

## INTRODUCTION: ETHICAL AFFORDANCES, AWARENESS, AND ACTIONS



Ethical impulses, judgments, and goals are features of everyday life in every known society, past and present. Does this mean that the propensity for taking an ethical stance arises from human nature itself? If it is innate, does it follow that we could be ethical without knowing it? There are many who would reject that idea. Some people hold that ethics is based on reason; others, that its sources are divine. If ethics is based on reason, must each individual be capable of working it out in his or her own inner thought or at least of learning from the wisdom of those who have? If ethics is divine, does this require adherence to the right laws, faith in the right gods, or consultation with one's conscience? Or is it, rather, the fact that ethics is something each society creates on its own, so that each of us is stamped with the impress of a particular tradition, borne within a specific community? And in that case, does that mean each ethical world is ultimately incomparable to any other since each is the contingent outcome of a singular historical pathway? Or does it turn out that ethics is a product of natural selection, favoring reproductive success? Does science then require us to accept that ethical concepts and values are ultimately epiphenomena, generated by mechanisms that themselves have nothing specifically ethical about them?

This book looks at several ways of answering these questions through empirical research. Broadly speaking, the approaches we will examine here fall within the traditions of either natural or social history and can lead to very different views of ethical life. Indeed, some scholars think that these two approaches are quite incompatible and insist that we must choose between them. I think that is a mistake: it is important that we are all talking about the same world. But the differences matter. Naturalistic research, in fields such as

neuroscience, cognitive science, linguistics, developmental psychology, and biological anthropology, tends to seek out human universals. These often (but not always) involve processes that work beyond the scope of anyone's awareness. The research commonly (but, again, not always) takes the individual as the primary unit of explanation. It describes changes that usually unfold on the vast timescale of evolution. What I call social history includes not just the scholarly discipline of history proper but also cultural and linguistic anthropology, historical sociology, sociolinguistics, microsociology, and conversation analysis. These approaches tend to stress the diversity of existing ethical worlds. Although they often describe economic, political, and other forces of which people are unaware, they are prone to giving a central place to the agency of people who act with self-consciousness and purpose. The focus is typically on life within communities. The time frame of social change can be as narrow as a few decades.

Natural and social histories offer more than different points of view, since they challenge not just each other but also certain dominant strains of ethical thought in philosophy and religion. If some naturalistic explanations, such as seeking causes of behavior in neurophysiological mechanisms, can undermine our confidence that ethical choices are really choices, cultural relativism can seem to undermine the sense that ethics is objectively compelling or anything more than social conformity. This book argues against both kinds of debunking. It proposes that if we look closely at the points where natural and social histories converge, we can gain new insights into ethical life, the fact that humans are inevitably evaluative creatures. We might also gain something looking the other direction as well: this book also stems from the conviction that the more familiar ways of distinguishing between natural and social realities no longer serve us well and that ethics, with sources in both biological mechanisms and social imaginaries, is a good place to start rethinking their relations. With these purposes in view, this book works with a broad definition of *ethical life* to refer to those aspects of people's actions, as well as their sense of themselves and of other people (and sometimes entities such as gods or animals), that are oriented with reference to values and ends that are not in turn defined as the means to some further ends.

Researchers in the various disciplines that focus, respectively, on natural or social histories tend to stay housed within their separate silos. With some notable exceptions, they rarely take advantage of what they could learn from one another's research. Indeed, they often have principled criticisms of other styles of research, which can reinforce the idea that their findings contradict each other. The natural scientists may object that too much emphasis on social construction overlooks the objective foundations on which moralities are built. Some even suggest that resistance to naturalistic explanations betrays a lingering taste for the "supernatural." The social historians and ethnographers, in turn, worry that naturalistic explanations don't give enough credit to people's creative agency and self-interpretation, to the first-person point of view, or to the complexities and contradictions of history. In response, this book assumes that there is a lot to be gained by persuading people to climb out of their respective silos and look around.

