Webb KEANE, *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories*
(Princeton and Oxford, University Press, 2016)
Owen FLANAGAN, *The Geography of Morals: Varieties of Moral
Possibility* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017)

Concerning the philosophers of his time Nietzsche wrote this:

> [P]recisely because moral philosophers had only a crude knowledge of moral
> *facts*, selected arbitrarily and abbreviated at random—for instance, as the
> morality of their surroundings, their class, their church, their *Zeitgeist*, their
> climate and region,—precisely because they were poorly informed (and not
> particularly eager to learn more) about peoples, ages, and histories, they
> completely missed out on the general problems involved in morality, problems
> that only emerge from a comparison of many *different* moralities.[1]

The present-day relevance of Nietzsche's words is brought into
sharp relief by these two books: one by a philosopher concerned with
exploring the "varieties of moral possibility," the other by an
anthropologist, whose discipline has always engaged in that very
exploration through ethnography.

They both focus on what Keane calls "the dialectic between the
shared human capacities explored by fields such as psychology and the
variability that is at the heart of ethnography and history" [27] and on
what Flanagan calls "the transformation of first nature into a kind of
second nature" [77]: shared "first human nature" is "nowadays getting
worked out by human scientists" while "second nature" exhibits
variation and requires "comparing and contrasting moral orientations
across individuals and cultures" [73]. They agree that the relation
between first and second nature is one of *under-determination*. They
offer differing accounts of how to specify what that relation is. For
Keane it is captured by the concept of "affordances." He argues that
this better illuminates that relation than "the more traditional versions
of cultural construction" [31]. Affordances are available for, rather
than determining, ethical judgments and practices. They are poten-
tials taken up by actors. An ethical affordance is "any aspect of
people's experiences and perceptions that they might draw on in the

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, 2001 [1886], *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (chapter V, section 186, ed. by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, transl. by Judith Norman (Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press: 73-74).

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process of making ethical evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not" [27]. Unlike preconditions, affordances "leave things more open-ended" [31]. Flanagan canvases a range of concepts and computational, botanical and agricultural metaphors to capture the impact of natural and innate factors (modules, foundations, sprouts, seeds and weeds). But he insists that there is always scope for resisting and reshaping that impact through "reason and imagination to notice alternative ways of being and doing" [41]. Modules do not operate "all the way up" [66], and humans "live in the space of reasons as well as the space of causes" [195]. Both authors are thoroughly *au courant* with the extensive and growing research into first nature by neuro-scientists, cognitive scientists, and evolutionary, moral and child psychologists. Both books discuss ethnographic and historical examples in support of their arguments. Do they catch sight of the "general problems involved in morality?" They certainly address some, and do so in new and interesting ways.

Keane's central goal is to link what he calls natural and social histories: the findings of naturalistic research, usually focused on individuals, into panhuman properties and propensities, usually operating beyond the scope of human awareness, with studies of ethical life within communities in diverse ethical worlds. "Ethical life" is broadly conceived as "those aspects of people's actions as well as their sense of themselves and of other people (and sometimes entities such as gods or animals), that are oriented with reference to values and ends that are not in turn defined as the means to some further end" [4]. It involves evaluation of self and others and operates at the "middle ground of social interaction where people are provoked to cooperate or dispute, to explain themselves to one another, and, above all, to see themselves—through one another's eyes—or refuse to do so" [6]. It is here that the "panhuman sweep of psychology" meets "the contingent particularities of social history" [131]. Much of ethical life is, for Keane, "instinctual, habitual, fragmentary and contradictory and does not require anyone's full awareness" but he also includes within the ethical what he calls (developing a distinction from Bernard Williams) "morality systems" that make things explicit and "announce themselves through their rituals, disciplines, rules, texts, authorities, slogans, laws and justifications," which "make it possible to step outside the flow of life and look at it from a critical distance" [200]. Moralities center on "obligations that are supposed to be grounded in consistent principles of great generality" [113]. "Morality," he writes, can "thus be treated as a special case within ethics" [20]. He adds that

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there are "*many* morality systems, of which the tradition Williams attacks is only one example" [19]. One major virtue of Keane's book is his attempt to explore, through a series of case studies, "what circumstances tend to foster or induce the development of morality systems: more or less context-free, more or less explicit, systems of obligations" [20]. And the ways in which "ordinary ethics" and "moralities"—"tacit habits and intuitions" and "explicit concepts and rules" [162, 134]—shape one another.

