Freedom, reflexivity, and the sheer everydayness of ethics

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James Laidlaw's emphasis on freedom has played an important role in reinvigorating anthropology's interest in morality and ethics. A key component of his approach is the role played by reflexivity. Drawing on Michel Foucault, he writes, "Tied as it is to the reality of consciousness and the constitution of the subject . . . , reflective freedom is a precondition for ethical life in general" (Laidlaw 2014: 177). While endorsing Laidlaw's attention to reflexivity in ethics, I am not wholly persuaded by the way in which he deploys the idea of freedom. This essay offers a critically sympathetic reading that, I hope, remains within the spirit of his argument and true to the generosity of his thinking. It will sketch some alternative perspectives that, I think, retain the key insights of the book, while pushing them in a somewhat different direction.

First a point of terminology. It's remarkable how rarely anthropologists of morality or ethics define these words, even when they insist that the distinctions between them are critical. Like Laidlaw, I have found Bernard Williams (1985) useful. He distinguishes between *ethics*, which is an answer to the question "how shall I live?," and *morality*, that is, systems of rules and obligations, usually thought of in quasi-juridical terms. The first is seen as largely constructive, the second as constraining on the ethical person. Williams holds that moral philosophy has gone astray by taking morality, rather than ethics, as its model. Laidlaw thinks anthropology's error is similar. Ever since Durkheim, in his view, anthropologists have tended to see morality as those obligations that society impresses upon individuals. But morality, as

Williams defines it, is a subset of ethics, since it's one possible answer to the ethical question "how shall I live?" As a result, in any given ethnographic instance, morality and ethics often turn out to be thoroughly entangled with one another. Recognizing this, Laidlaw remarks that "moral codes and ethics must be distinguished analytically, because they may change independently" (2014: 111). So one empirical question would lead us to focus on the distinct kinds of historical processes these involve. To get at these, I think we need to attend closely to the nature of reflexivity, not as the fulfillment of the a priori requirements of a normative theory or a philosophical thought experiment, but as something that emerges out of specific kinds of practices and institutions, something we can discover empirically.

Why should ethics matter when we already have strong concepts of power, ontology, assemblage, hegemony, culture, and so forth? Early in his book, Laidlaw writes: "The claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is not an evaluative claim that people are good; it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative" (2014: 2). I wholeheartedly endorse this statement, and want to stress three things about it. The first is that *the primary object of our study is normative*. The idea that evaluation is one of the distinctive features of human social existence, and of a distinct kind from other possible objects of inquiry into human life such as those of genetics, brain science, or demography, is baked into the Durkheimian and Weberian foundations of the human sciences. It gives a special role to the first-person perspective of the experiencing and self-interpreting subject, a role that underwrites the ethnographic stance (an argument I develop more fully in Keane 2010, 2014). Second, this view invites us to seek out ethics above all in *the interstices of everyday activity*, what Michael Lambek (2010) dubbed "ordinary ethics." This saturation of the ongoing flow of everyday life with evaluation is what I would call "ethical life." Third, *we shouldn't decide in advance what ethics will look like*: even racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and so forth, are materials for the anthropology of ethics. After all, these too are forms of evaluation, and often enough people justify them on moral and ethical grounds. And an anthropology that confines its efforts only to understanding those of whom the anthropologist approves, and ignores what Susan Harding (1991) called "the repugnant other," is hardly worthy of the name. It will certainly leave out of its purview a large part of the range of actually existing human realities.

Un-debunking freedom

How one defines freedom depends on what it is being opposed to. Most succinctly, Laidlaw pits freedom against what Zygmunt Bauman (1988) calls the "science of unfreedom," which means, as Laidlaw puts it, "[i]nvoking 'the social'—or 'ideological state apparatuses,' 'the global system,' 'neo-liberalism,' 'colonialist discourse,' or whatever—can be supposed directly or straightforwardly to explain why people do one thing rather than another" (2014: 4). We might describe this as replacing the first-person with the third-person point of view, that is, the perspective of the subject with that of an observer more or less outside the action.

