

# Ordinary Ethics

ANTHROPOLOGY, LANGUAGE, AND ACTION

*Edited by*

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FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

*New York 2010*

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ordinary ethics : anthropology, language, and action /  
edited by Michael Lambek.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8232-3316-8 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8232-3317-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8232-3318-2 (ebook)

1. Anthropological ethics. I. Lambek, Michael.

GN33.6.O74 2011

303.3'72—dc22

2010033983

Printed in the United States of America

12 11 10 5 4 3 2 1

First edition

*For Aram Yengoyan*

*and in memory of Roy (Skip) Rappaport*

## Minds, Surfaces, and Reasons in the Anthropology of Ethics

Webb Keane

Whether they are trying to understand such things as global religious or political movements, ethnic clashes, state violence, diasporas, or biotechnology, or are faced with calls for social activism and political engagement, anthropologists may find familiar ethnographic habits serve them poorly and discover old questions acquiring new force. Does the specificity of cultural context mark a limit to the claims of universal justice and human rights? Or is the deployment of these very ideas merely the work of power? And if so, must we ultimately understand social relations in purely instrumental terms? But then to what ends? What makes one kind of self-formation or social project worth undertaking and another not? The giving of justifications for our political, ethical, or epistemic commitments eventually comes to an end point: What do we find there? These questions are not provoked only by new circumstances or extreme situations. They can arise in the most ordinary reaches of everyday life.

Concepts like society, culture, ideology, and power were meant to help answer questions like these. Should they fail to do so, triumphant explanations derived from genetics, rational-choice modeling, neo-liberal economics, cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, and neurophysiology are eagerly poised to take their place. But whatever else the latter approaches may offer, their effect is often to render out of court

some problems with which actually existing people still need to contend. Part (but only part) of the distinctive mandate of anthropology is to encounter people in the midst of things. This mandate suggests one way to think about ethical experience as an irreducible component of the politics and pragmatics of ordinary life.<sup>1</sup>

Although many social scientists are skeptical of the vocabulary of morality and ethics, it speaks to some of the fundamental challenges their practices have long posed, not least to the very societies that produced them. Darwin and Nietzsche can stand for two poles from which natural science and humanistic scholarship threatened to undermine the assurance of human self-mastery, if not of divine sanction itself, on which much nineteenth-century European religious and moral thought rested. But situated between them were emerging disciplines that became the social sciences. Their claim to be sciences of something distinctively human was often staked on the assertion that their knowledge concerned objects of an entirely different status from those of natural science, what Emile Durkheim (1938 [1895]) called “social facts.” For Max Weber (1978), sociology’s purview was limited to purposeful actions oriented to those of other persons. Thus in *The Protestant Ethic*, Weber (1958) portrays what I would call a “virtue system,” a more or less coherent vision of ultimate goods that gave rise to a coordinated set of socially supported and institutionally organized means of self-cultivation.

Varied though the heirs of Durkheim and Weber may be, an empirical focus on the domain of values helps characterize disciplines such as anthropology, with their own implications for prevailing ideas about morality (Keane 2003a; cf. Howell 1997, Lambek 2000, and this volume). After all, many philosophical and theological traditions have held some variation of the idea that the ethical act presupposes a degree of autonomy on the part of the actor, since it must be the outcome of a choice made from among alternative possible courses of action (Schneewind 1998).<sup>2</sup> This is

1. For purposes of this chapter, I will follow Ian Hacking’s advice, during discussion in the Toronto conference, and treat “morality” and “ethics” as interchangeable. Although I find Williams’s distinction between deontological morality and socially situated ethics useful in principle, in practice I have found it unwieldy to keep the words themselves clearly separated. Indeed, this difficulty may ultimately reflect the dialectical relations between modalities that this chapter addresses.

2. Anthropology’s own relation to sociological and other kinds of determinism has been highly ambivalent (see Keane 2003a). Laidlaw (2002; see also his contribution to this volume) has argued that anthropologists’ overemphasis on social norms has obscured their view of the freedom that defines moral agency; con-

why Adam's Fall is a moral story, not merely a causal one. Once transcendental mandate is eliminated, morality often seems to depend on the autonomy of individual minds. But if humans are products of natural processes over which they have no power, of social forces beyond their ken, and internally, if their very self-knowledge is limited and untrustworthy, then what could ground moral responsibility? Posed against autonomy seems to be what we might call, in the old phrase of C. Wright Mills (1959), the sociological imagination. This denotes the observation that we live among other people, and that this condition is no mere happenstance. We do not just discover ourselves already fully formed among others, with whom we must then contend. Rather, we come to be who we are within, and by virtue of, relationships with others, their bodies, their possessions, their languages, their ways of inhabiting our imaginations and emotions. What follows from this claim, however, is far from settled.

