" (Laidlaw 2013, 142)? Laidlaw attempts to answer this question by introducing a more variegated understanding of the "liberal" tradition. He begins by delineating three different conceptions of freedom that can be found in the thinkers that Mahmood groups under the heading "liberal."¹¹

First, he draws on Isaiah Berlin's (1971) classic distinction between negative and positive liberty. Negative conceptions ask, "Over what domain of my activities am I master?" They envisage freedom as "the absence of coercion, constraint, or interference by others" (Laidlaw 2013, 143). This idea differs from a positive understanding of freedom—which Berlin and Laidlaw identify in thinkers as diverse as Rousseau, Kant, and MacIntyre—which finds liberty in "conformity to a single objectively good form of life" (2013, 144). But both of these forms of freedom are different from reflective freedom. This concept, typically elaborated by thinkers of variously liberal orientations (for example, Flathman 1987;

¹¹ One of which is, somewhat confusingly, Kant—for many the paradigmatic opposite of liberalism.

Frankfurt 2006; Williams 1993), locates freedom in our ability to “evaluate our own thoughts and desires, and decide reflectively which desires we wish to have and to move us to action” (2013, 148). This, many of these authors contend, is in fact the freedom which underwrites all others and is “intrinsic to the very idea of ethics” (2013, 149). And so amongst those that Mahmood denotes as “liberal,” Laidlaw finds at least three significantly different conceptions of freedom. This enables him to trouble Mahmood’s descriptions of her field site. The project that she describes, of internalizing a submission to God, is clearly a “positive concept of freedom as the realization of a prescribed version of a true perfected self” (2013, 147). But this undertaking also clearly relies on non-interference and on the reflective freedom to decide to undertake it.

More interesting, though, than the simple presence of these types of freedom, is the relation between them. For this particular program of positive freedom that Mahmood describes, as Laidlaw points out, imagines liberation as the achievement of a particular self which is *incapable* of displeasing God (2013, 152). This could mean a number of things. To clarify which, Laidlaw draws on Bernard Williams (1981) to make a contrast between two forms of incapacity (2013, 152–54). The participants in the piety project could try to develop their reflective freedom in order to enable them to *choose* to do only actions that please God. They could thus be said to be incapable of displeasing God in the way that they may also be incapable of killing a kitten. They *could* choose to do it, but they never would. But this is not the freedom that Laidlaw thinks Mahmood describes. For the piety project, Mahmood says, aims to make “consciousness redundant” (2011, 119). The project aims to cultivate selves that are incapable of displeasing God in the same way that a vertiginous person is unable to walk a tightrope. To walk a tightrope is not something they could choose to do (just, on reflection, they never would), it is something that person *cannot* choose to do. Their incapacity is thus more physical than moral. It places restrictions on what they can choose,

rather than being a choice itself. The piety project relies on reflective freedom to be undertaken at all. But it values the positive freedom to be a self that is incapable of pleasing God more highly than the consciousness required for deliberation. Indeed attainment of this ideal self—the final telos of the project—actually requires circumventing and curtailing that reflective freedom (2013, 154).

This returns us to Laidlaw's question about whether or not the women in the piety project pursue a different form of freedom, or simply do not value freedom at all. The answer depends on one's position in debates about autonomy and value conflict. Laidlaw turns again to Berlin in order to frame the choice between two ways of approaching the issue. The first is found in all those traditions that Berlin identifies as valorizing positive liberty. Berlin argues that these philosophical schools conceptualize autonomy neither as freedom from external constraints nor as the ability to reflect, but as the "internal coherence or integrity of the agent," the achievement of a reconciled and consistent self (Laidlaw 2013, 164). This is related to the fact that, for these thinkers, value conflicts are generally imagined as illusory. Any such apparent dilemmas are the product of a divided and inconsistent self (which, for MacIntyre, is further caused by disordered traditions, or by not being located within one at all), not a feature of the moral world itself. This makes it "possible to aim at consistency of values and coherence of will other than through independence or self-legislation" (2013, 167). This understanding of freedom can be actively pursued "as MacIntyre has emphasized . . . through subordination to external authority" (2013, 167). Freedom, in this way of thinking, is identified not in *choosing* how to constitute oneself, but in *being* constituted a certain way—which may include one's location with a functioning tradition. As result, the reflective freedom to deliberate on value conflicts need not be essential, and can at times appear as a distracting menace, in these philosophies.

