Affordances and Reflexivity in Ethical Life:

An Ethnographic Stance

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Abstract

Naturalistic, normative, and ethnographic approaches to ethical life seem to describe very different worlds. Focusing on ordinary social interactions and ideologies surrounding them, this article argues the ethnographic stance allows us to look in two directions, where we can see some points of articulation among these worlds. In one, the domain of naturalistic explanations, ethical life draws on affordances offered by psychological, linguistic, and other processes usually described as operating beneath the level of people's awareness. In the other, the normative domain of reasons, principles, and arguments about them, it is the demands of ordinary social interaction that form some of the most ubiquitous inducements for people to account for themselves in ways that can become conscious, reflexive, and purposeful. When explicit reasons and justifications result they may give rise to historical objects like moral codes and ethical precepts.

Keywords: Ethics, Morality, Affordance, Ethnography, Objectification, Social Interaction, Intentionality, Psychology, Moral Philosophy

Ethics and morality, among the oldest and most challenging topics in socio-cultural anthropology, are being taken up anew with fresh vigor.[1] This ethical turn provides an occasion to reflect on the distinctiveness of the ethnographic stance among the human sciences. Given that ethics perches on the so-called fact/value divide, this essay argues that there is something to be learned from both naturalistic approaches (such as psychology and linguistics) and normative ones (such as philosophy, religion, and law)—without, however, inviting reductionism.[2] Naturalistic approaches describe a world of causes and effects, of mechanisms, or statistical correlations of which people are largely unaware. Normative ones invoke a world of principled, reflexive reasoning and decision-making carried out by self-conscious agents. I suggest that if anthropology is to shed light on the relations between the cognitive, affective, and linguistic processes described within naturalistic frameworks, on the one hand, and the ethical thought at the heart of normative ones, on the other, it must find new strategies for taking advantage of the work being done in these fields.[3] This article proposes one way of doing so that retains ethnography's distinctive stance toward the world, by attention to affordances and to the interactive dynamics that prompt reflexivity.

To see some of the characteristic problems posed by the attempt to understand ethical life, consider this incident: during the Second World War a Polish peasant woman happened to hear a group of her fellow villagers propose throwing a little Jewish girl into a well. The woman said "she's not a dog after all" and the girl's was saved (Gilbert 2003: xvi-xvii). To the traditional philosopher, what is striking here is the absence of principled justification or indeed any serious moral argument at all (Appiah 2008: 160). We may wonder how much conscious ethical reflection this woman's quip required on her part, or on that of the people she addresses.

It seems she merely invokes, in a rather off-the-cuff way, a common-sense category that reframes a situation so the others can see what they have proposed in a new light. To some, this apparent lack of reflexivity may cast doubt on exactly how we should count this as a full-fledged ethical act. An alternative approach would place the act in its cultural context. And although we may conclude she draws on a locally available category, clearly it was not until that moment salient to those who had, perhaps, taken the girl to be some kind of vermin. Even if we grant that communities are cross-cut with multiple conflicting value systems, there is no reason to think this woman does not share all the usual background beliefs and values with her fellow villagers: in this case, the explanatory power of "culture" alone doesn't seem to get us very far. But neither does moral psychology, for the same reason, since it should apply equally to that woman and to the other villagers. Moreover, against the cheerful claim that this woman's instincts reveal a bedrock humane intuition, perhaps offering a clue to some universal basis for ethics, we would need to recall that a similar sort of gut reaction can find differences of skin color, sexual orientation, religion, dress, or eating habits fundamentally repugnant, and even inhuman (Haidt 2001, Rozin and Nemeroff 1990, Rozin and Royzman 2001).

The Polish villager's intervention points to some key questions for any empirical research into ethics: what are the relations among her gut level response, on the one hand, and explicit modes of argument and reasoning, on the other? How does either of those articulate with taken-for-granted community norms, habits, and their histories? Does a naturalistic explanation of that gut level response—perhaps in affective, cognitive, or neurological terms--have any bearing on what happens in the normative domain, which is defined by reflexivity, as people reason with one another, fault others, or justify themselves? Or vice versa? What made this Polish villager's intervention work? What is it to give an account of oneself (Butler 2005)? This article cannot

pretend to answer all these questions, but attempts to indicate some directions to which they might lead us.

To anticipate part of my argument, giving an account of oneself (and of others) involves the invocation, implicit or explicit, of certain known or potentially knowable types of person, acts, and stances—girls, dogs, the charitable woman, the insincere man, to slander, to vindicate, contempt, benevolence.[4] This invocation is not just a matter of an ethical subject contemplating a set of ideas and values, and applying them to a particular circumstance. The preeminent instigation for giving an account is interaction with other people. I will suggest that we can gain some traction on reflexivity by looking at the affordances of interaction and the objectifications they can induce as critical components of ethical life.[5] What's crucial here is not to take the domains of reflection and talk in isolation, nor to treat them as simply expressing pre-existing moral codes, ethical precepts, or social categories. To understand how they emerge, they must be situated in relation to other dimensions of ethical life. These include both those psychological processes that work beneath people's normal awareness, and the historical ones that may range beyond it. In sketching out the parameters of these questions, I will suggest that one virtue of the ethnographic stance is that it can allow us to see how they are articulated.

This article begins by outlining the contrast between naturalistic and normative approaches to ethics, and the challenges they pose to the ethnographic stance. It then proposes that the idea of affordance shows us one way that the world that naturalistic explanations describe becomes visible in the world that ethnography encounters, that is, one of self-interpreting, purposeful people in communities that have histories, and face constraints. Turning then to the normative perspectives, I argue that the conscious ethical reasoning that lies at their heart has its foundations in the demands of ordinary social interaction. I suggest that ethical

reflection, persuasion, justification, or accusation most characteristically come into ethical pertinence when a person is called upon to give an account of herself (or, as in the Polish story, of others). When people do so, they draw not only on existing cultural vocabularies, but also, sometimes quite inventively, on what I will call the affordances of psychology, language, and interaction.