### *In the Midst of the Action*

In a recent iteration of the contest between mental autonomy and scientific explanation, Anthony Appiah (2008) reviews psychological research showing that the accounts people give of their own behavior are not reliable. Cues below the subjects' threshold of awareness frame their interpretations of and reactions to different situations that call for ethical decisions. As a result, not only do actors lack full consciousness of the real causes of their actions, their actions are also not consistent across contexts. Such "situationist" explanations seem to eliminate the element of self-awareness and intentionality on which many familiar accounts of moral responsibility depend. They suggest that we cannot take individuals' stated reasons for their choices at face value, which seems to jeopardize the deliberative component of much moral philosophy. By raising doubts about consistency of character, they also seem to undermine a key premise of virtue ethics.

Having accepted these findings enthusiastically, Appiah nonetheless defends the philosophical enterprise: "Moral thought aspires to a register that is universal without being impersonal. . . . it has to be intelligible to us ordinary persons. That's why an explanation cannot supplant a moral

versely, others like Sperber (1996) assert that an overemphasis on cultural self-invention has led anthropologists to ignore important causal explanations for human behavior.

justification" (ibid. 117). These words portray the psychologist and the philosopher as united in their quest for universals, a goal many cultural anthropologists habitually dismiss. But suppose we grant them their goal and accept their empirical findings—we may still say that something important eludes our understanding. We might even start with Appiah's own assertion that justification is not something that stands apart from moral action, since "the act of describing a situation, and thus determining that there's a decision to be made—is itself a moral task. It's often *the* moral task. Learning how to recognize what is and isn't an option is part of our ethical development" (ibid. 196). For Appiah, this recognition seems to be largely a matter of personal insight, ultimately grounded in psychological processes. But the sociological imagination suggests that the presence of other people is a crucial element of any ethical "situation." And no empirically known community has ever in practice been able to rely entirely on either the individual intuitions described by psychology or the general principles sought by philosophy (or, we might add, the explicit rules of theology and law, or even the tacit ones of custom).

Bernard Williams takes up the challenge the sociological imagination poses to the Kantian traditions of Western moral thought by stipulating a distinction within the moral domain. What he calls the "morality system" centers on deontological obligations that are held to be universal, context free, and wholly binding. But in confronting the experience of practical necessity and the decisions it involves, Williams says, "the agent's conclusions will not usually be solitary or unsupported, because they are part of an ethical life that is to an important degree shared with others. In this respect, the morality system . . . conceals the dimension in which ethical life lies outside the individual" (1985: 191). Theorists of virtue and moral community like Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) and Charles Taylor (1985, 1989) make similar points. In these views, morality is not founded on structures of pure reason or on psychological universals but is the product of an encompassing social order, oriented to a distinct vision of human flourishing, and the historically specific habits and disciplines it inculcates. And, of course, it was precisely the goal of some classic anthropological concepts of culture (e.g., Benedict 1959, Sahlins 1972, 1988) to show that particular notions of human flourishing or ultimate goods are formed within and sustained by the totalizing frame of historically specific communities.

But, put this way, the sociological imagination runs into some well-known problems. Faced with a world that seems irremediably conflictual, relentlessly unstable, and powerfully constraining while also shaped by

purposeful actions, anthropologists have long since abandoned models of self-contained social worlds and their holistic systems of meaning. Yet, if communities are not totalizing, how do we understand the force and efficacy of the social facts they create? And, given the force and efficacy of those social facts, how do we also understand doubt, innovation, protest, and sheer indifference? To say that morality is inseparable from the very nature of people's lives with one another—that it is not reducible to some context-free explanation in terms of innate drives, economic interests, rational first principles, or evolutionarily adaptive functions—should not lead to the conclusion that morality must be a pure social construction, continually reinvented from scratch and shared by a group of like-minded people. The sociological imagination works against strong claims to derive ethics entirely from universal reason or moral psychology. But historical and ethnographic realism warns us against trying to do so by appeal to seamless cultural traditions or cohesive moral communities instead.

I will argue that the descriptions to which Appiah refers typically arise in the midst of acts like deliberating, making excuses, and offering justifications instigated by the demands and expectations of social interaction, especially in cases of disagreement and conflict. Their intelligibility to the participants derives, in part, from available vocabularies, material practices, norms for argumentation, and the authority to take them up. But vocabularies, practices, norms, and authority are not sufficient to account for the outcomes of interaction. There are several reasons for this, including the effects of differing individual interests, dispositions, and capacities, as well as the ineluctable specificity of circumstance. The approach I sketch here starts elsewhere. To one who is in the midst of the action, the entire range of possible explanations for other people's actions and possible outcomes of one's own can never be fully apparent. Lacking the view from nowhere, people are likely to find themselves responding to the surfaces of things, to their forms or semiotic modalities.<sup>3</sup>

Within the limits of this chapter, I will develop this claim: if a significant part of ethical life lies outside the individual, as Williams puts it, then

3. By *semiotic* I mean this: people draw inferences about their circumstances on the basis of their perceptible experience of material forms, including the forms of language (see Keane 2003b, 2008c). Those inferences are not necessarily conventional—thus they do not treat things as “symbols”—nor are they necessarily fully cognizable—thus they are not always “interpretative” nor are the results necessarily “meaningful” (see Engelke and Tomlinson eds. 2006). Since material forms have *causal* sources, a semiotic approach is not to be confused with idealism or social constructionism. Since the inferences are usually informed by cultural knowledge, this approach is also not a pure phenomenology.