To that end, this book brings together key findings from psychology, the ethnography of everyday social life, and social histories of ethical reform. It does not, however, aim to revive the old dream of a unified explanation for everything. It will not leap directly from genetics to social movements, say, or from game theory to theology. Rather, these chapters scout along borderlands where certain fields converge and overlap. For example, they trace out those points where cognitive science meets child development and blurs into the microsociology of face-to-face interaction, which in turn provides materials that can inspire ethical reformers working on the vast scale of religious or political revolution. The approach developed here is based on two premises. One is that both approaches, from natural and social history, respectively, provide crucial insights into ethics—I refuse to dismiss either out of hand. The second, which follows from the first, is that neither of them can provide a satisfactory account of ethics on its own. I find unhelpful pretensions that one can be fully explained or subsumed by the other. For natural historians are right to insist that humans as animals are subject to causalities of which they are not aware. But the social historians are right to insist that self-awareness and purposes matter. To repeat, we cannot step directly from the one to the other. This book follows them into the middle

ground of social interaction, where people are provoked to cooperate or dispute, to explain themselves to one another, and above all, to see themselves through one another's eyes—or refuse to do so. If we are to grasp ethical life as something both natural and social in character, both innate and historical in its origins, we might start by examining some of the points of articulation where natural and social history approach, as well as push back against, one another. That examination is what this book aims to accomplish.

### SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT ETHICAL LIFE

What are the stakes in raising such questions at all? Before I proceed, let me be clear that saying ethics is a ubiquitous feature of human life does not mean that all people are inclined to the good, an assertion so obviously absurd that it's hardly worth denying. Perhaps less obvious is this: I do not mean that even good people are likely to come to a consensus about what ethics entails. This claim requires more demonstration, on which more below. For now, it is enough to observe that the ubiquity of ethics offers no guarantees: people can assert diametrically opposed positions or values, such as hierarchy and equality, loyalty and justice, or fairness and discrimination, with equal ethical conviction. Rather, this book starts with the proposition that, with some borderline exceptions such as psychopathology, humans are the kind of creatures that are prone to evaluate themselves, others, and their circumstances. They may act in defiance of those evaluations but are rarely just indifferent to them. Consider the following stories, each of which exemplifies some of the problems with which research in ethics is grappling. The first and third are famous thought experiments; the rest are actual events.

The first story, known as the “trolley problem,” has given rise to an enormous amount of discussion among philosophers and psychologists (for the original versions, see Foot 1967 and Thomson 1976; a recent popularizing summary is Edmonds 2013). Its basic form presents you with two imaginary scenarios. A runaway trolley is hurtling down the tracks at a group of five people, who will be killed if you don't intervene. In one scenario, you can pull a switch

that diverts the trolley onto another track, where it will hit only one person. Utilitarian reason says that the death of one person is better than that of five. Most people who are presented with this situation in experimental settings agree and say they would pull the switch. The interesting complication arises in the second scenario. The five people are at risk as before. Now there is a man standing on a bridge over the tracks. He is so fat that were you to push him off the bridge, his body would stop the trolley. The utilitarian calculation remains the same: save five lives at the cost of one. But it turns out that most people balk at the idea of pushing the man to his death.

I will not reproduce the various attempts to explain the differences between the two responses and the endless variations they have given rise to. We will return to some of these topics in the next chapter. Here I want to make just a few observations to clarify the approach to ethics taken in this book. Obviously the trolley scenario is highly artificial, although analogous problems do arise, for example, in warfare and medical triage. Moreover, as historians and anthropologists will quickly note, the results are assumed to apply to all humans, yet the subjects of such experiments are usually drawn from a much narrower range, typically educated members of present-day urbanized, industrialized societies—serious problems arise when you try to set up the problem in other cultural contexts (Bloch 2012: 65–66). Still, the findings are provocative. What is more relevant for the purposes of this chapter, however, is the way in which the trolley problem depicts “ethics.” The ethical problem is presented as a discrete event that requires a single decision and transpires within a brief time frame. That decision is taken by a lone individual who contemplates a limited set of clear options, which have immediate and unambiguous results. Those results can be measured on a single scale of value, numbers of lives saved. The experiment takes its interest from the contrast between ideal and actual responses to the emergency. The ideal is based on the assumption that there is a rational solution revealed in the consequences of each choice; the discussion is provoked by the ways people’s actual gut feelings deviate from that solution. In short, the time frame is narrow, the social focus is on the individual actor, and the basic contrast is between rational and irrational decisions. Some aspects of ethical life are like this, but much is not.