To illustrate how these dimensions work together in particular ethnographic contexts, this article turns to the problem of intentionality and the ethnographic claim that in some societies people deny being able to construe one another's intentions or thoughts. I will argue that we can gain more *ethnographic* insight into *particular* social realities if we take seriously the psychologists' assertion that intention reading is a basic part of human life *everywhere*, than if we treat such denials as evidence of radically different ontologies. In conclusion, I briefly point to one way the ordinary ethics of everyday interaction articulates with historically emergent and enduring ethical concepts. First, however, I will define what I mean by "ethnographic stance" and "affordance."

Affordances and the ethnographic stance

Of anthropology's ethical turn, Michael Lambek remarks "One of the virtues of practicing ethnographic fieldwork is that you see how people act in good faith, how they try to do what they think is right in the face of conflict and try to maintain self-respect in conditions that work to undermine it" (2000: 318). His words display a key feature of the ethnographic stance, which privileges the experience of the fieldworker and the self-understanding of those among whom we live. But to take people at their best-reckoning of themselves runs counter to a

host of other perspectives, from the large-N statistical models and experiment-based explanations ventured by other social sciences to the unmasking gestures of post-structuralism and of ideological critique, as well as the normative arguments of moral and political philosophy. Given such influential alternatives, what exactly does the ethnographic stance yield?

The ethical turn in ethnography can be located between two poles in contemporary thinking on the subject. On the one hand, the Kantian and utilitarian traditions in philosophy and political thought often seek to ground ethics in the rationality of self-aware actors. On the other hand, neuroscience, psychology, evolutionary theory, and economics tend to take the sources of ethical responses to be immanent in biological systems, or individuals, or selective pressures, or populations, in each case more or less independently of anyone's self-awareness. The former stresses reasons and justifications; the latter, regularities, causes, and effects.[6] The ethnographic stance, by contrast, tends to accept neither normative nor naturalistic accounts as the heart of the matter. In a more Nietzschean spirit, much current socio-cultural anthropology emphasizes the particularistic and historicizing character of the ethnographic domain. It is widely assumed that people's self-understanding is as much somatic and pragmatic as it is verbalized and reasoned out. The old view of culture as a normative playbook has largely been displaced by an insistence on fluidity, boundlessness, innovation, conflict, contradiction, the rhizomic, and so forth. But having abandoned the earlier units of social analysis, these more fragmentary perspectives do not always replace them with full accounts of people's interests, motives, constraints, nor do they explain exactly what, besides the individual, we should be attending to. With this in mind, I propose we take a critical, but not merely debunking, look at efforts underway in some other fields grappling with ethical life.[7]

This article proposes that the ethnography of ethics concerns processes that mediate

between the poles of naturalism, involving phenomena of which people are unaware, and the heightened self-consciousness of moral reasoning. My starting point is to assume that ethical life is not a pure cultural construction, built from scratch by some Promethean human will. It draws on—*but is not determined by*—certain features of cognition, affect, linguistic structures and pragmatics, and patterns of social interaction. Neither does it depend on explicit, discursively available, moral reasoning and reflection—"ordinary ethics" (Lambek 2010) is *a pervasive element of people's unselfconscious daily round*. But ethical life can both produce (and in turn respond to) objectifications like explicit moral systems, religious disciplines, human rights regimes, and legal codes. However, the reflexivity that concerns me here is more banal, but also more pervasive, the stuff of gossip, parental didacticism, the etiquette of talking about people's intentions, and the ready-to-hand vocabulary of character. To summarize, the ethical worlds made visible in the ethnographic stance draw on *affordances* they discover in cognition, affect, and interaction, are manifested tacitly and explicitly in everyday interactions, and have the potential to instigate ethical *reflexivity*.[8]

The idea of affordance originated in the psychology of visual perception. As defined by James J. Gibson, "[t]he affordance of anything is a specific combination of the properties of its substance and its surface" in light of what it offers, provides, or furnishes for the animal that perceives it (Gibson 1977: 67-8). Gibson stresses that although the properties are objective phenomena, they serve as affordances only *in particular combinations* and *relative to particular observers*. Thus, "[I]f an object that rests on the ground, has a surface that is itself sufficiently rigid, level, flat, and extended, *and if this surface is raised approximately at the height of the knees of the human biped*, then it affords *sitting-on*" (Gibson 1977: 68, italics in the original). Or, as George Herbert Mead had remarked a generation earlier, "the chair invites us to sit down"

(1962: 280). But as Gibson goes on to say, "knee-high for a child is not the same as knee-high for an adult" (1977: 68). Two crucial points in this original definition are, first, that affordances are objective features in contingent combinations, and, second, they only exist as affordances relative to the properties of some *other* perceiving and acting entity.

To extend this concept to ethnography, we might start with the simple observation that not just physical objects but *anything* that people can experience, such as emotions, cognitive biases, bodily movements, ways of eating, linguistic forms, traditional teachings, or conventional practices possesses an indefinite number of combinations of properties.[9] In any given circumstance, these properties are available for being taken up for in some way for some purpose, while others will be ignored. So another crucial point to stress is (mere) potentiality: a chair may invite you to sit *but it does not determine that you will sit*. You may instead use it as a step ladder, a desk, a paperweight, a lion tamer's prop, to burn as firewood, to block a door, to hurl at someone. Or you may not use it at all. Affordances are properties of the chair vis á vis human activity. As such they are real, and exist in a world of natural causality (they can hold down loose objects or catch fire), but not they do not cause people to respond to them in any particular way.