Laidlaw argues that Mahmood's ethnographic description favors this view. In her

enthusiasm to oppose practice theory's understanding of liberation, she writes as if "these movements empower their participants because and insofar as they endow them with a unified, consistent, and comprehensive perspective on the world" (Laidlaw 2013, 167).¹² All of her ethnographic questions "concern progress in the successful achievement of a coherent, consistent, and self-reinforcing program" (Laidlaw 2013, 166). Though she does refer "to moments of failure," she is so eager to avoid these being read as moments of resistance that she refused to see them as conflicts of values. Instead interprets them as "arising from doubt or recidivism . . . as points then at which people stumble along a single known path" (Laidlaw 2013, 172). Freedom for these women, according to her, is found in *being* pious. Mahmood's analysis thus replicates the depiction of ethical life, autonomy and value conflict found in traditions that valorize positive freedom (see also Schielke 2009a).

This perspective stands in stark contrast to the views of liberal theorists of reflective freedom who have typically maintained that "values are intrinsically and perennially plural and the conflicts between them are irreducible" (Laidlaw 2013, 165).¹³ Where Mahmood describes risk within ethical life as falling off, or not progressing on, a clear path of progress, these philosophers articulate a broader conception of moral risk. Risk can arise when human limitations render an ethical path impossible to follow or when there are genuine and irreconcilable tensions between different moral demands. Ethical life, for people who draw attention to these risks, is inherently "agonistic." It unavoidably consists "in part at least of balancing conflicting claims and sometimes facing tragic choices" (Laidlaw 2013, 165).¹⁴ In this tradition, autonomy is simply the lack of external constraints, the ability to choose one thing over another (Laidlaw 2013, 156). A minimal conception of autonomy, such as this,

¹² Laidlaw's argument is that Mahmood, in ignoring the issue of reflective freedom, has misread both Aristotle and Foucault on this front, her position being actually closer to Bourdieu's—something Laidlaw also attributes to the pernicious influence of MacIntyre (Laidlaw 2013, 75).

¹³ On value-pluralism and value conflict in anthropology see also Robbins 2013a and Mattingly 2014.

¹⁴ See also Nussbaum 2001; Cavell 1999; and Lear 1995; as well as Mathewes's discussion of the relation of some of these authors to theological ethics (Mathewes 1997).

limits what counts as a practice of freedom. If one subscribes to this idea, then it becomes impossible to call “free” that which does not involve deliberation. Reducing one’s reflective freedom is thus not just choosing one freedom over another. It is the removal of the very capacity that enables the exercise of freedom altogether.¹⁵ On this view, one cannot describe the aim of the piety project as a practice of freedom for it aims at the curtailment of its most important prerequisite and practice.

This raises the question of what Mahmood’s ethnography would have looked like if she had instead drawn upon a philosophical picture of ethical life drawn from theorists of reflective freedom. When Mahmood describes situations in which people faltered on a clear ethical path, is she actually referring (imperfectly) to situations in which participants faced important conflicts of values? Emphasizing diverse forms of risk allows us to ask whether, when a husband tries to prevent his wife from engaging in the piety movement, when a woman finds herself unable to concentrate in prayer, or when a teacher’s demands clash with other ethical sensibilities, the Salafist framework offers a complete way to deal with or transcend such problems or whether people find that these other concerns have a hold on them that they cannot shake off. Mahmood does not tell us and that, Laidlaw argues, is the problem. But on the basis of other ethnographies of similar situations (Schielke 2009b; Simon 2009), we have reason to believe that the practitioners experience genuine value conflicts between these ideals and other moral considerations (Laidlaw 2013, 167–73).

Laidlaw’s arguments against Mahmood suggest that the iconoclastic mode has severe limits for a number of reasons. First, this trope tends towards imagining the distant Other as a mirror image of ourselves. If we are always searching for people who are not tainted by individualism, neo-liberalism, or modernity then “the interminable rediscovery of ‘radical alterity’ will of course be over determined” (Laidlaw 2014, 504). This trope may, in part, be

¹⁵ See also Faubion 2011, 81–85.

influenced by Mahmood's commitment to the idea of tradition that comes from MacIntyre, and then Asad. Laidlaw argues that the idea of tradition requires a degree of essentializing difference that is unhelpful for investigating the complexity of ethical life as it is lived.