Here is another story about a momentary decision, which opens up the range of questions we might need to take into account. It concerns a friend of mine, whom I will call Sally. Sally is a social worker in her fifties, married to a physical therapist. They have one grown child and another who still lives at home. They get by, but their financial situation is neither easy nor secure. Sally is the main breadwinner in the family, since her husband has been unable to find full-time employment in recent years, due to government budget cuts. For the last decade or so, Sally worked for an adoption agency run by a religious organization. This organization has never accepted unions between homosexuals and has a clear policy of refusing to help gay couples adopt children. One day Sally decided that in good conscience, she could no longer work for an agency that held such a policy and abruptly, and without consulting her husband or children, quit her job. She felt that she simply couldn't live with herself otherwise. She had nothing else lined up and in the year or so since has been semiemployed like her husband. Needless to say, this has rendered the family finances even more uncertain.

Now here are some ways we could tell this story. It shows that people are not driven only by egocentric calculations of gain. Ethics, in this perspective, stands in opposition to the values of economic rationality and to the idea that people's motives are always selfish. (But then the same can be said of the religious morality that leads the agency to reject gay applicants.) It also stands for the role that abstract, general ideas, such as justice or equality, might play in specific, concrete actions, such as quitting a job, and in more general dispositions, such as one's politics. At the same time, the thought that she could not live with herself otherwise reflects Sally's stance toward her own life, not just toward gay couples. And it shows someone who was willing to put her immediate family at risk (something that could be construed as unethical) for the sake of people known to her only as members of a general social category (gay couples)—that is, someone whose moral circle has expanded from the narrow confines of those closest to her. The story could also be represented as a narrative of ethical progress. We might imagine Sally acting quite differently a generation ago. Even ten years ago she worked for this agency with few qualms. The rise of gay marriage as a civil rights cause,

along with its extraordinarily rapid acceptance in the United States, has been a remarkable social transformation. So if ethics is supposed to be solid bedrock, how could that happen? Yet another thing: Sally put her own family at risk. What ethical calculus allows her to treat their interests as less important than those of unknown strangers? A utilitarian might say that she was right to sacrifice a few individuals for a greater good; a certain kind of traditionalist might say that the obligation to kin is primary; and a virtue ethicist might go either way, depending on what Sally's actions say about her character.

Both Sally's choice and the trolley problem bear echoes of the conundrum posed by the English thinker William Godwin in the eighteenth century: If a house is burning, and I can save either Bishop Fenelon (an important social reformer and defender of human rights) or his chambermaid, but not both, which should I save? Godwin gives an early version of what would become a utilitarian answer. The rational choice is that which results in the greater good overall:

Supposing the chambermaid had been my wife, my mother or my benefactor. This would not alter the truth of the proposition. The life of Fenelon would still be more valuable than that of the chambermaid; and justice, pure, unadulterated justice, would still have preferred that which was most valuable. (Godwin 1793: 83)

Accordingly, the bishop should be saved because his life has greater social value than the chambermaid's. But what if the maid is also my mother? Should calculations of utility trump the ethics of kinship? Godwin thinks so. But if they do, what kind of person would that show you to be? As the philosopher Bernard Williams remarks, if you hesitate in order to work out the justification for saving your mother, rather than instinctively pulling her from the flames, that is "one thought too many" (1981: 18). Considerations like these ask us to shift our attention from decisions to personal character and from the individual at one moment to his or her social ties to others over the long run.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>It matters where utilitarian calculation starts. In *The Theory of Good and Evil*, a sober Oxford don writes, "The lower Well-being . . . of countless Chinamen or negroes must be sacrificed that a higher life may be possible for a much smaller number of white men" (Rashdall



These are normative questions, concerning what one *ought* to do. But as an empirical problem, how do we understand what Sally *actually* did? To understand her decision, do we look to psychology? Politics? Religion? And must we seek ethical heroes for counterarguments to self-interest? Heroes are few and far between: How will they help us understand the ethics that runs quietly through ordinary everyday activities, what I am calling “ethical life”?