Affordance is a useful way to understand how ethnographers can think with relevant findings of psychologists (among others) without assuming that doing so must lead straight to reductionism or determinism. By *ethical affordance*, then, I mean any aspects of people's experiences of themselves, of other people, or of their surround, that they may draw on as they make ethical evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not. Below, I will suggest two common sources of ethical affordances, the social dynamics of conversation, and the cognitive propensity to seek out other people's intentions. As the next section shows, discussions of

creativity and freedom have been central to the ethical turn in anthropology. Affordance is one way to approach the problem of human creativity and freedom without overlooking what might be learned from the naturalistic approaches that ethnographers may tend to associate with determinism.

Freedom and self-awareness in theories ethical life

The idea of freedom brings us to a critical point of divergence between normative and naturalistic perspectives on ethical life. Traditional philosophical definitions of ethics commonly turn on a distinction between fact and value, and between the causes of action and the reasons for it (Darwall 1998). In these traditions, for an action to count as ethical it must be directed or justified in the light of some values recognized *as* ethical by the actor (Parfit 2011). This requires both some degree of autonomy from natural causality or social pressure (one could have done otherwise) and some quality of self-awareness (one must know what one is doing). Thus even Michel Foucault, who has been one of the major touchstones in anthropology's ethical turn, sees ethics as characterized by the freedom of the subject (1986, 1997). This freedom is expressed in two modes of reflexivity, as a kind of knowing, and a kind of action. Foucault defines ethics as a relation of the self to itself; the self knowing the self and the self acting upon the self. The freedom that defines ethics is a function of reflexive thought. This reflexivity turns on a capacity for self-distantiation: "Thought . . . is what allows one to step back . . . to present [one's conduct] to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals" (1997: 117; see Butler 2005: 111ff, Faubion 2001). As in much of the western tradition (Schneewind 1998) this takes the relative autonomy that defines an action or

stance as ethical to be inseparable from heightened self-consciousness. Foucault, in this respect at least, seems to be working within the broad parameters of that tradition which places ethical life in the domain of reasons and justifications.

Pushing hard against this tradition are the apparently corrosive effects of the social and natural sciences on Euro-American ethical thought. Since the era of Darwin, Marx, Comte, Quetelet, and Freud, naturalistic explanations have challenged the human self-mastery and self-awareness that supposedly defined ethical life. This challenge remains strong today, arising in fields as diverse as neuroscience and economics. Naturalistic explanations have sometimes been taken as debunking people's self-understanding as illusory (for the polemical extremes, see Harris 2010, Pinker 2002). Although less extreme, perhaps, the findings of situationist psychology (Mischel and Shoda 1995, Ross and Nisbett 1991; cf. Appiah 2008, Doris 2002) seem to undermine precisely that subjective self-awareness traditionally found at the heart of the ethical. Situationist psychology holds that people's ethical judgments are strongly affected by trivial and irrelevant factors of which they are unaware, aspects of the momentary situation (e.g. the smell of baking, having just found a some money in the street) or how a problem is framed (e.g. which element of a moral dilemma is presented first in a narrative sequence). Behavioral economics draws on similar research to emphasize to role of subliminal cues and priming effects in people's financial decisions (Kahneman and Tversky 1979). Although these particular approaches are not universally accepted within their disciplines, they exemplify the problem faced by any concept of ethics that relies on notions of self-awareness, self-mastery, or freedom.

Foucault's use of "freedom" has both the negative character of action not wholly shaped by external forces and the positive character of a person's capacity for self-formation. This dual character reflects the mediating function of the concept of ethics, as a middle way between the

positions, respectively, that subjects can wholly construct themselves or that they are wholly shaped by forces beyond them (Faubion 2001: 94). Developing this line of thought, James Laidlaw (2002) attacks any tendency to so wholly identify morality with society that it comes to have a deterministic character to it. As Joel Robbins succinctly rephrases his conclusion, "When every observance of a collectively held rule of etiquette is as much a moral act as is refraining from killing someone who has injured you, there seems to be little to say about morality beyond obvious claims about the force of culture in guiding behavior" (Robbins 2007: 294).

Yet values and judgments are not defined as ethical only by their weight—however different their consequences, murder and disrespect do not *necessarily* fall into qualitatively separate domains. Indeed, that disrespect may provoke murder is exactly what dueling was. There is a case to be made for the ethics of very ordinary activities, even etiquette (Gershon 2010, Yeung 2010), service encounters (Manning 2008), street level drug dealing (Bourgois 2003), insults (Irvine 2003), or simple neighborly good will (Das 2010). What needs to be undone, rather, is the association of ethics with cultural determinism and the familiar idea that we can identify ethical differences with cultural ones in any straightforward way.

The search for a middle way between free invention and full determination is hardly unique to Foucault, of course. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) introduced the concept of habitus in part as an alternative to the deterministic character of Marxist and structuralist models. Although habitus is a product of socio-economic circumstances, it allows room for skill and strategy. Note the difference from Foucault, however: it is precisely by virtue of operating *beneath* the level of awareness that the skills of habitus can function as they do. Those who are too self-conscious will be less successful at playing the game. To this we might add the more traditional question, whether natural habit or constant vigilance better describes the ethical

person. So what are the conditions that produce reflexivity, and what follows from it?   To answer this question, I turn to the dynamics of everyday interaction.

Character and the ethical affordances of interaction

The ethnographic stance, by encouraging attention less to discrete acts and dramatic events than to people's lives over long periods of time, has led several anthropologists (often drawing on Foucault) to the philosophical tradition of virtue ethics (Asad 2003, Hirschkind 2006, Laidlaw n.d., Mahmood 2005, Pandian 2009, Rogers 2009). Hearkening back to Aristotle, virtue ethics takes the primary question to be not "What should I do in this situation?" but "How should one live?" (Anscombe 1958, Williams 1985). Against the rationalism of deontology, it finds the basis of ethics in the non-rational habituation of the passions (Crisp and Slote 1997: 14). Against the emphasis on moral decisions made in discrete events, which dominates experimentalist research, it looks at ethics over the life-span.