it is an individual who attends to the surface of things. After all, being unable to read minds, we are, in a sense, surfaces to one another. I want to argue that ethics takes a variety of semiotic modalities and that these interact with one another. Ethics is not all of one order. Sometimes we are in the midst of the action; sometimes we seem to stand apart from it. If the ethical life centers on the tacit competences of the individual embedded in a social world, under certain social circumstances that individual undertakes explicit deliberation and justification. Sometimes ethics *does* act, in certain respects, like Williams's “moral system,” and as obligations that one can justify in words. But those words do not *explain* either morality or action. Justifications respond to the way some social contexts require the giving of reasons. The giving of reasons is itself a practice that requires certain competences, certain capacities for objectification. Objectification is an endemic feature of social life overall (Keane 2003b, 2007, 2008a). It has effects across the spectrum from silent bodily habitus to self-conscious verbalization. Objectification permits certain kinds of reflexivity. A capacity to reflect on agency itself—to take actions and their purported agents as objects of thought, discourse, and manipulation—may be a prerequisite for what Williams called the morality system. It facilitates praise and blame, explanation and excuses, and the disciplining of self and other.

This chapter will briefly sketch some of the dimensions a contemporary anthropology of morality might consider by looking at different modalities that ethically marked practices can take. It begins with forms that help endow material and verbal exchanges with their ethical character and concludes with contexts that encourage or demand the explicit giving of reasons. This is not meant to be an exhaustive typology, and these modalities are often thoroughly entangled with one another. But by focusing on these different aspects of ethical action, I hope to show what we can learn by attending to the surfaces of things and the interactions they mediate.

### *The Shape of Things*

One of the founding texts for the anthropology of morality, Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* (1967) focuses on social interactions that are mediated by material things. In Mauss's view, the morality of the gift derives from the way it seems to confound the distinction between the domain of practical functions and value judgments. It interposes a rule that interrupts the logic of economic utility. On its first page, *The Gift* points to the importance of semiotic modality to the ethical act: “The form usually taken is

that of the gift generously offered; but the accompanying behaviour is formal pretence and social deception, while the transaction itself is based on obligation" (ibid. 1). What endows a particular kind of transaction with moral weight may be obligation, but it is the formal properties of the action that frame it as a gift. As people on the Indonesian island of Sumba made clear in talking to me about their own exchanges, a horse given without the due forms is not a gift at all. An object may pass hands, and certainly there will be material results: one more horse in one person's corral, one less in another's. But if the link between objects, acts, and persons is not established by certain physical and verbal expressions, the transaction has no *moral* consequences, no socially binding debt, no ethical virtue accrued to the giver, no recognition accorded to the recipient.

Some procedural norms look like rules. The ability to refer actions to the domain of rules places them *publicly* under a certain description, as instances of a recognizable type of action and thus, as Sumbanese see it, as something more than willful behavior driven by personal desires. These norms are central to the performance of disinterestedness. If the gift is not best understood in terms of following a rule (Bourdieu 1977, Taylor 1993), what gives it the moral character that people engaged in gift exchange clearly accord it? And what are we to make of the fact that people sometimes *do* use the language of rules to talk about exchange? If we look at the concrete activities that constitute Sumbanese exchange, it becomes apparent that they take their value within a larger field of unmarked transactions, against which they are made to stand out by virtue of their formal character. The formality that registers a transaction as an instance of gift exchange marks the way people sit facing one another; two-part dialogue structure and the ritual couplets naming the gift, identifying the responsible agent and the target; preliminary tokens conveyed in betel dishes; reciprocal tokens given in acknowledgment of receipt; and so forth (see Keane 1997). Sumbanese explicitly draw a contrast to the marketplace, where often the same items (horses, cloth, machetes, and so forth) will change hands, but without any of the formality. This formality frames acts of exchange as transpiring within a domain of evaluations of people, their actions, and their material goods. To be completed, a transaction must be recognized as valid by an exchange partner. If it is valid, then certain things follow. The presence of horses in a man's corral, or gold in his storage chest, is considered to be proof of a transaction recognized by another, and all the moral standing that retrospectively conveys. The semi-otic forms of the interaction and of the objects that flow through it form

a moral metalanguage. The goods that result index the mutual recognition of both parties; the horse in my corral indexes a moral bond between its source and me. Talk about rules is a way of establishing value judgments, rendering material goods traces of past actions of a certain knowable type.