One way to respond to such questions is to ask how local cultures shape the ethical choices and values of ordinary people. Here’s a story from my own fieldwork in the 1980s and 1990s, on the island of Sumba, a rural Indonesian backwater (Keane 1997). Unlike most Indonesians, Sumbanese never converted to Islam, and until fairly recently they had limited contact with the dominant ethnic groups in the archipelago, their Dutch colonizers, and the nation-state that succeeded them. Much of Sumbanese life at this time was oriented around a relatively self-contained set of local values (but see Keane 2007). These values played into one of the key structural features of Sumbanese society, something anthropologists call asymmetrical marriage alliance. Sumbanese are born into their father’s clan. Each clan is allied with certain other clans through marriages. In each generation, new marriages should renew those alliances. The way this works in practice is that a man is supposed to marry a woman from the same clan that his mother came from. The ideal marriage, because it is the closest way to reproduce his father’s marriage, is for a man to marry his mother’s brother’s daughter (thus a woman should marry her father’s sister’s son). These alliances are asymmetrical: the worst thing a man could do is reverse the directions and marry a woman from the clan into which his sister should marry. Although clans are large enough, and the ways one defines kin are flexible enough, that there is some room for individual choice, alliances are a matter of collective interest and are negotiated by teams of elders from the clans involved. Marriage is far too important to be left to the personal preferences of the future husband and wife. It is

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1907: 238–39; I thank Elizabeth Anderson for the reference). The point is not that utilitarianism is conducive to racism—historically the contrary was the case—but, rather, that the logic of the calculus does not guarantee the rationality of its premises.



also too expensive for any individual to sponsor, since the alliance is established through the elaborate negotiation and exchange of valuables such as pigs, horses, gold, and ivory, which reinforce ongoing relations of reciprocity and debt between affines. These negotiations and exchanges provide a public stage on which clans display their status; elders, their political clout; negotiators, their command of poetic speech; and individuals, their wealth.

Many Americans to whom I have described the Sumbanese marriage system react strongly. It runs against some of their core ethical values, such as individual autonomy, the free choice of a spouse, the idea of a love match and companionate union, and the elevation of sentiment over material goods in family life. It is against this background that I had a conversation with the elderly mother in the family with whom I lived during my fieldwork. Having talked endlessly about their own marriage system, she asked me whom my people are supposed to wed and what goods we use to accomplish it. When I told her that it is up to the individuals themselves, that there are no rules except for the prohibition on incest, and that we do not give goods in order to do it, she was visibly appalled. Thinking about my reply for a moment, she finally exclaimed, with shock, "So Americans just mate like animals!"

A conventional way to tell this story is as an illustration of cultural relativism: they have their values, and we have ours, and neither should be judged in light of the other. The clash between the two value systems has the salutary effect of denaturalizing what had seemed natural and fundamental to the naive person on either side. From this denaturalizing effect, one might then draw the conclusion that values are social constructions, each system wholly distinct from, or even incommensurate with, the other (Povinelli 2001). But the idea of cultural relativism has not always fared well, even among anthropologists. For one thing, the idea that cultures are more or less bounded entities, self-contained and internally consistent, has been hard to sustain in a world of constant migration, state penetration, mass media, global religions, and so forth (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). A veiled Muslim woman who is the paragon of virtue in Algeria might find herself the object of moral indignation in France; so too the scantily clad German tourist in Java. Nor are

cultural complexity and permeability necessarily just modern phenomena: some would argue that cultural worlds have always been exposed both to “external” influence and to “internal” contradictions by their very nature (Appadurai 1996; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Rosaldo 1989).

Here is another angle: the ethics underlying my Sumbanese friend’s reaction is not entirely unrecognizable even to a freedom-loving American. Although the values in each marriage system seem directly opposed to one another, this woman appeals to some other principles that look familiar. She recognizes that different communities have different marriage systems. After all, that is why she asked me the question. What makes the Sumbanese version distinctly ethical is, in part, the way in which it imposes external obligations and constraints on individual actors, in the name of some larger social good. Sumbanese are well aware that one might yearn to marry someone against the rules—and sometimes people do, although at considerable social cost. Moreover, they tell myths about ancestors whose supernatural powers included the ability to marry without marriage payments, stories whose appeal to listeners hints of wish fulfillment. So the sense of constraint is real and is linked to the sense of being ethical. It limits one’s own willfulness. Those limits take concrete form not just in rules but in social interactions with other persons, who matter to one’s own self-esteem. That very sense of limitations suggests yet another facet, that to be ethical is to be invested in a way of life and to live up to some vision of what a good person ought to be. Finally, an American might also recognize this aspect of my friend’s remark: being ethical makes you human. To act without restraint is to be an animal.