The sciences of unfreedom (for there are many) are hardly new; they did not have to wait for the advent of post-structuralism or post-humanism. Much as the

theory of natural selection was taken to undermine both divine will and human exceptionalism, so too the human sciences that emerged in the nineteenth century challenged people's sense of self-possession in their Western homelands. Freud's model of the unconscious, Marxian theories of ideology, Quetelet's social physics, Durkheim's statistical analysis of suicide, Boas' notion of secondary rationalization, Sapir's of linguistic structure, all could be taken to undermine people's experience. They would always seem to be debunking.

Today, two relatively distinct orders of debunking explanation prevail. One is more or less sociological. A science of unfreedom may attend to the unrecognized effects of power such as "false consciousness." But more influential today are the "large-N" statistical social sciences like economics and political science, and the even larger N of Big Data, which aim to reveal patterns that simply lie beyond any first-person awareness, false or otherwise, such as crime patterns and marriage markets. The other order of debunking draws on causalities rooted in the natural sciences. A glance beyond the confines of anthropological discourse reveals a public enthralled with genetics, neuroscience, and many varieties of psychology (evolutionary, cognitive, developmental, moral, social, and others). Steven Pinker now commands the kind of attention once held by Margaret Mead. Laidlaw rather quickly dispenses with the second of these orders of explanation on the ground that even cognitive anthropologists don't accept evolutionary psychology (2014: 9). And perhaps the silly just-so stories of popularized evolutionary psychology aren't worth our time. But they are hardly the only game in town. To confine ourselves to the limits marked out by existing disciplinary consensus risks conceding the larger arguments to those outside our discipline.

In my view, the naturalistic explanations are the greatest conceptual and political threat the ethnographic stance currently faces. This is not simply because they occupy a different world, one that we can ignore. It is because they include aspects of the *same* world that we know, but that we may lack ways of taking into the ethnographic account. As a source of ethical debunking, consider what is, admittedly, an extreme case. In 2007, two men in Connecticut committed a completely unmotivated rape, murder, and arson. On inspection, it seems they suffered from brain malformations that deprived them of any capacity for empathy. Discussing this case, the neurologist (and militant "new atheist") Sam Harris (2011) writes: "Whatever their conscious motives, these men cannot know why they are as they are. Nor can we account for why we are not like them." In his view, the third-person perspective that reveals mechanical causality simply trumps the first-person point of view. Harris, ever the polemicist, goes on to assert that such findings eliminate any role for the concepts of morality or justice. Certainly his moves are too fast and too simplistic. But it's not enough for the anthropologist simply to assert the contrary, on purely intuitive or normative grounds. How can we draw on our ethnographic knowledge to make a strong counter-argument, one that doesn't simply deny that there's something to be learned from the neurophysiological world revealed by the third-person perspective?

Now Laidlaw introduces a very similar case, that of Charlson, a man who murdered his young son (*Regina* v. *Charlson*). Charlson's legal defense persuaded the court that the killer had a brain tumor that rendered him not responsible for his actions. According to Laidlaw (2014: 193), "[t]he defence depended on the conceptual

detachment of the tumour from the 'self' that was the defendant, on the idea that it was a distinct, detachable, hostile, and intrusive object that was not part of him." Notice here the appeal to the third-person perspective and the subordination of the killer's own subjectivity to that of mechanical explanation. This is the very kind of sharp ontological distinction, between the world of causality and that of evaluations, of ethical self-knowledge, on which radical determinists like Harris claim to have proven that we should do without the idea of morality.

The ontological distinction is expressed, at least implicitly, at the other end of the spectrum too. Although Harris and Foucault draw diametrically opposed conclusions, they seem to agree on the radical ontological divide between the subjective experience of the first person, and the causal explanations offered by the third-person perspective that separates them. The concept of freedom that Laidlaw takes from Foucault does not seem to require any discussion of biological mechanisms or psychological depths. Rejecting on anti-essentialist principles any notion of "human nature," it offers no account of the sources of people's desires, values, interests, or purposes beyond specific, contingent historical formations (Athenian virtue, for instance).