At the center of most versions of virtue ethics is the idea of character, "set dispositions to behave systematically in one way rather than another, to lead one particular kind of life" (MacIntyre 2007: 38). Yet this normative ideal seems to invite refutation from those who provide naturalistic explanations of behavior. Some psychologists claim, as the philosopher Maria Merritt puts it, that "few if any persons display the integrated structure of robust personality traits that would conform to the Aristotelian ideal of virtuous character" (Merritt 2000: 367; see Ross 1977). In response, Merritt points out that people "normally witness episodes of behavior in a quite restricted range of circumstances, in which common situational regularities recur over and over again" (Merritt 2000: 373). The most important of these

situations is what she calls "the sustaining social contribution to character" (2000: 374), that is, particular social relationships and settings. Even if individuals are not wholly endowed with some "internal" stability, they are supported by consistent "external" frames of reference such as etiquette, routines, institutions, creeds. The enduring effects of one's reputation depend on the words of others, which can shape one's interactive possibilities. In his classic study of gossip in a Mayan village in Zincantan, John Haviland writes "Gossip relies on reputation while at the same time it expands on it. The fact that a man is known as a murderer certainly affects the way others treat him and the distance they maintain, and a story about a past murderer may easily trade on the man's reputation without explicitly stating it. . . . A man's proper name may even come to connote aspects of his reputation" (1977: 58-9). As Erving Goffman (1963) argued, even the victim of stigmatization may come to internalize his or her public reputation. Such regularities of interaction help form the public exoskeleton of character. They are also part of the conversational infrastructure on which ethical reflexivity depends.

One of the most pervasive sites for such regularities is ordinary conversation. These regularities need not be as explicit as gossip, but I will suggest they are both effective even when unnoticed, and also provide a stimulous for the emergence of more explicit ways of talking about ethics. For example, "repair" is a ubiquitous micro-feature of conversation in which participants try to resolve problems in the interaction. Although these might concern organizational glitches, such as confusion in turn-taking, the main focus of repair is intersubjectivity. Repairs arise when people perceive themselves to be losing "the shared reality of the moment" (Schegloff 2006: 78) and act to restore it—clarifying that a seeming insult was only meant as a joke, or that an apparent demand for information ("Is it hot in here?") was actually a deferential request ("Please open the window").

Interaction depends on participants' expectations for coordination and mutual recognition. These expectations serve as default expectations against which alternative actions, or inaction, such as failing to respond to a greeting, or ignoring a question, come to have significance (Grice 1976). Such breeches of expectation, or ruptures in shared reality, may constitute acts of *disregard* for others. As the linguistic anthropologist Jack Sidnell puts it,

> When persons interact they necessarily and unavoidably assess whether they are being heard, ignored, disattended, and so on. Is this person really listening to me? Paying attention to me? And, in so doing, acknowledging me as worthwhile person who merits such attention? (2010: 124-5)

I want to stress that "being heard, ignored, disattended, and so on" *could* be construed as merely technical problems with channels of communication, like testing whether a microphone is turned on. Attentiveness and inattentiveness are not the *sources* of ethics (a point well argued in Lempert, n.d.); but they *are available* for being taken to register people's regard for one another's actions and character. Basic technical devices of conversational interaction are thus affordances for ethical evaluation.

Commitment to the expectations of interaction seems to blend easily into commitment to the other person (Clark 2006). One person's neglect of the demands of routine joint activity may be taken by others as a failure of social recognition. The minor but ubiquitous expectation that people will display regard for one another in these ways can be taken be the basis for ascriptions of character. Thus conversations are not just *about* ethical judgments (as in gossip), the very technical requirements of interaction also may *themselves* provide resources for those judgments (affording inferences about intentions or character). This is most evident when people encounter outsiders to local norms of interaction. It is a commonplace of sociolinguistics that even barely

perceptible differences in timing, prosody, or word choice can lead people to intuitive character judgments, that, for instance, one's interlocutor is arrogant or timid, honest or crooked (Gumperz 1982, Sacks 1972).

The technical details of conversation largely work beneath participants' awareness, and can be treated much like other mechanisms subject to naturalistic explanation (Atkinson and Heritage 1984). But the participants can potentially respond to them as ethical affordances to be scrutinized and elaborated. That is, as affordances, they can become objects of ethical reflexivity. In Samoa, for instance, "Hierarchy is maintained through the display of *fa'aaloalo* (respect), a term composed of the causative prefix *fa'a* (to make) and the respect-vocabulary term *alo* (to face) thereby entailing a bodily and social orientation toward others" (Ochs and Izquierdo 2009: 397). Here we can see the basic physical and verbal dimensions of interaction have become ethnographic objects, knowable values that people can reflect on and talk about explicitly. As such, these objects reinforce that "sustaining social contribution to character" to which Merritt refers, as well as providing a model for behavior and a vocabulary people's ethical evaluation of one another. Samoan interaction inculcates knowable values:

> family members rarely issued praise. It was also unusual to compare individual skills in family surroundings. . . . Rather, one performing an activity was viewed as benefiting from a *tâpua'i* (supporter). Distributed responsibility was recognized through a common verbal exchange: A tâpua'i notices a person's activity by saying ''Mâlô!'' (Well done!), then the person reciprocates ''Mâlô le ta apua'!'' (Well done the support!). Through such exchanges children were socialized to give and receive support and that responsibility resides beyond one person (Ochs and Izquierdo 2009: 398).

Interaction is not a one-way process, a simple inculcation of values, since the affordances

to which it gives rise can lead in turn to further interpretation and reflection. In Zincantan, the person being told gossip must actively push the narrator for clarifications and details.