Sometimes the suppression of certain ways of talking helps constitute acts as moral. In some societies people typically claim it is impossible to know what is in the mind of another person. Melanesian research suggests this "opacity claim" is less a theory of mind than an ethic of *talk about minds* (Duranti 2008, Rumsey 2008, Schieffelin 1990). That is, when people deny they can tell what others intend, they are expressing a strong cultural norm about who has the right to put inner thoughts into words. This has consequences for the forms that acts can take in order to be morally recognizable. These forms stress material transactions over the verbalizing of purposes, and thus place great weight on inferences drawn by the recipient rather than on explications offered by the giver. Opacity statements sometimes manifest a local moral theory, that the privacy of inner thought guarantees the individual's relative autonomy (Stasch 2008). The combined focus on things and silence around intentions helps constitute certain acts as morally consequential and demands attentiveness to the forms those acts take.

Mauss saw gift exchange as characteristic of "archaic societies." He took it, in part, as a counter-ideal he posed against liberal capitalist modernity, manifesting a world prior to individualism, alienation, and the drawing of boundaries among such distinct value spheres as religion, economics, government, and kinship. But even in the most liberal economies, some things such as children, spouses, body parts, sex, good grades in school, and even political office are not supposed to be for sale (Sharp 2000, Zelizer 2005). And they are cordoned off for reasons different from the prohibition on selling dangerous drugs or military secrets. They concern the ethical boundaries that distinguish persons from things, ends from means (Keane 2007: 223–51).

The relation between form and ethics is not confined to supposedly traditional economies or to the domestic sphere in capitalism. As I have argued elsewhere (Keane 2008b), marketplace bargaining typically follows rules that derive some of their ethical force from the interactive norms of social etiquette (see Yeung in this volume). The norms often remain tacit, but, as the metalanguages that can emerge amidst marketplace negotiations above might suggest, the move into explicitness can draw moral authority from that implicit domain. Drawing on the early history of

capitalism, Mary Poovey (1998) has suggested that double-entry book-keeping manifested ethical values such as transparency. Among contemporary futures traders in Tokyo, according to Hiro Miyazaki, people can self-consciously respond to the values suggested by such forms. Miyazaki writes:

In the Japanese business world, storytelling is an important genre of speech. . . . Typically delivered in monologue form by a senior to a junior while drinking and eating late into the night, this speech consists of a retrospective account of the senior's reflection on his career. The account always has a slightly moral overtone. It also usually culminates in a revelation of the speaker's "dreams" for the future. The dreams are presented as if they were secrets, as truthful presentations of who one is. (2006: 150)

These revelations are inseparable from ideas about finance. According to Miyazaki, "In [Japan] in the late 1990s, the move to calculate one's own worth was one of the characteristic activities of the 'strong individual.' . . . This practice was evidence, in the popular imagination, of the strong individual's rationality, risk taking, and self-responsibility" (ibid. 151). The very instrumentality of this practice imposed what I think we can call an ethical value, as an external discipline on the willful self. One of these men, Tada, uses a spreadsheet to calculate his worth. "From Tada's point of view," Miyazaki writes, "the power of logic inhered in its use as a constraint on intuitive impulses. Tada demanded that traders should do exactly what their models were telling them to do even if this contradicted their intuition" (ibid. 154). Like the Maussian gift, certain forms, such as spreadsheets and financial models, can be used to impose a rule on the willful actor. Submission to them is a virtue. Their moral standing derives from the experience of externality that their materiality makes possible. This externality allows (but does not determine) a sharpening of ethical awareness.

In material transactions ranging from the ordinary etiquette of hospitality (Shryock 2008) to formal exchange, from marketplace haggling to high-end financial operations, the material or transactional forms that govern ordinary commercial interactions give an ethical shape to actions and, characteristically, embody a moral metalanguage rendering them available for judgments by others. The very externality of things and forms to the subjective life of those who wield them seems to be part of that morality. Their semiotic form materializes that externality and its difference from the subject's unself-conscious habits and desires. Yet physical objects remain mute. That is also part of their power—they enter into the

projects of their recipients bearing a proliferation of possible futures (see Keane 2003b). That muteness is also a source of moral ambiguity: gifts, for example, do not make intentions transparent, and they can be diverted to alien purposes. In response, people often try to channel and control those possibilities by using words. But words, like things, have surfaces. Speech does not have to be either ritualized or ethically explicit to have moral implications; those implications can saturate the very forms that ordinary conversation takes.

### *Others' Words and Other Minds*

Acts such as justifying, accusing, and persuading cannot be understood outside the context of interaction with other persons. Close study of interactions shows how human cognitive and affective endowments are brought to bear on, and respond to, the realm of those public concepts and values that are most salient to consciousness. It is in interactions that we can begin to tease out the relations between the universalizing assertions of psychology or philosophy and the particularities of history and ethnography. Certain basic components of moral psychology, such as empathy, helpfulness, fairness, and an ability to distinguish intentional from nonintentional actions, appear very early in childhood (Tomasello 1999). The cognitive capacity to take another's perspective—both to see things from his or her point of view and to see oneself from the outside—is often taken to be an essential precondition for morality (see Rumsey 2003a and in this volume). Indeed, this capacity is presupposed by Weber's definition of social actions, which take their meaning from their orientation to those of other actors. Reciprocity of perspectives is evident early on, in the prelinguistic child's ability to direct her gaze in parallel with others and later to point. Linked to this ability is the subsequent emergence of an awareness that what others know and desire may differ from one's own knowledge and desires, which are prerequisites for the distinctly human "theory of mind" (Baron-Cohen 1995, Gopnik and Meltzoff 1997, Wellman 2002). Language seems to play a critical role in the full development of the reciprocity of perspectives (Lucy ed. 1993). According to the developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello, "to understand that other persons have beliefs about the world that differ from their own, children need to engage them in discourse in which these different perspectives are clearly apparent—either in a disagreement, a misunderstanding, a request for clarification, or a reflective dialogue" (1999: 182). Once a basic theory of mind