Ethical Life is neatly divided into three parts. In the first, "Natures," he gathers together a useful list of what research has shown to be "human capacities and propensities" that are "necessary but not sufficient conditions for ethical life" [35]. He lists "empathic responses to other people's pain and pleasure, aversion to those who harm others, impulses to sharing and cooperation for their own sake, spontaneous revulsion, valuing fairness, intention-seeking, and conformity to norms" [71]. The second part, "Interactions," explores "variations on intersubjectivity" [117] in "ordinary social interactions, the stuff of playground taunts, village gossip, and roommates" quarrels, as well as the teaching of politeness and exhortations to good sportsmanship" [79]. It deploys a range of reports from various ethnographic sites, ranging from a British rock concert to the "inner clash of ethical voices" in the monologue of an elderly Mexican to a Tibetan monks' oratory to a US presidential debate. It draws on Goffman, ethnomethodology, conversational analysis, semiotics and the philosophers Grice and Austin—all with the aim of revealing how "ethical affordances" work: that is, how ethical commitments, which need not be conscious, draw on the basic capacities and propensities discussed in the first part of the book. The upshot is to show how people probe one another's intentions and character, for instance denying or according them recognition, how recognition and intentionality are brought into focus in different cultural contexts, how contexts tend to initiate ethical reflection (he discusses, for example, the notion of "dignity" and its analogues in other cultures, and traces the changing meaning of "condescension" as the social hierarchy it once reflected disappeared) and how a shared vocabulary of ethical concepts becomes publicly available, enabling people to identify what types of people are acting (shades of Alfred Schutz), how their actions should be judged, and how situations are defined ("Is this a quarrel?").

In the third part, "Histories," Keane turns the focus to morality systems, scaling up to "the public world and its historical dimensions" and explores the purposeful "transformation of ethical and moral

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worlds" in social, religious and political movements. He provides discussions of feminist consciousness-raising ("an ethical transformation through the redescription of everyday life" [193]), Christian and Muslim piety movements and Vietnamese communism, all involving "the cultivation of a transcendental point of view that can make any apparent ethical inconsistency a problem requiring every effort to overcome" [37]. The book concludes by considering how the impersonal or transcendental "third person" perspective is also key to current human rights and humanitarian discourse and practice. He observes, however, that this standpoint "cannot provide a complete understanding of ethical life" [240].

Here, we can say, lies the most significant contribution of Keane's project: the thought, unfamiliar to, or at least unexplored by, mainstream moral philosophy[2], underlying the entire book: that ethical life involves a "mutual relationship between the first and second person" in "the interactive space within which people find themselves giving accounts, justifying, excusing, accusing, explaining, denying, praising, blaming, and [engaging in] all the other activities in which ethical categories and stances are made explicit" [253]. Nietzsche's proposed comparison of "many *different* moralities" for Keane requires investigating the "tension between the first/second and third person perspectives" [259].

Flanagan, like Nietzsche, criticizes the mainstream moral philosophers for their provincialism, citing Alasdair MacIntyre's injunction to cease being "imprisoned by one's upbringing" [3]: they "operate only or mainly within the resources of their own tradition, but claim to speak transcendentally" [13]. Much moral philosophy, he suggests, is "mostly a clean-up operation for ways of thinking and being that we already assume and prefer" [180]. One major aim of his book, he writes, is "to defend doing empirical moral psychology and comparative philosophy together on grounds that this intersection is a fertile and underestimated resource for making ourselves, both as individuals and as groups, better, more sensitive, more morally attuned than we are now" [41]. Throughout the book there is a running contrast between the practices and beliefs of "WEIRD" (Western Educated Industrialized Rich Democratic) people and those of the rest. For the most part, apart from occasional initial references to the ethnographic record, this is largely accomplished through extended comparisons

[2] Apart from the work of Stephen Darwall, on which Keane draws extensively. See in particular Stephen Darwall, 2006, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press).

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with Buddhism (about which Flanagan has written an earlier work). Thus, for example, four whole chapters are devoted to outlining "moral geographies of anger," with the aim of showing both the peculiarity and harmfulness of WEIRD anger (we are, he thinks, "both much too angry for our own good and largely complacent about how we might do better and be better" [215]). And he goes further to argue that "there are credible metaphysical beliefs and social practices in Buddhism and Stoicism that undermine the standard reasons we offer to justify anger." Indeed, perhaps these traditions provide plausible reasons "for wanting to extirpate anger altogether" [214]. More generally Flanagan's project is to denaturalize "our" (he seems entirely to have life in the United States in view) WEIRD morality by thinking holistically: relating the "surface structure of values" to the deep structure of their metaphysical background. Thus, for example, "Christian pity and Buddhist compassion might look very similar, but they are constructed from very different materials embedded in a different metaphysic, and they sit in relation to other virtues, values, norms, and aims that are not the same" [148].

The Geography of Morals covers a lot of ground. It is divided into four parts. The first, "Variations", sets out the case for seeking "evidence from cross-cultural philosophy, psychology and cultural anthropology," which shows that "we are extremely creative at remaking ourselves within the constraints of the possibility space, whatever it is" [40]. Arguing that those constraints are set by "pre-moral human personality" [36], he devotes the second part, "First Nature," to alternative accounts of it from two very different traditions, comparing and contrasting the "sprout" theory of the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius with the modular "moral foundations" theory of Jonathan Haidt. It is an intriguing juxtaposition. For Mencius, four sprouts lead to distinct virtues that are the basis for good character (sympathy or compassion for benevolence, shame and disgust for righteousness, deference for propriety, and the capacity for cognitive and normative discrimination for practical wisdom). Haidt's theory initially posits five intuitive "modules," operating cross-culturally, consisting in dispositions triggering responses to distinct domains of life (harm/care, fairness/reciprocity. hierarchy/respect, in-group/outgroup, and purity/sanctity) yielding the diverse, second-nature "emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses we make in the complex problem space of sociomoral life" [73]. Both theories posit a limited range of dispositions to be activated and cultivated in a second nature setting: issuing for Mencius

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uniquely in Confucian morality but, in the modular case, leaving open a range of possible outcomes. This, of course, opens what Flanagan calls a "key normative question": "How do we tell when the outcome or set of outcomes of the initial settings of the modules... produces what we want and are correct in wanting?" How, he asks "can we tell when a genealogy of morals" has produced "a morality that is ethical, an ethical morality, a truly good way of living, of being human?" He offers no answer other than to suggest that by comparing many moralities we will become "more sensitive, more morally attuned than we are now" [41].