> The nature of the interaction makes it possible for both interlocutor and storyteller to emphasize the relevant aspects of the affair; the gossip session serves as a practical moral lesson by allowing participants to reflect on particular behavior and observe its outcome before making explicit evaluations. . . . [as a result] people build ethical theories on evaluations of such situations. Zincantecos, through gossip, continually test ordinary rules and evaluative words against actual behavior. (Haviland 1977: 54-55)

Notice the implication: the activities of gossip do not simply reproduce values but exert new pressures on them. Both the Samoan meta-language of responsibility and Zincantecan gossip are conversational sites at which ethical reflexivity, drawing on the affordances of interactional patterns, emerges into full view.

Most of the techniques and expectations of ordinary interaction lie below the level of ordinary awareness, their observation subject to the protocols of naturalistic observation and explanation. But they can offer affordances for ethical evaluation, aspects of people's experience than can prompt judgments, and sometimes further reflection. But what bearing does the momentary flicker of mutual regard have on a sociologically embedded, culturally articulated, and temporally durable sense of ethical possibilities and demands? To answer this, I turn to intentionality and intersubjectivity, I suggest these basic aspects of human cognition can, in some circumstances, become foci of attention. When they become topics of explicit talk, they can give rise to relatively stables sets of practices and ideas, fostering the heightened consciousness of full-fledged ethical reflexivity, and what, in the concluding section, I will call historical objects.

Intention reading as ethical affordance

One point at which the universalistic assertions of psychology and the particularism of ethnography can clash is in how they view intentionality. Developmental psychologists are finding that infants become oriented to other people's intentions, and even evaluate them, very early in life (Onishi and Baillargeon 2005, Hamlin, Wynn, and Bloom 2007, Meltzoff 1995, Woodward 1998). As children begin to acquire language, according to Michael Tomasello, they "must in some sense simulate the perspective of other persons as they are expressing themselves linguistically" (Tomasello 1999: 176). The capacities to take another person's perspective and, beyond that, to infer their likely intentions, are components of so-called Theory of Mind or ToM (Baron-Cohen 1995, Wellman 1990, Wellman and Liu 2004). Among the diagnostic features of ToM over the course of a child's development are the abilities to distinguish between intentional and unintentional actions, classify actions according to goals, direct joint attention with another, enter into pretend play and deception, and grasp that mental states are independent of physical reality. None of this requires that human "mind reading" be unerring; indeed, simple misunderstanding and anxieties about it are pervasive features of social existence, and intentional falsehood (for which ToM is a precondition) may be a necessary one.[10] The point, rather, is that people are apparently chronically prone to seek out signs of intentionality.

The propensity for intention-reading, something explained in naturalistic terms by psychologists, may offer affordances for the kinds of ethical reflection and reasoning characteristic of normative approaches. Certainly the philosopher P. F. Strawson thought it a pre-condition for some kinds of ethical evaluation when he wrote "[i]f someone treads on my

hand accidentally . . . the pain may be no less acute than if he treads on it in contemptuous disregard of my existence. . . . But I shall generally feel in the second case a kind and degree of resentment that I shall not feel in the first" (1974: 5). Notice the double reflexivity this resentment requires: I must both impute intentions to another and assume the other anticipates that my own feelings, and not just my hand, will be hurt as a result. In more general terms, this kind of double reflexivity underpins Goffman's (1967) account of face-work, which depends on *others* affirming that *I* am the kind of person *they* take *me* to be presenting to them. Face-work is not itself necessarily intentional, but it does seem to require a degree of mind-reading. Since it is saturated with people's evaluations of one another, and ultimately of themselves, it would appear to be a core element of everyday ethical life.

I see no reason to assume intention-reading is a "cause" of ethical judgments. Although the ubiquity of human intention-seeking may have neurological or cognitive sources, its role in ethical judgment is not itself deterministic. Rather, as with the details of interaction discussed above, it seems to be an affordance to which people may respond in the process of making ethical judgments. The obvious question arises whether the orientation to other minds sketched here holds beyond the Euro-American contexts in which it has usually been described, with all the emphasis on individual interiority and agency familiar in Western ideologies. This is the kind of question to which the ethnographic stance is often summoned to provide counter-examples. Thus the well-known claim that people in some societies maintain an "opacity doctrine," asserting that "it is impossible or at least extremely difficult to know what other people think or feel" (Robbins and Rumsey 2008: 407-8; see also Rumsey 2013).

In Pacific societies where the opacity doctrine is present, for example, people are often expected to refrain from speculating (at least publicly) about what others may be

> thinking, and penalties for gossip about other people's intentions are often very high. . . .
> For related reasons, people tend to put little store in the veracity of what others say about their own thoughts (Robbins and Rumsey 2008: 408; se also Rumsey 2013)

Here ethnography seems to pose a powerful challenge to the universalizing claims of psychology.

But what exactly is the nature of this challenge? Notice that what Robbins and Rumsey actually point to is not Melanesian people's abilities to discern intentions, but rather "speculating," "gossip," and "what others say." In other words, what's crucially at issue here is *talk*, and more specifically, talk *in public*. The question may therefore be not whether people draw inferences about others' thoughts, but rather the ethics of doing so and of revealing it. The presence of opacity claims is surely consequential, but not because it testifies to a complete absence of intention reading. Rather, it may manifest an ideological stance toward ToM that requires people to suppress the public expression of their intuitions and inferences (Duranti 2008, Keane 2008a). Indeed, the opacity doctrines may be good evidence that Melanesians are *preoccupied* with intentions and interior states, the likelihood of deception and concealment by others, and the threats that others' mind-reading capacities might pose to their own mental autonomy.