has been established, children can internalize explicit rules they have learned from adults, using them for self-regulation. Further developments include metacognition (being able to discuss one's own reasoning) and representational redescription (being able to present knowledge in different formats, to represent representations as such). The latter ability is presupposed by many familiar theories of morality, since, according to Tomasello (1999: 191–95), it allows people to generalize about ethical principles and to apply them flexibly across different contexts. But as suggested above, morality is not only, or even primarily, a matter of rules and reasons.

Empirical observation bears out classical theory: one does not develop morality all by oneself. Studies of children's language socialization (Ochs 1988, Schieffelin 1990; see also Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2007) have shown that the habits and emotions we can identify with moral virtues are shaped and given coherence in ongoing social interactions over the course of a lifetime. This process occurs across a range of interactions with distinct kinds of persons, giving it a socially distributed character. Research on responsibility attribution, negotiation, and didactic talk (e.g., Hill and Irvine eds. 1992, Hill and Zepeda 1992, Hanks 2000, Keane 1997, Shoaps 2007, Sacks 1974) shows the importance of collaborative acts of framing—precisely that which Appiah, as noted above, calls *the* moral task. Typically, over the course of an interaction, lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic linguistic devices specify what kind of action is in question and who the agents are, such that responsibility, praise, or blame is even in question at all (Silverstein 1993). Framing is also crucial to the identification of acts and agents as belonging to socially recognized types, such as cheating and cheater, bravery and the brave, which contributes to the perception that traits are coherent and stable. As conversation analysis shows (e.g., Sidnell in this volume), framing is an outcome of the emergent properties of interaction as a shared activity. Close analysis of interaction demonstrates how ongoing sociability provides the continuous external reinforcement that not only sustains ethical intuitions and moral virtues but also shapes them in ways that make them recognizable to other people within the same community.

Palpable objectifications make the individual's character available for evaluations and responses by other people and serve as feedback to the individual him- or herself. Self-knowledge thus draws on some of the same resources as knowledge of others (see Rumsey in this volume). Ordinary interaction is saturated with the subtle acts of evaluation and judgment linguistic anthropologists categorize as stance. Stance refers to the ways

people assign value to objects of interest, position themselves, and invoke personal and cultural systems of goods (Du Bois 2007: 139). In conversation analysis, “moral stance” has been defined rather narrowly as “action [taken] in such a way as to reveal to others that the actor can be trusted to assume the alignments and do the cognitive work required for the appropriate accomplishment of the collaborative tasks they are pursuing in concert with each other, that is to act as a moral member of the community being sustained through the actions currently in progress” (Goodwin 2007: 70–71). As Veena Das suggests (2007, and in this volume), moral dilemmas can arise out of the small exchanges that make or undo neighborliness. Like attributions of responsibility, stance is not entirely in the hands of a single actor, for “the very act of taking a stance becomes fair game to serve as a target for the next speaker's stance” (Du Bois 2007: 141). In this way, the ethical character imputed to individuals is shaped by such things as publicly circulating stereotypes and speakers' institutional positions (Irvine 2009). Thus many linguistic anthropologists are coming to describe stance more broadly than the local collaborations Goodwin invokes, as “a way of categorizing and judging experience particular to a group or individual that turns on some notion of the good or true” (Kockelman 2004: 129). But to have moral consequences that endure beyond the moment of interaction, notions of the good must become part of what people are to one another, and to themselves.

### *Moral Voicing*

Social interactions are mediated by processes of objectification that contribute to actors' experience of living in knowable, relatively stable realities. Typification (Schutz 1967) produces widely recognized character types or figures within a particular social context (Agha 2007, Silverstein 2003). The embodied and discursive figures available in any moral community serve as public models or exemplars with respect to which actions can be oriented, reasons given, and justifications made. People are shaped as publicly known moral characters over the course of their interactions with others—this becomes part of the frame through which subsequent actions are interpreted. Lies are expected of known liars, charity of the generous. Taking on certain figures during interaction can itself become a process of moral self-discovery that contributes to the formation and systematization of virtues. Since these internalized figures are objectified, they are manifestly available to



other people to respond to and evaluate. The feedback may help consolidate bodily habits, affective dispositions, ways of speaking, and styles of reasoning that persist or recur across contexts. But interaction also threatens that consolidation. As Erving Goffman wrote, "The divination of moral character by adducing indicators from the past is one of the major preoccupations of everyday life. And the treacherous feature is that 'a case can be made,' and at the same time there is no foolproof way of determining whether it is made correctly" (1974b: 453).