Second, this move also sets up a relationship that is inimical to the kind of ethical conversation that Mahmood hopes for. If we imagine Others as so distant from us, as wrapped up in distinct and impermeable ethical traditions, Laidlaw argues, their lives can have no purchase on our own (Williams 1993). Laidlaw's demonstration of an alternative makes this point well. His skill in navigating the different streams of Western moral philosophy is exemplary of a movement in the anthropology of ethics towards exploring the technical differences between moral theories. This enables him to find analogies between "the West" and "the rest," which in turn draw those streams of normative ethical reflection into a critical conversation both with each other and with Mahmood's ethnographic material. Where before we may have seen only an opaque radical difference and incommensurable moral subjectivities, the kind of textured relationship that Laidlaw's descriptions develop gives us a foothold in the debates, the difficulties, and the dilemmas within that ethical venture (2013, 216). In doing so, he provides a more hopeful picture of conversation across traditions than MacIntyre.

His emphasis on the possibility of failure, risk, and value conflict in ethical life is key.¹⁶ While attending to the differences between ethical programs, this focus highlights the fact all moral projects have to contend with certain shared limitations. As a result, it checks the wilder impulses of social constructionism, giving us the chance to investigate what different ethical practices have in common, as well as how they differ. This inaugurates a more realistic and variegated exploration of cultural difference. Failing to focus on limitations affords the chance to imagine that they live in a wholly different "world" not

¹⁶ The most obvious example of which is his criticism of Mahmood that I have been exploring here. But it is also central to his ethnographic monograph on Jainism (see Laidlaw 1996). For other exemplars of this approach in ethnographic practice, see Lester 2005; Mattingly 2010; and Day 2007.

subject to any constraints (or that they would live in such a world had they never come into contact with the “West”). But this, Laidlaw argues, divorces them from our own ethical conversations (2013, 224). A focus on failure and value conflict enables us to hold together their difference from and similarity with us in such a way that it allows their difference to speak to, rather than past us.

Laidlaw aims to bring the distant Other into conversation with the more neighborly Other of moral philosophy. Through finding ways to analytically articulate their ethical projects, the subjects of anthropology can become active in our ethical discussions, and our knowledge *about* them can transform into learning *from* them (2013, 224). Indeed, Laidlaw’s work suggests, contra Mahmood, that when description is done well, there is no need to try and integrate explicit judgments into anthropological texts. For good anthropological description done in this way is a kind of ethical reflection in and of itself. In creating textured conversational bridges between what look like isolated entities of different “cultures,” it constitutes already a reformed mode of ethical conversation, already a different kind of relationship with the Other (2013, 224). In other words, both the form and the content of Laidlaw’s work gets us closer to overcoming the tense relationship between description and judgment.

3. Suffering and the Other: *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, edited by

Didier Fassin

Didier Fassin’s *A Companion to Moral Anthropology* (2012a) is “an endeavor to expand the domain [of the anthropology of ethics] beyond its current frontiers by integrating objects and reflections not usually regarded as being part of it” (Fassin 2012b, 10). The contributions are arranged not according to traditional anthropological categories such as kinship and ritual, but by topics much more familiar to religious ethics: moral sentiments,

ethical reasoning, war, care, punishment, and so on. This is reflected in the contributions of authors from outside the intellectualist sphere of anthropology. The book, as Fassin's chapter explicitly frames it, is therefore an exploration of what a reformed anthropological relationship with judgment might look like (2012b, 1–10, 14–15). In the spirit of this enterprise, I want to put in critical dialogue the work of three of its contributors: Fassin himself, Joel Robbins, and João Biehl. These scholars have all written about the ethics of portraying suffering in anthropology, yet each relates their ethnographic work to normative aims quite differently.¹⁷ As such, the conversation between them allows us to further explore Laidlaw's proposal for an anthropology that takes the Other seriously.

Laidlaw turns away from Mahmood's more obviously normative style, and towards descriptions that cultivate what he calls an "ironic" relationship with the Other. But this approach is not without its critics. To many, irony is too detached a response to ethnographic encounters with those who are deprived, distressed, and suffering. How does the reality of suffering affect Laidlaw's proposal? Can his approach to ethical conversation deal with these situations, or does it ultimately fail to capture their ethical import? To explore this issue I will first attend to Biehl who, in recent years, has been one of the prime critics of "intellectualist" anthropology's supposed neglect of suffering. I will then go on to explore Robbins's and Fassin's responses to him. I argue that their different approaches highlight significant problems with Biehl's work, and that this sheds further light on the relation of the intellectualist project to the issue of suffering.