Why would people suppress their inferences about others' intentions? One implication is developed by Rupert Stasch in his discussion of Korowai political order, which is based on egalitarianism and a great deal of personal autonomy, prompting a great deal of suspicion and conflict. He proposes that their "sensitivity about not presuming to know others' minds is intertwined with sensitivity about not presuming to impinge on each other's self-determination" (2008: 443). Stasch observes that although Korowai commonly disavow any knowledge of

other's thoughts, this doesn't stop them from making predictions about others' actions. Even more striking, they do not hesitate to claim other people harbor malevolent thoughts toward them, even without verbal or other evidence for those thoughts. In other words, despite explicit ideological assertions to the contrary, they *do* seem comfortable talking about purely mental states in certain contexts (2008: 444). Thus the opacity claims that Korowai state at least partially contradict how Korowai actually behave—their own reflections do not seem to conform with what an observer might describe. As an ideological formation, although the claims seem to be saying something about other minds, according to Stasch, their real force centers on something akin to freedom of the will. When Korowai deny being able to know what is in another's mind, they are insisting that "[w]hat the other person is going to do will be determined by the person's processes of thought leading to an action, not by conditions that are already known" (2008: 445). This principle becomes especially relevant when people act in unconventional ways, and in cases of social conflict, precisely when ethical judgment is most put to the test (see Hampshire 1983).

If Stasch is right, distinctions, between self and other, and inner and outer, matter to Korowai not as matters of speculative thought. Rather, the political and ethical significance of these distinctions turns on their role in practical problems with freedom—precisely the principle that anthropologists of ethics such as Faubion and Laidlaw have been trying to bring back to the center of discussion. Again, a *universal* propensity for mind-reading here seems to serve as an affordance for responding to *very specific* worries and difficulties provoked by the nature of Korowai social life. More generally, then, we might say that, given certain political problems, in certain social and historical contexts, mind-reading can become a focus of reflexivity, that is, of attention, anxiety, and conceptual elaboration--even if only takes the form of ideological denial.

Consider another case of an opacity doctrine. According to Eve Danziger, Mopan Maya disregard questions of intent when gossiping or punishing misdeeds. Inadvertent transgressions are punished just as if they were purposeful ones. Moreover, judgment about what people say "is based exclusively on the perceived truth value of expressions and not on the intentional or belief states of the speaker" (2006: 260). In other words, Mopan do not discriminate between errors of fact and outright lies—a distinction that turns on speaker's intentions and states of belief (see Sweetser 1987). Yet Mopan are quite capable of meeting the usual tests of ToM, and easily make statements about what other people "want," "believe" and "know." In Danziger's analysis, the key issue has to do with the ethics of speech itself: a "sacred morality inheres in the very relationship of spoken word to actual world" (2006: 261). This morality centers on a specific language ideology concerning the relations between words and the world. According to Danziger, Mopan language ideology holds that "linguistic words and expressions are considered to be related to their signifiers in ways that . . . transcend the volition of those who use them" (2006: 262). Again, it is not the case the Mopan have no capacity to read minds: rather, these are affordances for ethical elaboration, leading to emphatic denial of something they in fact seem to be doing.

In both cases, local semiotic ideologies about the signs of intention, or their lack, have consequences for how people in fact act. But the ethical implications go beyond talk. We do not need to accept the strong cultural-constructivist claim that ToM itself is merely a local phenomenon, an ontology developed in some cultural contexts and not others, in order to recognize that stressing it or playing it down will lead to divergent ethical worlds. Indeed, if ToM were merely a local invention (let's say, a peculiarity of the modern West with its obsession with individuals, interiority, and intentionality), and the opacity doctrine another local

invention (an entirely distinct Melanesian or Mayan ontology), the conjunction of these observations would not seem to tell us much even ethnographically, beyond a conventional lesson about the boundless fecundity of the human imagination. If, on the other hand, ToM is ubiquitous, some societies elaborating it, others finding it ethically problematic, and still others giving it little thought one way or another, then it appears as both a source of difficulties in its own right, an inducement to reflection. In this respect, ToM is an affordance with which people can (but need not necessarily) perform ethical work. When they do so, people's responses to other minds register specific ethical worries or political problems that *would not be as ethnographically visible* were these responses only sheer cultural inventions or free standing ontologies.

Objectification and the historicity of ethics

I began this article by contrasting two quite distinct approaches to understanding ethical life, that of naturalistic explanations (exemplified by psychology and linguistics), and that of normative reasons and reflexivity (exemplified by philosophy). A third approach, the ethnographic stance is distinguished in part by its commitment to keeping people's self-understanding and sense of self-worth at the center of its visual field. But rather than treat ethnography as standing in isolation, or taking people's self-understanding only at face value, I asked how the world it encounters might articulate with those encountered in naturalistic and normative approaches. As (a partial) answer, I proposed that ethical affordance describes in non-deterministic terms how people respond to their experiences of the world that naturalistic explanations describe, as they evaluate one another and their circumstances. The responses may

be subliminal, but in some circumstances, prompted by the demands of social interaction, they can feed into more explicit forms of ethical reflection and reasoning. I have offered two examples of this, the dynamics of conversational interaction and the problems and possibilities posed by intentionality and mind-reading.

But surely we should be after bigger game, shouldn't we? How does this attention to gossip, repair, and etiquette get us to the threat to kill a Jewish girl in a Polish village, to say nothing of the larger historical disaster that formed its context? Obviously this question cannot be fully answered in the space available here. But what I want to do in conclusion is return to the question posed by normative thinking about ethics: what is it to give an account of oneself? Here I want to indicate, only suggestively, how the domain of reasons, justifications, accusations, excuses, and so forth forms connections between everyday interactions and long-lasting moral concepts and institutions.