The divination of moral character to which Goffman refers depends on the surfaces of things, such as the quality of the gift and the timing of the counter-gift, the tone of the voice and the choice of the words. Choices among linguistic forms, for example, can play a crucial role in defining speakers' character and even the ethical options available to them. Consider Jane Hill's (1995) close analysis of a narrative by Don Gabriel, a speaker of the Native American language known as *Mexicano*, who lived in a farming village of central Mexico. Don Gabriel recounts the events surrounding the murder of his adult son, who was involved in a small business, by envious neighbors. The narrative, which culminates in the father viewing his son's corpse, implicitly stages a contest of value systems. It pits Indian-identified subsistence farmers, who are committed to relations of kinship and reciprocity in the village, against the Spanish-oriented world of individualistic urban capitalists.

Virtually none of the ethical contest takes explicit propositional form in Don Gabriel's talk. It emerges in code switching between *Mexicano* and Spanish, in different kinds of dysfluency (false starts, stutters, verbal slips, memory gaps, and so forth), shifts in the use of tenses, and changes in intonation contour. Hill finds that several distinct voices can be identified with Don Gabriel himself. He embodies by turns a neutral narrator, an engaged narrator, an emotionally overcome protagonist, and a moral commentator on the events. The latter offers his commentary to the listener through direct address, marked by other techniques of immediacy as well, such as historical present verb tenses and certain intonation contours.

Hill's analysis is of particular interest because it is strongly influenced by Goffman, whose portrayal of social interaction Alasdair MacIntyre took to exemplify the peculiarly amoral condition of modernity. According to MacIntyre, in Goffman's world "imputations of merit are themselves part of the contrived social reality whose function is to aid or to contain some striving role-playing will. Goffman's is a sociology which by intention deflates the pretensions of appearance to be anything more than appearance" (2007: 116). But although Don Gabriel is attentive to how he is presenting

himself, the surface appearances he is trying to manage involve serious ethical commitments and the difficulties that their contradictions pose for him. The linguistic variations in his speech index both a cast of social types that manifest distinct moral stances and visions of the good life, and the speaker's identification with or estrangement from them. Hill, following Bakhtin (1981, 1984), says that insofar as discourse is replete with references to the words of others, by allusion, implication, or reported speech, it is constantly judging the words of others. The speaker's relationship to the words of a typified other is always one of taking a position, or stance. To speak dialogically is both to respond to others and to evaluate them in some way. This is why variations in speech style can reflect choices among ethical positions and moral commitments.

Don Gabriel is not in full control of the voices in his narrative. The very limit faced by his mastery registers the ethical gravity of the options he faces. The presentation of self is a kind of ethical work on the self. Don Gabriel tries to establish a coherent ethical position among conflicting ways of speaking. He cannot, for example, simply eliminate the presence of the voices of the profit seekers—his son is one of them—but he can locate them as far from the ethical center of the narrative as possible. Just as he participates in a social world that includes both agrarian collectivism and profit seeking, so too the voices that index that social world remain part of his own discursive repertoire. It appears that the struggle for dominance among the voices and the dysfluencies that result arises from a condition endemic to social existence: Don Gabriel cannot wholly identify with only a single voice. His dysfluencies may exemplify something about the ordinary ethics of everyday life.

Don Gabriel's encounter with the moral universe is neither created *ex nihilo* nor scripted in advance but works with the materials at hand. His moral intuitions are surely his own. That is, following the psychologists mentioned above, we can assume those intuitions are not merely imposed from without onto an otherwise empty space. It is those intuitions, presumably, that motivate and direct his struggles among the figures available to him. Yet those intuitions must be articulated in some manifest form, such as actions, habits, or voices. In this case, his self-knowledge depends upon those very voices. The need to choose among the options available in the public space within which the voices circulate is crucial to the production of consciousness. If we consider consciousness to be a component of a fully ethical person, then that person depends upon the existence of differing, even clashing, voices and upon the possibility of choosing among

varieties of semiotic form: without those conflicts and without the objective materials of semiotic form, perhaps there is no occasion for ethical consciousness.

### *Giving Reasons*

Don Gabriel lays out his ethical *apologia* not in the form of overt self-justification but by embodying certain moral figures. This may be one of the most common modes of ethical stance taking. But it is certainly not the only discursive option. It is not just professional moralists who talk explicitly about ethics; such talk is ubiquitous. The invocation of rules and principles that Bernard Williams identifies with the morality system is instigated by all sorts of social interactions. Let us suppose that actions are characteristically evaluated ethically by virtue of being understood “under a description.” Identifying an act as an instance of a knowable social or ethical type, a description implicitly must take into account the perspective of others, those for whom it would also be recognizable. In some cases, like excuses, the actor explicitly appeals to others to accept a certain description. In either case, there is thus an inherently dialogic feature in *any* judgment of action. The description of an action is perhaps usually only tacitly understood. But, what is tacitly understood can, under some circumstances, be put into words. Objectification can be a crucial—although not necessary—moment within the dialectic of action.