Biehl's *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (2005) reads more like a post-modern novel than an ethnography. It reconstructs the story of Catarina—a woman abandoned by her family in a nightmarish and derelict equivalent of a care home—by telling distressing stories, relating disorientating extracts from her diaries, and presenting powerful

¹⁷ The conversation has not taken place solely within the binding of the book however. I use the edited volume as a springboard into the conversation between the various articles and books of these authors. My discussion of these issues also owes much to Banner 2014, 82–106.

and beautiful photography. The result is a “finely tuned aesthetic of misery” (Csordas 2007, 2009). As such, it responds to a contemporary anxiety that mass-media images of suffering do not enable us to take the distant Other seriously, but instead “produce moral fatigue, exhaustion of empathy, and political despair” (Sontag 2004, 71). Biehl’s book is an attempt to develop an “anthropology of suffering”; a genre of ethnographic writing which would cultivate a more sustained emotional relationship with those in need (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007; Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997).

His work has much in common with Scheper-Hughes’s proposal for a militant anthropology—in particular with her ease in making explicit moral judgments. In his chapter in Fassin’s *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, Biehl brings the ethnographic material of *Vita* to bear in an argument about the morality of care and its lack (Biehl 2012). Catarina’s family, he contends, perverted “the meaning of care itself . . . by substituting drugs and institutionalization” for relational care (2012, 251). He is unafraid to talk about their “self-interests” (2012, 259), the way they veiled “what was truly happening” (2012, 260), and how this “abandonment speaks of . . . the forms of human life that are endorsed these days” (2012, 259). There is an ethnographic argument here “about how neoliberal states and their citizens come to abandon those who cannot productively regulate themselves. But this point is not developed in great depth” (Robbins 2013b, 455). Instead, this kind of ethnographic work is designed to “resituate” ethnographic subjects “within . . . concrete struggles” (Biehl 2012, 247). We might describe both Biehl’s and Scheper-Hughes’s ethnographic writing as an anthropology of witness which remains “secure in its knowledge of good and evil and works toward achieving progress in the direction of its already widely accepted models of the good” (Robbins 2013b, 456).

In doing so, Biehl and Scheper-Hughes transform the distant Other into one of us. They no longer see themselves as studying a culturally separable Other, but instead as

standing alongside their informants in their plight. But the two authors do this in strikingly different ways. Rather than focusing on the inherently political themes of injustice, oppression, and violence, Biehl instead attends to suffering. Whereas Scheper-Hughes seeks a political solidarity with the marginalized against their oppressors, Biehl searches for a universal “communion in trauma” (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 18). For Scheper-Hughes, taking the suffering of the distant Other seriously means standing for their political cause, but for Biehl it involves being drawn into their emotional experience.

This latter may seem like a perfectly intuitive, and not very controversial, moral sentiment but Fassin has argued that it is neither. He claims that this ethical attitude—and its current widespread deployment in political life and in anthropology—is in fact the product of historical shifts in moral imagination (2012b, 5). The main thesis of his monograph *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (2011) is that Western publics, NGOs, and governments have, in recent years, come to regard the problems of the distant Other not as specific situations of political injustice but as examples of a universal experience of trauma, suffering, and vulnerability. He produces a genealogy of this politics of compassion in order to historicize the “natural” pity it plays on, locating this sentiment as a specifically constructed understanding of human misery.¹⁸ Fassin goes on to explore the moral complications of this ethical sensibility. He expresses concerns that humanitarian reason threatens to paste over ethical questions about the politics of our relationship with the distant Other by imagining our similarity too readily. He wonders whether the frame of compassion can really deal with the complications of contemporary political realities.

In this respect, his comments parallel Rowan Williams’s remarks on empathy (Williams 2014). Williams, drawing heavily on Stanley Cavell, argues that there is something morally troubling about the way empathy can be used to whitewash particularity, and to make

¹⁸ For an interesting comparison see Jackson 2013 and 2011.

the stranger into a neighbor.¹⁹ Doing so enables us to imagine that we can replace the complex and compromising ethical and political practices of careful mediation, building trust, and mutual negotiation with a simple one-way process of identification. This covers up the complicated gap between the self and the Other—paving the way for us to speak on behalf of others about what they really feel and want. To guard against this Williams suggests that, when we see the suffering of an Other, our first response should not be “I know exactly how you feel,” but “I have no idea.” Before the Other we must practice a contemplative and confessional hesitation.