That this goes largely unremarked by Foucault's followers in anthropology may be due to its congruence with the discipline's taken-for-granted. This kind of anthropology is an offshoot of a tradition, going back to Vico and Herder, that looks to culture for a specifically human mode of collective self-creation, independent of natural causality (Keane 2003). Culture was meant to provide an alternative to universals like God, Reason, or biology in order to open a space for human invention. We might call this "freedom" too, although manifested at a collective level. In its current forms, this model of freedom seems to depend on having already ruled out as irrelevant any of the other considerations introduced by naturalistic sources of determinism, things described, for example, by cognitive psychology. One of the risks is that, in reproducing the ontological divide between fact and value, it yields too much ground to the prevailing versions of natural determinism. The challenge the ethnographic stance faces is to give an account of the articulation of the worlds viewed by the first- and third-person perspectives that doesn't simply end up either subordinating one to the other, or placing them in radically segregated realities. What the alternative approach I advocate does, in part, is to draw our attention to the second person, to the scene of address and interaction. This scene mediates the self's relationship with the domain of third-person perspectives, that domain from which the self may view itself from a reflexive distance.

First- and third-person perspectives

Laidlaw is primarily concerned with the first order of debunking, what I've called the sociological. Anthropology, he writes, "requires the development of a notion of explanatory adequacy—of what an effective 'social explanation' might be—that does not re-describe the conduct of responsible agents as the effects of causal 'forces' or the mechanical self-reproduction of 'objective structures'" (2014: 10). Notice that this is a normative not an empirical statement. It takes as given that which remains to be demonstrated, that causal or other contextualizing explanations of

ethics are false or incomplete a priori. Laidlaw, in defining "social explanation," is delimiting in advance what explanations he's willing to allow, and in defining "ethics," he is in principle excluding causality as having any part to play in those explanations.

It seems to me Laidlaw does himself a disservice by developing his account of freedom only with reference to sociological determinism. For one thing, I doubt many anthropologists today actually think in terms of the mechanical self-reproduction of objective structures. I'm not so sure the Durkheim of "the social" or the Althusser of "ideological state apparatuses" really exemplifies the most critical problems we face. Having said that, there are certain endemic difficulties the "sciences of unfreedom" pose to first-person perspective encounters. The ethnographic stance commits us to taking seriously people's own best accounts of themselves. But must we stop there? There are some obvious problems with this. First, people's own accounts of themselves are not always internally consistent; so which of their varying accounts should we accept? Second, people in any given social context are likely to give accounts that contradict those of others. Laidlaw's (1995) own elegant ethnography of the Jains of Jaipur, India, provides one example. There he shows how members of a religious community dedicated to a nearly impossible standard of austerity and world-renunciation work to retain their world-renouncing values while managing to flourish within the seemingly contradictory terms of commercial success. This is a case in which apparent contradictions in theory are resolved in practice.

But things can get much more fraught. Other situations may offer no clear resolution to either ethnographer or the people in question. Whose side should we privilege, the master or the slave? Men or women? Elders or children? Delhi's Hindus or its Muslims? America's Tea Party or the Democratic National Committee? China's ruling party or the dissidents? Even if we accept that all knowledge is partial and situated, this shouldn't require us to ignore out of hand any critical insight a third-person perspective might offer. Unless we want to remain literal-minded, we must have some way of thinking dispassionately about the sources and consequences of self-deception, blindness, and distortions. Elsewhere (Keane 2003) I've argued that the insights of anthropology don't derive simply from the first-person perspective or intimacy, but rather from *ongoing movement back and forth between* intimacy and the more distant view of the third person. Taking ethics seriously should not mean taking people only at face value and resting content with an account of subjectivities.

At various points, Laidlaw's book seems to exemplify each of three more or less distinct ways to treat the concept of "freedom" within ethnographic analysis. One is an immanent critique of the concept of freedom *in academic social theories.* This is where Laidlaw begins. A second is to seek out whatever *empirical corroboration* of freedom we can elicit from studies of observable social action—from a third-person perspective that might not be available to the people in question. In this approach, for instance, it doesn't seem necessary that Jains have a notion of freedom themselves for Laidlaw to discover it in their practices. A third is to ask what might be the *locally relevant concepts*, if any, translatable as "freedom" in any given historical and ethnographic instance. Here the first-person perspectives of the Fulani, people of Mount Hagen, and the Jains—or of participants in the French Revolution, the Arab Spring, Europe's new fascists, or American's mid-twentieth-century Civil

Rights movement—would each present us with more or less distinct reflexive accounts of "freedom."