Cultural accounts have their limits. People contradict one another, and individuals themselves are inconsistent, to say nothing of self-deceiving, so whom do we believe? And some ethical insights are innovative or idiosyncratic by local standards. Here’s one example. During World War II a Polish peasant woman happened to overhear a group of her fellow villagers propose throwing a little Jewish girl into a well. The woman said, “She’s not a dog after all,” and the girl’s life was saved (Gilbert 2003: xvi–xvii). To a philosopher, what might be striking here is the absence of principled justification or indeed

any serious moral argument at all (Appiah 2008: 160). We may wonder how much conscious ethical reflection this woman's quip required on her part or on that of the people she addressed. It seems that she merely invoked, in a rather off-the-cuff way, a commonsense category, which reframed the situation so that the others could see what they had proposed in a new light. To some philosophers, this apparent lack of reflexivity may cast doubt on exactly how we should count this as a full-fledged ethical act.

An alternative approach would place the act in its cultural context. Although we may conclude that the Polish woman drew on a local category, clearly it was not until that moment salient to those who had, perhaps, taken the girl to be some kind of vermin. There is no reason to think that this woman did not share all the usual background beliefs and values with her fellow villagers: in this case, the explanatory power of "culture" alone doesn't seem to get us very far. But neither does innate human psychology, for the same reason, since it should apply equally to that woman and to the other villagers. Moreover, against the cheerful claim that this woman's instincts reveal a bedrock humane intuition, perhaps offering a clue to some universal basis for virtue, we would need to recall that a similar sort of gut reaction can find differences of skin color, sexual orientation, religion, dress, or eating habits immoral, fundamentally repugnant, and even inhuman (Haidt 2001; Rozin and Nemeroff 1990; Rozin and Royzman 2001).

The Polish villager's intervention points to some key questions for any empirical research into ethics: What are the relations between her gut-level response, on the one hand, and explicit modes of argument and reasoning, on the other? How does either of those articulate with taken-for-granted community norms and habits and their histories? Does a naturalistic explanation of that gut-level response—perhaps in affective, cognitive, or neurological terms—have any bearing on what happens when people appeal to norms, reason with one another, fault others, or justify themselves? Or vice versa? What made this Polish villager's intervention work? What gave her a voice in this situation, when we might imagine that some other person would have gone unheeded? How do we evaluate its success within the larger context of ethical failure surrounding it?

The Polish woman wins the day by invoking the ethical implications of an ontological category, with an implicit syllogism: because the girl is not a dog but a human, therefore she is owed what we owe to a human. But once we bring in ontology—those background assumptions about reality that are implicit in a certain way of life—we find ourselves back at the problem of relativism again.<sup>2</sup> For not everyone agrees on all the same ontological premises. Communities that agree on most aspects of reality (fires need dry kindling, crops need water) may differ vastly in how they answer the question “What can count as an ethical actor?” In the contemporary West the ethically responsible self is usually—but not always—considered to be bounded by birth (or maturity) at one end and death at the other. Not so in the various South Asian theories of karma, based as they are on the doctrine of endless cycles of rebirth; they teach that individuals suffer the consequences in this life for misdeeds they performed in previous lives that they cannot recall but for which they remain, in some sense, responsible (Babb 1983; Doniger 1980; Fuller 2004). Nor does responsibility necessarily stop with humans. Herodotus (1997: 525) reports that Xerxes had the Hellespont whipped and verbally chastised for destroying a bridge; medieval European courts punished animals for crimes (Evans 1906). One need not venture so far: present-day middle-class Americans differ among themselves over such basic questions as the existence of angels, the reality of the immortal soul, the personhood of the fetus, the intervention of God in one’s personal life, the responsibilities of corporations, and the rights of animals.