Some of the similarities, in both form and content, between Williams’s and Fassin’s comments draw our attention to the genre of the latter’s work. Fassin’s work exemplifies and advocates a different configuration of description and judgment. The book is not “engaged,” because it takes many steps back from the moral program at hand and tries to understand its historical genealogy (Fassin 2012b, 2–5). And yet it does not refrain from judgment altogether. Fassin subtly but explicitly critiques the moral practices he studies. He exemplifies the creative combination of intellectualist and activist positions that he sought to generate in editing *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*.

It is illuminating to compare this with the writing of another contributor to the volume, Robbins. In his controversial essay “Beyond the Suffering Subject: Towards an Anthropology of the Good” (2013b), Robbins draws on Fassin in order to think through the specifically anthropological problems with Biehl’s work. His most immediate difficulty with this framework is that it can distort ethnographic descriptions. He illustrates this point through discussion of his own research, written up most fully in his landmark monograph *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (Robbins 2004). Based on fieldwork among a Papua New Guinean tribe called the Urapmin,

¹⁹ See also Stozckowski 2008.

Robbins's ethnography traces the history of their self-conversion to a form of Pentecostal Christianity. This history left the Urapmin believing that certain ethical stances and practices necessary to sustain their social organization are morally reprehensible. And yet, despite their aspiration to move away from this old way of conducting their social life, they have not yet found a new one. As a result they live, as the subtitle puts it, in "moral torment."

The situation of the Urapmin may appear to be a clear case of suffering subjects with whom we need to sympathize. But Robbins contends that such attributions of misery hinder, rather than help, our understanding of them. The Urapmin willingly converted to Christianity. To conceive of them as victims thus requires either ignoring their well-developed Christian aspirations, or patronizingly attributing these to false consciousness. Too strong a commitment to the ethical goals of the anthropology of suffering, and the thin conception of misery it is based on, can stop us from understanding the ethical lives of those we study. Instead, anthropology must focus on people's struggles towards the "good."

However, just because Robbins resists Biehl's imposition of suffering onto the Urapmin, and focuses on their pursuit of the good, this does not mean he is inattentive to ethical risk and value conflict. In the first part of the book he carefully traces how, in committing themselves to their understanding of Christianity, the Urapmin have exposed themselves to modes of evaluation, visions of sociality, and constructions of desire that are simply unrealizable in their present context. In the second section, he goes on to look at the kind of value conflicts this produces in their everyday life. His argument against Biehl might be read as a critique of too narrow a conception of the fragility of ethical life. Our intuitive judgments of misery will only tell us about how *we* imagine moral failure and distress, rather than giving us any analytical purchase on how our informants do. For both Robbins and Laidlaw, attending to fragility by way of value conflict—rather than suffering—produces

more variegated and realistic contrasts between different ways of ordering and experiencing moral life.

Laidlaw criticized Mahmood for ignoring certain features of the ethical condition we all share (that is, the possibility of value conflict) in her attempt to highlight difference. Robbins and Fassin criticize Biehl for too much focus on similarity, and not enough attention to difference. But their critiques actually gesture in the same direction as Laidlaw's, namely towards an anthropology that is able to hold complicated portraits of cultural difference without projecting desires for either universal communion or radical alterity onto them. In particular, their arguments contribute to our understanding of how this kind of anthropology might deal with the question of suffering. They make the case that the kind of hesitation before the Other that Laidlaw advocated is in fact especially important when it comes to situations of suffering. For in these cases, the temptation to seek a troubling emotional identification is particularly strong. But taking the Other seriously requires letting them be *other*. And so what both Robbins and Fassin offer is an ethical vindication of Laidlaw's intellectualist traits in the face of the more activist stance that Biehl exemplifies.