There are, of course, serious confounds among "their" concepts about what they do, "our" concepts about what they do, and "our" concepts about "their" concepts. (Nor, crucially, are concepts identical to experiences.) Although ethnographers have long known this, the way Laidlaw links ethics and freedom brings it to the foreground. In his portrayal the science of unfreedom aims "to explain why people do one thing rather than another only insofar as their experience of freedom of decision is deemed illusory" (2014: 10). This criticism assumes that to explain something in terms of sociological or cultural categories (from what I'm calling a third-person perspective) is to treat people's first-person *experience* of freedom as illusory. Moreover, it implies that without such an experience, there is no freedom. But nothing seems to guarantee that all people will in fact experience that freedom of decision which is the heart of Laidlaw's concept of ethics. This seems to suggest that, as an empirical matter, freedom may turn out not to be evenly distributed.

Laidlaw's reading of Foucault suggests this will be the case: "Foucault asks us to imagine a slave in chains—we are dealing not with a power relation in this sense, because its object is not properly-speaking action, but instead with brute capacity" . . ., and therefore not with ethics" (2014: 98). In fact, many local concepts of freedom depend on a clear opposition to coexisting states of nonfreedom. This seems to be the case for the Fulani of West Africa, for whom the freedom of the adult male was traditionally defined in contrast to the slave (Laidlaw 2014: 145–46). The contrast to slavery was also definitive of freedom in Aristotle's Athens. And we needn't go so far: long ago, Edmund Morgan (1975) argued that American freedom once took much of its meaning from the visible presence of those who were not free, the slaves. This is certainly part of the notion of freedom that Foucault takes from Aristotle. But in all these cases, freedom is something exclusive, and therefore ethics itself, it seems, is not a quality that inheres in human life as such.

And yet Laidlaw defines ethics in more universalistic terms: "humans evaluate." If that's the case, and ethics is inseparable from freedom, then these should be universal features of human social life. Otherwise, we seem to find ourselves in the dangerous position of adjudicating who does or does not have an ethical life. So "freedom" in that case must mean something immanent in human social existence *regardless* of whether it's culturally or ideologically or philosophically or theologically thematized. It must be built into ethical life, a quality of how people live as such. Yet ethnography's commitment to people's self-understandings, along with its self-consciousness about its own categories, means one cannot cleanly separate these approaches. But perhaps we can pry apart experience from the analysis of freedom—to do otherwise, at the very least, risks subjectivism. To find an alternative, I will argue below, requires more attention to the dialectical nature of reflexivity. But first, let's look more closely at Laidlaw's thinking about freedom.

The trouble with freedom

Laidlaw's deployment of the language of freedom makes me nervous, for three reasons. It carries a lot of *genealogical* baggage, it challenges the ethnographic

commitment to *taking seriously other worlds*, populated with unfamiliar kinds of responsible agents, and it threatens to undo some of the major insights that were won through the social sciences' *decentering* moves. It should be apparent that these three concerns are interrelated, but for expository purposes I'll treat them separately by turns.

First the genealogical worry. For Laidlaw, the domain of the ethical is defined by freedom. This seems so familiar that my immediate instinct as an anthropologist is to find that a source of unease. Did we need to travel so far, and learn so much, only to find the answer, like Dorothy returning to Kansas from Oz, in our own back yard? And as Joel Robbins remarks about Laidlaw's earlier work, doesn't it also risk "falling into the trap of promoting western common sense models of social action to the lofty position of universal theories" (2007: 295)? To be sure, all concepts have their histories and locations. The question is: What follows from this fundamental positionality?