Discussing the implications of experimental psychology for ethical theory, the philosopher Anthony Appiah remarks that when people are faced with a moral dilemma, "the act of . . . determining that there's a decision to be made—is itself a moral task" (2008: 196). For him, this turns on knowing how to describe the situation, which is an important aspect of that normative side of ethical life I am identifying with reflexivity. Descriptions of specific kinds of action, along with their ethical implications, clearly differ from one context to another. An "affront to honor" cannot have the same referent in today's Seattle that it would have had in Prussia, and to respond with a challenge to duel would be laughable (see Appiah 2010). To be "graciously condescending," the way a Duke could act toward an inferior in Eighteenth Century England, can be only an insulting paradox in Ann Arbor, where no one should baldly appear to think themselves above others and the very meaning of the word "condescending " can only hold

negative connotations (Herzog 1998). And "charity" in middle class India today is hardly the same as that described in the *Bhagavad Gita* (Bornstein 2011). But where do descriptions—and the ethical reflections they can prompt--come from? And what gives them the historical character these examples suggest?

First, "the moral task" is not necessarily verbal. But ethical life does depend more broadly on fundamentally semiotic features of social existence: people's availability to one another, and to themselves, by means of materializations, which include language, but also other things, such as the body (see Keane 2010). Thus Bourdieu writes of bodily hexis as a virtue, albeit, one he usually portrays as simultaneously constitutive and oppressive:

> a [Kabyle] woman is expected to walk with a slight stoop, looking down. . . . the specifically feminine virtue, *lahia*, modesty, restraint, reserve, orients the whole female body downwards, towards the ground, the inside, the house, whereas male excellence, *nif*, is asserted in movement upwards, outwards, towards other men (1977: 94)

Note three things about this description. First, there is a causal relationship between social order and bodily hexus (think how much disciplining is packed into the passive verb form "is expected to"). Second, that by virtue of its embodied character, this relationship is not dependent on fully cognized execution—in fact, according to Bourdieu's account of doxa, it is most effective when the individual is least self-conscious or reflective about it. But, third, virtue is—and *must* be--materialized in sensible forms. Being necessarily perceptible, these materializations have the potential for being transformed into other semiotic modalities more available to conscious reflection and argument. Transfer this Kabyle woman from Algeria to a *banlieue* in France, and the taken-for-granted signs of her virtue become the objects of highly explicit forms of ethical talk, from morally outraged condemnations to neo-orthodox justifications. Across the spectrum

from the tacit to verbal, the materiality of semiotic form, offers a platform on which self-aware ethical reflection can, potentially, be constructed. That semiotic form is instantiated in everything from the bodily habits or conversational repair that are explained in naturalistic terms to the doctrinal texts and philosophical arguments that characterize normative approaches to ethical life.

Verbal interaction is not merely an arena within which character is established or challenged, recognition offered or denied. It is also the preeminent site where people may demand explicit reasons and accountings of one another or provide them.[11] It is in response to the demands posed by talk that rationalizations and justifications arise. If attention to the materiality of social interaction tells us nothing else, it should be that argument, reasoning, and justification cannot be understood solely in logical or cognitive terms. For their natural home is not in the individual autonomous mind but in palpable social interactions, whether face-to-face or in more mediated forms—for even doctrinal texts imply an addressee. By pointing to the irreducibly interactive character of justification, I hope to open up more questions about reasoning as a social practice, its articulation with moral intuitions and emotions. Here I can only suggest, as well, that these practices can result in the objectifications that endow ethics with its historical character, something that endures beyond the momentary situation, but that can also, as exemplified by "honor," "condescension," or "charity," change beyond recognition.

What is key here is to recognize that the giving of reasons and the ethical description of actions are hardly confined to the grave debates of high theorists—they run through the most banal moments of everyday life. That very ubiquity is part of what gives them their power. Here's a minor yet, I think, wholly characteristic example of a especially self-conscious moment of didactic objectification. It's a transcript recorded just after a kids' pickup basketball game in

Los Angeles, when the father invites the two teams to cheer each other:

> Father: DOES ANYBODY know what that's called?
>
> Regan: Yeah.
>
> Father: What?
>
> Regan: Good game.
>
> Father: Good sportsmanship.
>
> Father: It's not only about . . .
>
> Regan: Let's play another game. (*does cartwheel*)
>
> Father: It's not always about winning. It's about being a good sport.
>
> Father asks the kids to label the behavior that they have just exhibited. Regan suggests 'good game', echoing part of the utterances used in the cheer. Father corrects Regan that the action represents *'good sportsmanship'*. (Kremer-Sadlik and Kim 2007: 44, special transcription markings removed)

Here the father gives the flow of action a description (being a good sport) and anchors it with reference to a larger ethical theory (good sportsmanship).

This small moment of objectification, with its almost ritualized dialogue structure, is not radically different in kind from more formal activities like debates about justice (Dave 2102), sermons (Hirschkind 2006), or catechisms (Keane 2007). Nor from the telegraphic meta-language of a New York crack dealer: "Real crazy. Yeah! Ray's a fuckin' pig; Ray's a wild motherfucker. He's got juice. You understand Felipe? Juice! . . . On the street that means respect" (Bourgois 2003: 24). And all share certain features with gossip, which in Zincantan, as perhaps most places, "is clearly *aimed* at the interlocutor. People try, through gossip, to convince their interlocutors, to arouse their sympathies, or to recruit their support" (Haviland

1977: 83-4).

In all these cases, the explicit verbalization of ethical descriptions is prompted by an encounter between, respectively, children to be taught, political opponents to be won over, congregations to admonished, believers to be disciplined, ethnographers to be wised up, neighbors to collude with. These examples of ethical talk seem to require that the speakers see themselves from outside, taking another's point of view on their own thoughts and actions. That is, they take the reciprocity of perspectives described by the ToM researchers as an ethical affordance. But this kind of reflexivity also depends on the objectification that results from interactions with others. This objectification (in the first example above, the words "good sportsmanship") in turn endows it with at least the potential for historical endurance beyond the moment, as people continue over time to take "good sportsmanship" to be a standard by which they can judge themselves and others, perhaps as a virtue peculiar to particular social orders, or a model for international goodwill like, say, the Olympic Games.