Yet there are also significant differences between Robbins and Fassin that in many ways parallel those between Laidlaw and Mahmood. For Fassin is quite explicit that intellectualist detachment is not the end of the story. It facilitates, and even obligates, a kind of critical engagement with the particular moral practices he studies. But by comparison, explicitly normative reflections on moral practices are notably absent from Robbins and Laidlaw's texts. Robbins, for instance, refuses to condemn Biehl, let alone any ethical practices outside anthropology that enact this troubling identification with the Other. Laidlaw demonstrates a similar reticence. He advocates anthropological models that take value conflict seriously and condemns Mahmood's approach for not doing so. But he does not criticize ethical projects outside of anthropology that fail to do this (such as the ethics of

Salafist Islam that he claims Mahmood's analysis replicates in certain respects). So whilst their approach offers distinct anthropological advantages, does it actually get us anywhere in rethinking the relationship between description and judgment?

4. Conclusion

I have argued throughout that the anthropology of ethics develops a more nuanced way to reflect on the distant Other than previous approaches within the discipline. Mahmood, Laidlaw, Fassin, and Robbins all reflect on issues that have been central to more textured variants of moral philosophy and religious ethics. How do we remain open to the diversity of freedoms that other people pursue? How do we take people's moral endeavors seriously not just in their aspiration but also in their failure? How can we learn from the Other without imposing our own understandings? How can we hesitate before another's distinctive ethical subjectivity whilst still being in conversation with them? Having explored these questions through recourse to moral philosophy, these authors offer two things to religious ethics.

First, they give a sense of what genres of philosophical reflection, and what models of ethical life, permit better kinds of empirical investigation, and so are more conducive to reforming the relationship between judgment and description. For instance, Laidlaw found Bernard Williams and the late Foucault more generative than MacIntyre and Bourdieu in working out how we can learn from anthropology's empirical descriptions. His arguments might make religious ethicists reconsider their use of the latter authors in their own ethical inquiries. This might also make us rethink Banner's iconoclastic arguments (though not his practice) about how to relate to moral philosophy. These anthropologists show that if moral philosophy is handled well, then it does not need to be thrown out with the utilitarian or deontological bath water. By keeping a firm hand on the point of employing thinkers from moral philosophy, as well as seeking out other intra-disciplinary conversation partners, these

anthropologists are able to advance their arguments significantly. This might provide a helpful reference point for religious ethics. As Banner has reminded us, if we are not alert to considerations of genre and purpose in using moral philosophy it can lead us astray. But if we have a clear sense of why and how we are using it, in other words, of what advancing scholarship in religious ethics looks like, then it can be fruitful.

Second, by integrating the considerations of moral philosophy into the heart of social and cultural anthropology, authors like Mahmood, Laidlaw, Fassin, and Robbins give religious ethicists more than just an analogous attempt to reform judgment. They offer genuine dialogue partners in that endeavor. When religious ethicists attempt to reform thin models of judgment, use description, or argue against scientific empiricist models, they might now ask how an anthropologist of ethics would approach such topics. Doing so may even enable the two fields to discover, and perhaps create, more shared ground than simply the methodology of this shared project of reform. Anthropologists and religious ethicists may find, now that the distinction between their projects is not quite so clear (anthropology becoming more engaged in ethical conversation, and religious ethics becoming more descriptive), that they are able to engage in dialogue on particular issues within ethics. Banner offered some topics for such a conversation in the form of kinship, birth, death, remembrance, and suffering. I have suggested some more analytical ones: freedom, risk, and value conflict.

Yet for all the hope I have for this dialogue, and the confidence I have in the anthropology of ethics, I find it hard to ignore the movement's own internal tensions. In particular, I suspect the difference with which I ended the last section—between Robbins and Laidlaw on the one hand, and Mahmood and Fassin on the other—is a significant one. Laidlaw and Robbins want their reinforcement of the classic intellectualist emphasis on abstaining from judgment to be, not a relativistic opposition to judgment, but a crucial step in

a reformed practice of it. Robbins, like Laidlaw, hopes that attending to his informants' attempts to strive after the good will enable us to find "ways to let their efforts inform our own" (Robbins 2013b, 462). This book discussion has developed Laidlaw and Robbins's line of thinking into the argument that anthropology's non-judgmental reflection on ethical situations renders any further judgment unnecessary. There would, on this view, be no tension between judgment and description: description *is* judgment.²⁰ There is nothing more to good judgment than producing good description. Anthropology produces good descriptions that constitute the only kinds of judgments anthropologists or religious ethicists need. Seeing it this way captures something about the way the very process of reading purely descriptive anthropological texts is already a transformative ethical practice.