That ethical actions depend on the freedom of the actor from external determinations has long been a theme in Western moral philosophy, but how widely should we apply it in our ethnographic research? According to one well-respected historian of Western thought, "Kant invented the concept of morality as autonomy. . . . Autonomy, as Kant saw it, requires contracausal freedom. . . . Readers who hold, as I do, that our experience of the moral ought shows us no such thing will think his version of autonomy as an invention rather than an explanation" (Schneewind 1998: 3). Prior to this invention, Schneewind goes on, morality in Europe was thought of in terms of obedience, premised on the assumption that most people could not on their own know what was right, but had to be instructed. The Kantian idea of autonomy had an equalizing effect, since it rendered morality available to all humans in principle. Referring to the modern West, Schneewind says "our assumption of prima facie equal moral competence is the deepest and most pervasive difference" between us and our own predecessors (1988: 4). This assumption is itself a normative position, a more or less unself-conscious expression of a distinctly modern egalitarianism. I say distinctly modern because it is closely linked to the equally unself-conscious secularity that underwrites the moral narrative of modernity (Keane 2007). One reason Williams favors ethics over morality is because he sees the latter to requires some supreme figure like God to give and enforce the laws (Laidlaw 2014: 112). Working within the dominant secular assumptions of the twentieth-century academy, he has to reject that. But these are normative not empirical objections: many of the people we want to understand are not egalitarians, and do not reject the guidance of a God.

Ethnographic experience makes clear that neither egalitarian nor secular models of ethics work universally, if we want to ground them in people's own experiences. Hence my second worry about Laidlaw's use of "freedom": ethical life must, to be ethnographically realistic, encompass those who find ethics in all sorts of forms. Unless we are going to decide that some societies have no ethics, we can't define it in ways that exclude those for whom the ethical referent might be lineages, Jesus, kings, icons, spirits, armies, cities, lightning, houses, witches, mountains, wells. In Western history alone we find Xerxes flogging the Hellespont and medieval farm animals put on trial (Evans [1906] 2009). The ethical nature of the business corporation is hardly a settled matter today (Welker 2014). Laidlaw does invoke karma to

make the point that life that is ethically significant may go beyond a single lifespan (2014: 105) and recognizes that "ethical subjects are by no means necessarily co-extensive with human individuals" (2014: 179). But is the concept of freedom, as he uses it, fully transposable across such ontological differences? What do we need to do to this idea to make it that kind of capaciousness?

This brings me to the third worry. Freedom, Laidlaw writes, concerns "whether or in what sense peoples' actions are unconstrained and really their actions" (2014: 5). Here the risk is that we will hypostasize individual interiority, making ethics a voluntaristic condition of individual subjectivities. This is not only an ethnocentric problem of defining the relevant subject of ethics. It also risks inadvertent entanglements with naturalistic explanation. For if we identify freedom with individual capacities, we ought to be asking what accounts for that individual's motivations, desires, interests, or goals, and what constraints they might face.

The first-person reflexive

Worries like these have led Laidlaw, among others, to draw inspiration from moral philosophers like Williams who have turned from deontology to virtue ethics. Rather than defining ethics in terms of discrete moments in which individuals make clear choices regarding specific acts (the exclusive concern of the popular "trolleyology" experiments in moral psychology, which present people with dramatic either/or dilemmas; see Edmonds 2013), virtue ethics looks at more diffused patterns, habits, ways of living. So despite those occasions when Laidlaw defines freedom in terms of unconstrained actions, the freedom peculiar to the titular "subject of virtue" is something different. Shifting from external actions to the language of virtue, Laidlaw evokes Aristotle, for whom "reflection on one's character, 'is . . . a manifestation of human freedom'" (2014: 91, quoting Lear 1988), and Foucault, who brings out "the irreducible importance of reflective ethical thought" (Laidlaw 2014: 93). The subject of virtue is thus not merely a human who evaluates, but one who is self-constituting. Laidlaw means self-constitution in a specific way: "[H]uman reflective consciousness means that we 'step back' from and evaluate our own thoughts and desires, and decide reflectively which desire we wish to have and to move us to action" (2014: 148). This is the ethically relevant concept of freedom. To be psychologically realistic, however, this can't mean that people can actually change their desires at will. Rather, what's involved is a kind of relationship to those desires, a stance. Invoking Harry Frankfurt, Laidlaw says that "we become *responsible* for our character not to the extent that we form it, but to the extent that we selectively identify with some of our attitudes and dispositions more or less 'wholeheartedly' . . . and in that sense, make them our own" (2014: 148–49, emphasis in the original).