Listen to ethnographer Paul Nadasdy recount his experience of learning to hunt with Kluane people in the Yukon:

The first time I found a live rabbit in a snare was something of a crisis. I was alone, and I knew I had to break its neck. Never having killed anything with my bare hands before, I was not really sure what I was

<sup>2</sup>I use *ontology* in the anthropological, rather than philosophical, sense (see Descola 2013; Povinelli 2001; Sahlins 1985; Vivieros de Castro 1998; as well as discussion in Keane 2013). It does not refer to ultimate constituents of reality but, rather, to assumptions that guide people’s observable actions. Some of these are presumably universal. Others are more local: if the lightning that struck my house is just meteorological bad luck, it makes no sense to ask who is at fault; on the other hand, if it was due to spirits, I had better find out what angered them.

doing. The animal suffered as a result, and I felt terrible. . . . The next day, . . . I told Joe Johnson [a Kluane elder] . . . how badly I felt about the rabbit's suffering. He told me that I must never think that way. The proper reaction, he said, is simply to say a prayer of thanks to the animal; it is disrespectful to think about an animal's suffering when you kill it. I did not understand that at first. A couple of months later, however, Agnes Johnson . . . told me that it was "like at a potlatch." If someone gives you a gift at a potlatch, it is disrespectful to say or even think anything bad about the gift or to imply that there is some reason why they should not have given it to you. . . . It is the same with animals, she said. If they give themselves to you, you say a prayer of thanks and accept the gift of meat you have been given. To think about the animals' suffering, she said, is to find fault with the gift, to cast doubt on whether the animal should have given itself to you in the first place. To do this is to run the risk of giving offense and never receiving such a gift again. (2007: 27)

Kluane hunters, in other words, take their prey to be persons with whom they enter into social relationships guided by the ethics of reciprocity. That basic ethics of reciprocity in itself might not look so unfamiliar to, say, urban Euro-Americans. The difference, of course, lies in the scope of appropriate ethical concern.

Similar statements about the personhood of animals and other nonhumans abound in the ethnographic record. When people talk like this, however, they are usually not just engaging in dispassionate metaphysical speculation (Keane 2013). Often enough, what is at issue is how one should properly interact with other beings. Anthropologist Irving Hallowell (1960) observed that the Canadian Ojibwa in the mid-twentieth century did not normally see important events as resulting from neutral causes. Rather, they were the result of acts carried out by some kind of person, which might be an animal or a human spirit. The ethical implications of this kind of ontology were spelled out by Knud Rasmussen, the explorer-ethnographer, who wrote of Arctic hunters such as the Inuit that "the greatest peril of life lies in the fact that human food consists entirely of souls" (1929: 56). When ontological assumptions differ, they may shape what kinds of entities should be objects of ethical concern and what kinds of beings can be held morally responsible for events.

Let me quickly point out two things about these statements. First, Kluane, Ojibwa, and Inuit are skillful hunters and observant naturalists who certainly do not rely just on prayers, magic, or gifts to obtain meat. Second, they are hardly unaware that humans and animals are different: as Nadasdy points out, no one sets snares to trap people and eat them. So what are we to make of such statements? This is hardly a settled matter among the ethnographers. But even a reader who finds it hard to imagine that a rabbit can really be an exchange partner who willingly gives itself up to the hunter might yet recognize the ethical obligations that Nadasdy's friend Agnes Johnson was talking about. Gift, reciprocity, and words of thanks might be applied to surprising social partners, but the ethical nature of the relationship that these acts invoke should not seem utterly unfamiliar. In the midst of alien ontologies, do we see the dim outlines of recognizable ethical intuitions? Is ethical concern something we can recognize even when applied to entities we might consider out of bounds? This book makes an argument that in many respects the answer will be a cautious yes and that to make sense of why that is so, we cannot rely on either psychological or cultural explanations alone.

These six stories point to some of the key themes this book will address. Some of these themes—such as desire, emotions, and beliefs—are often treated as matters of individual psychology. Others, such as altruism, utility, reason, freedom, and the ethical distinction between human and nonhuman, seem to fall in the domain of philosophical or other normative enterprises. Still others, such as politics, values, and cultures, are usually viewed in terms of social institutions. And some, such as voice, can be hard to pigeonhole. One of the tasks this book undertakes is to tease out the interconnections within this sprawling and apparently heterogeneous list. To start, let us consider some key terms: *ethics*, *morality*, *reflexive awareness*, and *affordance*.