But Fassin's work raises the question of whether Laidlaw's and Robbins's texts really live up to this thought. Does reading their descriptive work really constitute a reformed practice of judgment? Or have they simply shied away from the kind of explicit judgment which is necessary if one is to "step forward" as I described it earlier? In short, have they actually produced a reconciliation of description and judgment or simply pasted over the cracks? Which genre of anthropology takes the Other more seriously: that which hesitates before them so much that it refrains from explicit moral judgment, or that which moves beyond that reticence towards a normative and engaged ethical conversation? None of these texts offers any simple resolution to this problem. In what remains, I face this difficulty head on in order to see if a blessing for religious ethicists might still be wrestled out of it.

Veena Das (2014) puts the problem raised by Fassin and Mahmood directly to Laidlaw. She objects to his use of the term "value conflict" which, she says, does not capture the depth, complexity, and emotional tenor of how these situations are experienced and coped with in everyday life. She argues that it reinforces an intellectualist distance from the people

²⁰ See Adams and Elliott's innovative development of this argument in relation to theological ethics (Adams and Elliot 2000).

being studied and the ordinary ethical situations in which they find themselves.²¹ In order for anthropology to have a genuine encounter with people in such situations it must be “attuned” to them. Instead of talking about “value conflicts” she wants to talk about the difficulty of the everyday in ethics: how it inevitably confronts us with situations we cannot resolve. She does not want anthropologists to write *about* such value conflicts, but instead to practice and train the skill of living *with* the complexity of them. She openly commends a practice of what she calls living sanely with difficulty and describes moments when her ethnographic informants are incapable of doing this as relapses into madness. Anthropological reasoning, then, should share in the conditions of ethical. It should mimic what good ethical thinking looks like for informants by carefully navigating their predicaments with them.

For Das, anthropology cannot engage in a genuine dialogue with the ethical lives it studies if it does not also take a normative stand. For her, the idea that anthropological description *is* judgment will not do. It is perhaps beguiling to imagine that simply contemplatively reflecting without ever putting oneself forward in a more normative sense would ever be a sufficient way to engage in ethical life (Williams 2000, 39). Indeed, philosophers and theologians interested in value conflict and risk might well say the opposite: refusing to take a stance may be a way of avoiding making oneself vulnerable to moral accountability. If Laidlaw is right that agonistic and tragic choices are an inherent part of ethical life, then that is presumably true for anthropologists, too.²² As much as analytical contemplation may shed more light on issues, we are all aware that we cannot take this stance the whole time.

²¹ Das’s argument is part of a broader argument for ““Ordinary Ethics.” This approach regards ethics as “part of the human condition . . . that it is intrinsic to speech and action” (Lambek 2010a, 1). Ordinary Ethics, then, “implies an ethics that is relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself” (Lambek 2010a, 2). Lambek’s edited volume is the prime locus of this conversation, and remains one of the foundational texts in the anthropology of ethics more broadly (see Lambek 2010b).

²² “Since value judgment is the most commonly shared attitude toward the social world, the anthropologist cannot avoid and should not elude the moral position he or she adopts, either explicitly or implicitly, either by excess or by omission” (Fassin 2008, 341).

But if this approach most clearly articulates the problem with Laidlaw and Robbins's approach, it is not without its own problems either. Das implies that when she makes anthropological arguments she is beholden to ethical imperatives, not just analytic ones. This position seems to collapse an important distinction between the kind of ethnographic accountability that anthropologists have in their academic work, and the kind of normative accountability that anthropological practice has generally (Fassin 2008, 337; see also Weber 1958). How will her judgments be held accountable, criticized, and reworked? Through argument about empirical facts, or through criticisms of her moral stance? Laidlaw and Robbins, in their hesitancy to come to judgment, maintain the distinction between the short-term accountability of anthropological work to ethnographic realism, and the long term good that this kind of accountability may bring about (Laidlaw 2014, 498–99). The anthropology of ethics on this latter view can be part of an ethical practice without needing to include explicit judgments in its texts or research practices.