But what can this endorsement mean? In the spirit of virtue ethics, this shifts the valence of freedom from *negative* (the absence of determination) to *positive* (self-creation). But it seems to do so by shifting the scene from *external* deeds to an *internal* realm of thought. If it's a purely private act, then it seems to elude any social or ethnographic significance: my student can say her grade doesn't reflect what she got out of the class, and the murderer can tell himself that he wasn't

really himself when he swung the hatchet. But this seems to invite volunteerism and subjectivism. Can I commit that murder and then decide I am not the person who committed the crime? Sometimes—that's what happened in the murder case of *Regina* v. *Charlson*. But to be effective, that case depended on *public* criteria of acceptability embedded in law and local theories of agency and causality. Charlson, the man with the brain tumor, could not simply choose, all on his own, to decide he was not the person who killed his son, at least not to any effect we would call ethical (Laidlaw 2014: 193). If ethics understood as reflexivity in this way is not to turn out to be an internal state, a private feeling about oneself, we need to consider the *practical conditions of reflexivity*. I would like to argue that a reconsideration of the conditions of reflexivity can help show us one way to situate place ethical life within a social world without going back to the social determinism that Laidlaw rejects. (This is the project of my own current writing; see Keane 2010, 2014.)

What might an alternative way of thinking about freedom look like, one that is suited to empirical research within the ethnographic stance? Consider an interesting moment in J. L. Austin's (1961) essay on excuses. This text is usually read as a charter for a certain approach to the philosophy of action. Indeed, that's how Laidlaw reads it (2014: 196). In that approach, we seek in ordinary language the vocabulary by which people define actions and evaluate them. A linguistic anthropologist might point out that this is not merely a lexical matter: some of the most important aspects of this definition, like agency or epistemic stance, may only be expressed grammatically; this point enters into Michael Lempert's (2013) incisive critique of the idea of "ordinary ethics." But along the way, Austin remarks that freedom is not a deep problem of the will, but a matter of how you assess someone's action as not being un-free (1961: 180). The question only arises under certain circumstances, namely when people have to allocate responsibility, usually culpability.

Second-person address, third-person distancing

Freedom, in this view, is a characteristic not of action, but of interaction. It concerns how someone else (either another person, or the same one at some future moment) connects the person to the action. Looked at this way, freedom is inseparable from the ways in which people define situations and describe actions, *in a scene of interaction with one another*. Reflexivity is crucial to freedom, but it's not the introspection of the lone thinker. We need to recognize this if we are to understand people's own best estimation of themselves—and not simply rest there. Reflexivity is produced by the dynamics of interaction between people. What Judith Butler (2005) calls "giving an account of oneself" requires there to be someone to whom an account is being given—someone who can expect such an account. Even an internal voice silently laying blame and taking responsibility on the self, I would argue, is fundamentally interactive. It replicates, and even depends on, the prior experience of conversations with others. These scenes of second-person address that summon up self-accounting are a crucial step out of the first-person point of view.

The reflexive act of saying of oneself "I am not the one who did this act," even in silent thought, is a departure from first-person experience. It is already to take

oneself as an object, the self as it might be seen from the third-person point of view. And it is this capacity to step back and take oneself as an object that Laidlaw, following Foucault, places at the heart of ethical freedom (2014: 102). The reflexive self, in this case, is doing what the lawyer does in telling the court that Charlson's murder of his son could be explained in causal terms, as the result of a brain tumor. Or the penitent who confesses to God (Carr 2013). Or the hoods in *West Side story* who invoke psychological and sociological causality in addressing the police: "Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke, / You gotta understand, / It's just our bringin' up / That gets us out of hand. / Our mothers all are junkies, / Our fathers all are drunks. / Golly Moses, natcherly we're punks!" (Sondheim 1957). In each case, what happens is not merely an introspective moment of taking distance on oneself. The speaker in each of these cases takes the third-person position *in addressing another*, the second person. This is the scene of accountability. Giving an account of oneself emerges in the process of staging a relationship between a speaker and an addressee. The internal splitting that allows the self to take distance on itself is a function of *the self's capacity to interact with others*, and take the external perspective of the self they afford. If the ability to take distance on oneself is the condition for freedom, the nature of interaction is the condition for fully developing that ability and making it ethically relevant.