The book's third part, "Collisions," offers a very thought-provoking chapter on how to think about value conflict (in short: holistically) but mainly consists in an attempt to map "geographies of anger." Here he sides, as indicated, with Buddhists and Stoics in arguing for its extirpation—even with respect to righteous anger against injustice—on the grounds that anger "is a response that marks injury and seeks to do harm. It is vengeful and spiteful. It does not seek to heal like forgiveness and sorrow. Nor does it encourage or compliment goodness as gratitude does. It is ugly and harmful, and in the business of passing pain" [203]. Anger, Flanagan boldly claims, is needed neither to protect attachments, nor to rectify injustices, nor to achieve catharsis. The fourth part, "Anthropologies," does indeed survey a classic anthropological theme: namely, variations in conceptions of the self. Here once again, Buddhism plays a central role. His focus is on the metaphysical background—in particular the concept of No-Self and its motivational consequences—permeating Buddhist folk philosophy and reinforced by practices of meditation. It is a "way of thinking that seeks to overcome anxiety, frustration and suffering" [237]. WEIRD people, Flanagan argues, are "in the grip of a certain concept of the individual who makes his or her own fate and who succeeds as a person by his or her own and who succeeds as a person by himself or herself." Here he invites the reader to see this "deep philosophical difference" as explanatory, even offering "some reason to rethink our metaphysics and our morals" [235].

How then are we to engage in a "comparison of many *different* moralities?" It is a singular merit of both books that they address this and related questions. How many are there? How different are they? How wide and how deep does the diversity of morals go? To what extent and how is it constrained by panhuman nature? Each approaches such questions from the standpoint of its author's discipline. Keane investigates the conduct and flow of ethical life from close up,

at the level of social interaction, drawing his evidence from a wide variety of fine-grained ethnographic reports. Flanagan, by contrast, is concerned with the shaping power of background metaphysical differences within what Keane calls "morality systems" and relies for evidence upon their tenets and teachings, assuming that their official philosophies shape "folk philosophies," making their way, as he (strikingly but bafflingly) puts it, "into the blood and bones of ordinary people" [252]. Keane offers us a way, indeed a research program, to explore precisely this issue. Under what conditions and to what extent do the tenets and teachings of morality systems inform and explain ethical life?

The significance of this issue is well illustrated in Flanagan's Buddhist-inspired discussion of anger. Consider the extreme and widespread hostility to the Muslim minority Rohingya people in Myanmar on the part of its Buddhist citizens that has resulted in ghettoization, restrictions on movement, sporadic massacres and atrocities, arguably approaching genocide, that led to mass migration and the Rohingya refugee crisis of 2015. And, as for Flanagan's claim that anger is not a necessary component of the struggle against injustice in our WEIRD world, consider the current (as I write) #MeToo movement in the United States and the titles of three just-published books by feminist writers: *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*; *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger*; and *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*[3].

In fact, although they do not refer to each other, Keane and Flanagan appear to be interestingly at odds on the topic of anger. Flanagan writes that even if "at the end of the day anger is inevitable, different people have it and do it differently." His point is that "there are differences in the way anger seems or feels, the actions it gives rise to, the feelings it arouses in targets, and the ways it is resolved or dissipates, and these differences depend on differences in the overall moral ecology" [154]. For Keane, by contrast, there is no "it" that reappears in different contexts. He argues that "there cannot in principle be a generic or universal emotion such as anger, since it will necessarily be shaped by historically specific prompts, targets, and descriptions" [245]. A given neurophysiological state may or may not

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[3] Brittney Cooper, 2018, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (New York, St. Martin's Press); Soraya Chemaly, 2018, *Rage Becomes Her: The* *Power of Women's Anger* (New York, Atria Books); Rebecca Traister, 2018, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger* (New York, Simon and Schuster).

produce it; it is only anger if it makes sense in a context. As for women's anger, he writes that the "various experiences of women that came to be identified under the rubric of "anger" emerged through processes of social interaction that problematized aspects of daily life that had been largely unexamined." The idea here is that "women's anger" does not register the appearance among women of an isolable emotion reappearing in diverse contexts, from, say, road rage to armed combat. Rather, Keane plausibly suggests, it is the shared response to "the newly objectified description of formerly unselfconscious habitual daily life" that registers both a political analysis and an ethical vision of the good life, a "way of flourishing that has been denied" [197].

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