Should there then be a division of labor, where anthropologists produce the thick, textured, ethnographic material towards which ethicists take a stance? Anthropologists could remain accountable to ethnographic realism in producing good anthropological work without foreclosing the possibility of this work being used as part of a broader process of judgment. This division of labor is compelling, but again too neat. It seems to imagine the judgment that religious ethicists should pass on anthropological material in precisely the thin ways that Banner, Rowan Williams, and others cautioned us against. So we return to our starting question, what role can description play in coming to judgment? How can description be used in a practice of judgment that is thicker than one-off acts of arbitration, and yet not solely a contemplative gaze? How can we attend faithfully to the complexity of the world whilst still acting within it? How can we be simultaneously respectful of a person's Other-ness, faithful to their struggles, and remain in neighborly conversation with them? In short, is it actually

possible to do anything to reconcile description and judgment or must they remain fundamentally opposed modes of interaction?

Korsgaard assumes that respecting another person entails treating them as responsible—that is, addressing laws directly to them, rather than explaining their behavior as a natural phenomenon. This is what it means to recognize them *as* an ethical subject. The complexity of the cases we have been considering challenge such a simplistic answer.²³ Exactly what it would mean to hold someone in Papua New Guinea responsible for their ethical practices, how a reciprocal relationship with them might be possible, or why it might be desirable to form one, are questions that go beyond her narrow treatment of the matter. Indeed, the ongoing nature of the debate about the ethics of description and judgment in anthropology, of which the anthropology of ethics is only the most recent development, demonstrates how relationships that cross traditions and cultures press home the necessity of *both* description *and* judgment. They are neither inconvenient, dispensable practicalities nor irreconcilable modes but essential aspects of what it means to seriously engage with them.²⁴ It is obvious when faced with others whose subjectivity differs markedly from ours that to recognize them *as* ethical subjects requires both.

This is not to deny the sometimes tragic difficulty of holding description and judgment together. They may be as inherently in tension as they are necessary. But in this light we might read both the theoretical arguments in the anthropology of ethics and its reconfiguration of the descriptive genre of anthropological writing, as a bold and innovative attempt to try and bring these two modes into a more constructive relationship in order to

²³ Fassin's work should at the very least have alerted us to the difficulty of these issues, and Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* (2006) offers a more prolonged reflection on them.

²⁴ In this respect, it is interesting to ask of MacIntyre's simplistic and brief descriptions of social realities (Laidlaw 2013, 88): how were these ever imagined to be serious engagements with social reality by moral philosophers? His increasing insistence on the boundedness of traditions (Laidlaw 2013, 65–71) and the impossibility of conducting ethical inquiry outside or at the boundaries of them, meant he did not feel compelled to face up to the problems that anthropologists face. Bernard Williams's contrasting focus on the necessity of an "ethnographic stance" that crosses traditions may well bear an interesting relation to his much more subtle treatment of socio-cultural realities (1986, 203–4; 1993; see also Laidlaw 2013, 216).

form creative ethical conversations across and within traditions.²⁵ I have described how the discussions in the anthropology of ethics revolve around how to simultaneously attend to both the similarities and the differences between other ethical subjectivities and our own. What is more, these debates focus on precisely the issues that are rightly at the heart of the philosophical debate I discussed through Korsgaard: freedom, responsibility, and agency. The anthropology of ethics seeks a way to relate to ethnographic informants that neither reduces them to the determined products of their radical cultural difference with whom we cannot talk, nor presupposes and projects a shared, mutual conversational framework for ethical judgment when there is none. In this respect, the movement has much to offer a religious ethics which (despite its turn to description and its increased focus on virtue over act) all too often remains inattentive to the varieties of ethical subjectivity and the tensions that it creates between the two modes of relating to others I have described here. If anthropology has been forced to learn this lesson in conversations across social boundaries, it is no less salient and important for us to learn it in our discussions both within and between traditions, too.²⁶

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²⁵ For a more specific meditation on that topic see Mair and Evans 2015.

²⁶ I am enormously grateful to Charles Mathewes for introducing me to this conversation, and providing so much guidance along the way. Without him this piece would not have been written. I also owe a great debt to James Laidlaw, Michael Banner, Joel Robbins, and David Ford for reading drafts, teaching me a great deal about anthropology and religious ethics, and pursuing this conversation in their own ways. I am also very grateful to Jon Mair, Giles Waller, Paolo Heywood, Tyler Zoanni, William Dawley, Sam Hole, Jonas Tinius, and John Fahy for reading this piece at the many stages of its gestation. Collectively they are responsible for vastly improving its quality through innumerable suggestions and conversations. The responsibility for the many remaining deficiencies in my treatment of both anthropology and religious ethics remains completely my own.

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