Sometimes people are called to give an account of themselves by the very nature of their activity. The giving of reasons is itself a kind of consequential action, to be understood like any other social practice. Among other things, the practice of giving reasons can enter into those of making moral claims— and of ethical self-formation. This kind of talk characteristically responds to the demands posed by social distance and moral or ideological differences. But the differences are not absolute, since they separate one from others who must be persuaded or to whom one owes self-justification. I don’t owe an accounting of myself to just anyone. And I don’t try to persuade people whom I consider utterly alien to me. As in gift exchange, explanations involve differences that constitute certain possible kinds of relationship.

In the contemporary world, one of the fields of activity in which ethical argument and moral justification are expected is religion. Indeed, in certain respects, religious institutions have come to be identified with morality. This is an aspect of the differentiation of spheres that both Durkheim

and Weber saw as characteristic of modernity. James Laidlaw (2002) has criticized the Durkheimian tradition for so wholly equating morality with society that no distinctly moral sphere can be identified. But, of course, the lack of distinctions among social spheres was part of the point of the Durkheimian concept of “total social fact.” It was meant to characterize societies before modern institutions and categories. Thus any attempt to understand “archaic” exchange by way of the modern categories—to see it as merely economic—would miss most of its significance; moreover, the same might be true of contemporary commercial activity as well. For Mauss, at least, the concept of the gift was also meant to reveal the underlying moral dimensions of social life, even in the contemporary world (Graeber 2001).

But in the contemporary world, morality *is* often treated as the special concern of religion. According to what I’ve called the “moral narrative of modernity” (Keane 2007), to treat economics, politics, or even education in moral terms too seriously exhibits a failure to be modern. By the same logic (and vastly oversimplifying), religion retains an instrumental function in otherwise secular societies because it justifies and inculcates morality. If economic rationality should prevail in the marketplace, strategic calculation in politics, and sentiment in the family, then moral reasoning is proper to religious institutions. As I have argued elsewhere (Keane 2007), the creedal and evangelistic practices of the northern Reformation contributed to the Enlightenment model, which takes the rational capacity for deliberation to be a condition for moral actions. The demand that one be responsible for one’s thoughts can translate into a demand that those thoughts be objectifiable, available for rendering in propositional form.<sup>4</sup> But the high value often placed on the propositional stance toward one’s thoughts has become a general expectation within the frame of secularism. As Michael Warner has put it, “the trend toward the personalization of belief in the long history of Christian reform is a trend toward intensification and propositionalization simultaneously, and it is the latter that liberalism stems from” (2008: 612).

As I have suggested, the need for explicit ethical justification and the giving of moral reasons characteristically arises across some social or conceptual gap. In contexts of religious difference and change, people may

4. John Calvin, for example, held that all humans know moral law but this knowledge is obscured; therefore we need the written law of scripture (see Keane 2007: 109). In this view, the need for verbal explicitness that motivates scripture, prayers, sermons, and creeds is a direct effect of a condition specific to humanity due to Adam’s fall.

draw on speech genres such as inculcation, proselytization, casuistry, and apologetics directed at others. They can also be directed at oneself, for instance, as speaking a religious creed helps discipline one's thoughts (Keane 2007: 67–72). In my closing example, I want to look at what seems to be an especially hard case, a piety movement defined in opposition to the rationalistic discourse of justifications usually identified with Enlightenment modernity (or its imagined Greek predecessors). Charles Hirschkind has analyzed men in contemporary Cairo who strenuously engage in ethical self-cultivation. They aspire to virtue in the form of embodied and affective dispositions. To this end, they regularly listen to cassette recordings of sermons. In contrast to sermons delivered in state-sponsored mosques, these sermons do not justify faith and offer up reasons. They are shaped within a tradition that is “relatively unconcerned with . . . devising techniques to ensure the persuasiveness of a preacher’s discourse” (2006: 33). In this semiotic ideology (see Keane 2007), listening is not a rational engagement with concepts but an aesthetic one with sound. The stress is on the moral receptivity of the listener, which is located above all in bodily and affective responses to the spoken word. In this tradition, “all moral action is in some sense a listening, the reverberation of the words of God within human souls and actions” (Hirschkind 2006: 37).

This twentieth-century movement responds to the challenges posed to piety by the everyday conditions of life in a secular nation state. Moreover, its adherents are characteristically people who have in some sense converted; they have chosen the disciplines to which they subject themselves. Within that context, it is no surprise to discover them to be highly articulate exponents of their practices and the justifications for them. One man tells Hirschkind that, when you listen, it “makes you want to pray, read the Quran . . . to think more about religion” (ibid. 68). For many, this listening “serves as a constant reminder to monitor their behavior for vices and virtues, . . . to maintain a level of self-scrutiny” (ibid. 71). Thus, while the sermon does not necessarily work by virtue of persuasive arguments, it does contribute to modes of heightened awareness in which the self is transformed into an object of observation. If the goal is the inculcation of habits, they are instigated by a purposeful break from the unreflecting flow of a previous way of life. And, in the end, the sermons *do* provide the language by which these men portray themselves and try to persuade one another. Moreover, in persuading others they are also speaking to themselves. Their own explicit discourse helps guide their self-transformation, helping sustain an emerging habitus.