Defining the situation (an act of cunning wit or shameless betrayal? virtuous admonition or nagging? respectful deference or cowardice? piety or superstition?) is the most ordinary and ubiquitous part of that evaluative reflexivity that makes ethical life. Possible descriptions and definitions are, of course, more plausible to the extent they are knowable within a given ontology (can responsible agents include Satan? viruses?) and morality system (do they include family honor? aristocratic condescension? revolutionary valor?). To deploy these descriptions in moments of interaction is to introduce a third-person perspective on oneself. This deployment is not a deterministic *cause* of behavior. Rather, the self-knowledge it produces draws selectively from the public realm within which descriptions circulate. This circulation has a different temporality from that of interaction. It is a historical temporality in which what had once been "deference," for example, may come to be taken to be "cowardice," or "piety" to be "superstition."

My emphasis on interaction is, I think, consistent with Foucault's portrayal of self-forming ascetics, which includes activities like writing, engaging in dialogue with or listening to a master, remembering the dead, confession to a priest, meditation, and the interpretation of dreams (Laidlaw 2014: 103–4). These use a second-person addressee, or semiotic stand-ins for the second person, in order to take up a third-person perspective on oneself. Williams, too, writes that one's character responds to "practices of encouragement and discouragement, acceptance and rejection, which work on desire and character to shape them into the requirements and possibilities of ethical life" (1985: 194). My point is that these are not incidental to the project of self-formation; they are essential. And they suggest how such a project is located within a social and historical world, without resorting to the static models Laidlaw opposes. Those semiotic forms circulate and undergo transformation in a public world, beyond the self (however broadly or narrowly you want to define that entity), and the moment.

I want to stress this mediating level. Laidlaw, quite rightly, is not prepared to jettison any reference to a public realm altogether. It would be hard to talk about Jain austerities or Aristotelian virtues without some reference to that realm. So what is the position against which he is pitting the idea of freedom? Laidlaw's portrayal of the Durkheimian influence on anthropology reproduces the opposition between individual and society. For example, he criticizes the way Parry and Bloch (1989) use the concept of "moral economy" for identifying morality with the collective (Laidlaw 2014: 22). The problem is, this invites us to seek the alternative in individual choices, and, if reflexivity is the heart of the matter, in the inner thought of that individual. But no one encounters "society" as such; they confront other people. So if we take freedom to be emergent in interaction with those other people, then it is confined neither to inner thought nor to individuals. Nor is the pedagogical relation of ethical teacher to student a good model, since in that case the effects seem to go only in one direction. (Whatever might actually transpire in practice, there's nothing in the model that requires us to consider the effects of the student on the teacher.) The way to get beyond the sociological determinisms Laidlaw is worried about is not just to shift from collective to individual. It is to reject the dichotomization that makes those the only choices, by attending to the range of mediations that this dichotomy elides.

Here's where a more semiotic and dialectical approach is called for. At their most pervasive, the evaluations that Laidlaw takes as defining ethics center on a feature of everyday interaction, the idea of "what is going on right now." This is what Erving Goffman dubs "the definition of the situation," Elizabeth Anscombe "action under a description," and Charles Taylor "a description for us." In principle, this description cannot simply be determined in advance. But it is also out of the hands of the individual to settle. In any given interaction, however routine, any version of "what is going on here" is in principle defeasible. Because it's defeasible, that definition will be determined by the nature of what is going on *between* people, not just within each one's inner thoughts. To be sure, those inner thoughts matter, but aside from cases of severe mental disability, what's going on in those inner thoughts cannot be wholly unaffected by the other participants in the interaction.

I think this is consistent with Laidlaw's statement that "the ethical dimension of social life—the fact that everyday conduct is constitutively pervaded by reflective evaluation—is irreducible" (2014: 44–45). This is a reasonable approach to the concept of freedom as long as we realize that conduct is not mine alone, but mine *in response to, and drawing responses from*, others. This is why a semiotics of ethics is important. First, to the extent people are not endowed with extrasensory perception, their interactions are mediated by the construal of sensory experience. Second, because even in those historical situations that induce what Foucault called "problematization," people's reflections draw on concepts and practices they already know. In a curiously traditionalist-seeming moment, Foucault writes that subjectivation is based on "models that [the individual] finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, his social group" (1997: 291, quoted by Laidlaw on 2014: 102). But this can't be satisfying if it returns us to the idea that culture and society—or ethical pedagogues, for that matter—are static entities that stand over and against dynamic individuals. People

encounter those models (if that's what they are) because they circulate in public, as words (e.g. "virtue"), linguistic habits (e.g. grammatical markers of animacy), practices (e.g. the body language of deference), and institutions (e.g. schools), all of which have distinct historical temporalities. New ones emerge, of course, but on the basis of reactions to or transformations of prior knowledge, *arising through interactions with other people who are doing the same things*. This is one way to think about freedom not in metaphysical but ethnographic terms.