Let's return briefly to the question posed by the Polish woman who insists that the Jewish child is not a dog, with that debate-silencing addition "after all." Our sources provide only the skimpiest hint of the larger story, hardly enough to settle the matter. But taking this anecdote as a thought experiment, we might start with the fact that the woman's intervention takes the form of a bald verbal assertion in a scene of social interaction. Against the corrosive findings of experimental psychology, we may point to her durable ability to enter into that scene based on a lifetime participating in the interactive routines that embed the community's ethical expectations (most of them unspoken) and make her a legitimate speaker—that give her a voice (something, perhaps, not available to everyone in the village). Against the most radical forms of social construction we can point to the ways in which any such historical community has taken up

certain affordances made available by basic psychological and sociological conditions, and responded to the quandaries they may pose. Against sheer cultural determinism, we might speculate that it is this woman's self-respect that impels her to speak up against the weight of public opinion.

Yet her self-respect is not, I think, self-standing. If it draws on a sense of" the good" shared within a community, I want to suggest that it derives its efficacy more directly from the kinds of interactive commitments and capacities noted above. The problem of freedom within social and cultural contexts, discussed above, may then turn on how those interactions produce forms of recognition (of the girl, of the woman) and self-recognition (of the woman, of the mob) against that very community which was itself an fundamental source of those terms of recognition in the first place. To take people at their word is, in part, to understand how they come to take *themselves* at their word.

All this may remain subliminal, but should those forms of recognition become crystallized as explicit objects of reflection, they may be rendered available as ideas that can readily be referred to over an over again, potentially consolidated as norms to be defended or criticized. In short, they have the potential to become historical objects. By this I mean ideas that can be verbalized as a justifications, excuses, recognizable character types, nameable misdeeds or virtues. And more elaborated yet, these ideas can enter into the production of moral codes and ethical precepts that are widely recognized across a community, and have some endurance over time—and that are often tied to disciplines geared toward the purposeful cultivation of reflexivity, such as religious contemplation, philosophical debate, ascetic exercises, or rights activism. This is the point at which ethnography most directly encounters the raw materials with which the normative approaches to ethical life have usually worked.

I began by suggesting that at the heart of the ethnographic stance is a commitment to people's self-understanding and sense of self-worth. Against this, the naturalistic and normative approaches to ethical life can be seen not just as alternatives, but as challenges. Naturalistic explanations, in their strongest form, can seem to undermine the authority of people's ethical self-understanding. Normative approaches may be less debunking, but their proponents are often worried that ethnographic specificities fail to get to the heart of the matter—at what is ethics for humans, perhaps, and not just for Los Angelinos, Samoans, Korowai, or Zincantecans. This article is motivated by the sense that, rather than dismiss these challenges, we accept them as a means to sharpen anthropologists' own understanding of what exactly the ethnographic stance can offer. The purpose is not to reassure ourselves, but to provoke an approach to ethical life of a scope more adequate to the range of difficulties, contradictions, and imponderables it presents.

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Notes

[1] See, for example, Evens 2008, Fassin 2011, 2012, Faubion 2001, 2011, Hirschkind 2006, Howell 1997, Keane 2007, Kleinman 2006, Laidlaw 2002, n.d., Lambek 2000, 2008, 2010, Mahmood 2005, Mattingly 2012, Povinelli 2011, Robbins 2004, 2007, Rogers 2009, Zigon 2007. Note that there is no consistency in how anthropologists use the words "morality" and "ethics." I find useful Bernard Williams's (1985) distinction between deontology, or universalizing

"morality systems," and those socially embedded and historically variable visions of human flourishing he calls "ethics." But since I am especially interested in how these interact and overlap, I will use "ethics" as a cover term for both (see Keane 2010; for one argument in favor of such a move, see Benhabib 1992).

[2] The fact/value divide has been subjected to important critiques, but in practice, ways of approaching ethics still tend to fall on one side or another. Of course the division is not so neat: for philosophers working across it, see Gibbard 1990, Railton 2003, Velleman 2005. For anthropology and moral psychology, see Kleinman 2006, Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller 1990, Shweder 1990.

[3] By ethical turn I refer less to anthropologists' ongoing concern with their own professional ethics than to the somewhat distinct (if related), problem of how to understand the ethical as a constitutive dimension of social existence.

[4] For crucial discussions of typification and metapragmatics that are far too detailed for me to do justice to here see Agha 2007, Silverstein 2004.

[5] For my use of the term objectification, see Keane 2003, 2007, 2008b, 2008c.

[6]By "causality" here, I refer to explanations that invoke processes, mechanisms, or correlations in which human self-interpretation does not play a critical role. From Hume to Wittgenstein and beyond, there exists a host of important philosophical critiques of the concept of causality, but my concern here is with the way the idea continues to function in practice, especially in work close to my topic, such as in moral and developmental psychology.

[7] A point made powerfully, if from a somewhat different perspective and with greater emphasis on cognition, by Astuti and Bloch 2012.

[8]I would argue that, as those objects come to form the world people experience, its institutions,

and its ready-to-hand ideas, they in turn offer new affordances for ethical life. But I cannot justify this assertion within the limits of this article.

[9] For a discussion of the moral regulation of marketplaces that draws on the etiquette of social interaction, see Keane 2008b.

[10] The psychological anthropologist Lawrence Hirschfeld argues that people are in fact rather inaccurate mind-readers; their more successful predictions of behavior are based on social stereotypes (Hirschfeld 2013). Observing that the potential for deception is an inherent feature of human semiosis, Roy Rappaport (1999) put the problem of lies at the heart of his theory of ritual.

[11] Of course one often gives an account of oneself to someone who has the power to demand it (Butler 2005) but analysis should not stop there.