Just as Tada, the Japanese trader, externalizes himself in an objective form in order to subject himself to an ethical discipline, so too the act of giving an account of oneself to others can be at the same moment an act of self-formation. It is an ethical act that depends on those others and on the semiotic forms demanded by their presence. These men have undergone a kind of conversion, which provides them with the social space across which reasons may be demanded. We may find such social spaces in all sorts of contexts. As Michael Warner has suggested, for example, the American practice of stating publicly who one is has its roots in the models of individual conversion that emerged in evangelical Protestantism. Speaking of American evangelical testimony, he writes, “one way that fundamentalists have contributed to the culture of minority identities is by developing the performative genres of identity-talk. Sentences like . . . ‘We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it’ take for granted a context in which people are accorded the power of declaring what they are” (1993: 75). He says this capacity is based, in part, on the conviction of one’s separateness from mainstream society. (But, I should add, it’s still a society that can be addressed and ought to listen; this is not the separatism of, say, the Amish.) The conversion experience and the sense of separateness it can induce, or to which it can respond, is one basis for a position in which the critic might stand somewhat apart from the community. It might provide a position from which the giving of reasons and the mobilization of a knowable typology of persons and practices are necessary components of any act that would be deemed ethical.

### *Ethics, Others, and Objects*

I suggested that Don Gabriel’s own ethical self-consciousness is a function of the differing voices he is trying to master. I proposed that without those differences, although there would still be basic moral intuitions, there might be no basis for a full-fledged ethical *consciousness* per se. Similarly, the purposeful self-cultivation that Hirschkind describes is also a product of divergent possibilities. And even Maussian exchange works to define an other and to specify the distance between the giver and recipient of the gift. Potential conflict and difference are ubiquitous within even fairly unremarkable social circumstances and can belie the shared and taken for granted background values, the habitual character, and the embedded lack of self-consciousness that both the communitarians and their critics sometimes imagine a cultural account of ethics must require. The ethical modalities I have sketched out here allow certain kinds of self-distancing.

They involve distinct modalities of objectification by which people and their relations to other people are mediated by semiotic forms. The futures trader's spread sheet imposes a formal rule on a willful self. The Sumbanese gift enmeshes high moral claims with the causal consequences of material transactions. The grammatical forms with which Don Gabriel cannot help but speak resist his full mastery and express the role other people play within his own ethical self-formation. The Muslim sermon cassette fuses emotion and argument; it instills passion with reasons. If ethics is a function of life with others, those others are neither wholly other to the self (Don Gabriel's others speak *within* his own words) nor do they snuggle down comfortably together with it (Marcel Mauss pointed out that gift exchange can verge on *warfare*). The moment of objectification can turn in any number of directions.

I started by suggesting that the sociological imagination would put the bare fact of life with others at the heart of ethics. If this is so, I then proposed, we should attend to the surface of things. The dialectics of objectification makes possible a wide range of stances, a host of different ways of acting morally and being ethically aware that are in continual interaction with one another. The empirical study of actually existing moral worlds will cast doubt on any effort to reduce ethics to individuals taken in isolation, whether to their self-interest, instrumental rationality, abstract principles, cognitive proclivities, or affective dispositions. The sociological imagination suggests there is no source of goods or goals wholly antecedent to the context out of which the actor's motives and options have been formed. Thus there is no Archimedean point from which either one's self-interest or means-ends calculations can be objectively perceived and evaluated. Although morality is not *reducible* to experience—this chapter is not making a case for a strict phenomenology—the first and second person character of ethical experience is not something we should or can eliminate from our analysis. This conclusion does not, however, throw us back to the seamless determinism of a tradition or the structured order of a Durkheimian social morality. Ethics are not *only* tacit competences. Moral life is lived in, and moves among, different modalities. There is a space for deliberation, practices of objectification, for critique and invention, and for socially embedded demands for the giving of reasons. Even the smallest spaces of routine face-to-face interaction can foster moments of difference and distance that may demand an articulate morality. Both the tacit intimacy of habit and the vociferous distance of estrangement, the first person stance and the possibility of departing from it, are everyday conditions of life with other people.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Versions of this chapter were presented at the conference Ordinary Ethics at the University of Toronto, at Princeton University, and as the Annette B. Weiner Memorial Lecture at New York University and the D. R. Sharpe Lecture on Social Ethics at the University of Chicago. I am grateful to my hosts for inviting me to these events, to the other participants and audiences for their comments, and to Victor Caston, Veena Das, Charles Hirschkind, Matthew Hull, Michael Lambek, Adela Pinch, Alan Rumsey, and Kathryn Tanner for their astute criticism.