Opening up responsibility

If ethics is not based on God, Reason, or biology, then it has a history. In an important section of the book, Laidlaw discusses various ways in which the imputation of responsibility has expanded in contemporary Western societies. In fact, there seem to be two stories here. The first is about *revealing causality*, the other about *statistical emergence*. Here's the first: the more powerful the prevailing ideas about cause and effect become, the broader the net of responsibility can be cast. As people become aware of the chains of causality that link them to very distant others, they may come to feel responsible for things that happen at a distance. (This is a variation on an old idea about moral progress, according to which the narrow application of ethical values to one's immediate circles gradually expands, until eventually it incorporates universal humanity.) Once people can discern causal chains between their vote or consumer choices and distant evils (drones in Yemen, child labor in Bangladesh), they will discover they are responsible for distant unintended consequences. But notice that this version of ethics turns on discovering oneself within a world of causality that is, at least in some important sense, deterministic, even if it is not "me" who is determined.

The second story Laidlaw tells about the expansion of responsibility is even more challenging. It involves a revelatory semiotics. Statistics make evident harmful patterns, such as racial or gender bias in hiring (Laidlaw 2014: 205), that may not result from any individual employer's conscious intentions. Moreover, these patterns, which can only be *experienced* as individual instances of misfortune (Laidlaw 2014: 206)—just what the ethnographic stance is most likely to privilege—only become *knowable* from the third-person perspective offered by the statistical techniques of objective science. Notice the paradox: this takes precisely those effects of social science explanation (to discover causalities or correlations unavailable to personal experience) that had seemed to debunk ethical subjectivities, and uses them instead to expand the scope of ethics.

This can work in reverse as well: what can be *described* as fact might come to be *held up* as a standard of value. According to Michael Warner (2000: 58), drawing on the work of Georges Canguilhem, this is what happened after the invention and popularization of statistics: the statistical norm tended to be treated as an evaluative one. The "average" body size, blood pressure, or sexual practices came to be seen as the "normal" ones, a target to which everyone should aspire and a standard by which they would be judged. Fact came to *dictate* value. This is because statistical norms could be taken in view of a certain semiotic ideology as revealing something that had been hidden.

Both revealed causality and statistical emergence depend on a semiotics of making visible something previously unknown, which is what the human sciences have always been involved in doing. In ethical life, that semiotics of revelation transpires between people. After considering a range of variations on the idea of moral luck (a vase accidently brushed off a window sill hits a passerby, my dog bites you, a film inspires hooligans to violence), Laidlaw remarks: "One thing to notice about these examples is that the claims by means of which responsibility is embraced or repudiated, and attributed or refused to others, work in part by means of claims about the constitution and extension of the self" (2014: 194). But as an ethical subject, that self is only revealed through practices of claims making (cf. Das 2010), and therefore requires those others, second persons, to whom claims are addressed. Those other persons condition what claims are plausible in general, they determine which are acceptable in particular, and they define the field within which they do or do not matter. Looking at how ethical claims arise helps us see that those claims can point forward, toward future actions, and not just backward, accounting for past ones.

The point is that making ethical claims is not just about the self: it is part of a social interaction between people. By emphasizing the role of those other people, we can better understand in active terms what Laidlaw refers to with the passive verb when he writes: "matters of blame and responsibility, . . . whereby stretches, phases, or stages of people's on-going conduct *are interpreted* as acts for which distinct agents . . . are accountable" (2014: 197, emphasis mine). Blaming and holding responsible, denying and justifying, are acts that *both* the agent, *and* his or her interlocutors, are doing, and they doing them *for one another*. To understand this requires attending to who interprets actions, under what circumstances, with what capacities and consequentiality, and accountable to whom. Ethical life means that people are reflexive, evaluative, and creative—but not alone, confined to the inner space of their own heads.

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