## DEFINING ETHICS AND MORALITY

I first began thinking about the sciences of ethics and morality while trying to understand the conversion of Sumbanese ancestral ritualists to the Protestant Christianity brought to their Indonesian island by

twentieth-century Dutch colonial missionaries (Keane 2007). One of the central challenges this situation presented was making sense of how Sumbanese were able to rethink and change ethical values that, on the face of it, should have been part of those background cultural and ontological assumptions that are so deep and so world-defining that they can be almost impossible to question. But in this context “ethics” and “morality” seemed to be relatively straightforward concepts. They were defined in terms of an institutionalized religion with an explicit moral code. Matters became more complicated, however, when I ventured into the less self-conscious domains of habitual activities and everyday social relations that some ethnographers have called the “ordinary” (Das 2007; Lambek 2010). As I use it, “ethical life” starts from that sheer everydayness, that mere fact, as anthropologist James Laidlaw puts it, that people “are evaluative” (2014: 3). But as I began to explore other work by social scientists, I discovered that there is no consistency in how they use the words *morality* and *ethics*, which are often treated as requiring no definition at all.

A glance over some of the major writings in the anthropology of ethics and morality illustrates the point. In his 1925 essay *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss (1990) never defines *morality*, but it is apparent that he has in mind those obligations between persons that constrain their self-interest. Within the different African contexts they study, T. O. Beidelman (1980) uses *morality* to refer to character traits, and Wendy James (1988), to that which maintains a person’s health and balance in the face of evil forces. For K. E. Read (1955), *morality* refers to specific rules and judgments, while *ethics* consists of the underlying ideas about humans and their relationships on which those rules are based. Arthur Kleinman (1998) seems to reverse this distinction, using *morality* to refer to ultimate values and *ethics* to speak of the explicit principles propagated by elites. Finally, *ethics* often refers to the regulation of a profession, as in “scientific ethics” or “business ethics” (Meskell and Pels 2005).

In response to this inconsistency, I have found it useful to keep in mind a distinction articulated by the philosopher Bernard Williams (1985). Williams is critical of a dominant view in modern Western philosophy that emphasizes obligations and blame and assumes they must be based on a wholly consistent system of highly



general principles that should apply to all people regardless of their identities or circumstances. This emphasis, which he calls “the morality system,” obscures other crucial aspects of what he calls “ethics.” Whereas morality deals with such questions as what one should do next, ethics concerns a manner of life—not momentary events but something that unfolds over the long term and is likely to vary according to one’s circumstances. Viewed from this perspective, the trolley problem addresses an issue of morality, and the Kluane rabbit hunters, the nature of ethics. Ethics is thus less about decisions and the rules that should govern them than about virtues, which “involve characteristic patterns of desire and motivation” (Williams 1985: 9). (Some psychological research has been taken to challenge the realism of this view of the virtues, but that discussion must wait until the next chapter.) Although both ethics and morality say something about what one owes to other people and how one should treat them, they differ in how they portray social relations. Many of the most powerful rules and obligations of the morality system are meant to be universal in application, drawing on principles that transcend any particular context or person, like Kant’s Categorical Imperative. Moral obligations are the sort of things you might contemplate on your own. By contrast, ethics captures the way in which

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. (Williams 1985: 191)<sup>3</sup>

This emphasis on the social nature of ethics is one reason why Williams’s distinction between the two terms has been especially congenial to researchers working in historically and sociologically complex

<sup>3</sup>A parallel contrast exists in research in psychology. According to Lawrence Kohlberg (1981), child development should result in the acquisition of a mature sense of justice as something that is context-free and universal. Opposing this, Carol Gilligan (1982) argues that since people first are children of specific mothers, raised within networks of care, one cannot know what is good for someone in the abstract but, rather, only in particular social contexts. The philosopher Seyla Benhabib (1992) has made a cogent argument for reconciling the two into a more comprehensive perspective.

situations. It attends less to how ethics constrains people than to the ways it facilitates their ability to act and provides them with goals (Faubion 2011; Humphrey 1997; Laidlaw 2014).

We should not draw the distinction between ethics and morality so sharply that we are forced to exclude some of the phenomena we want to understand. As I read Williams, ethics does include the morality system—morality is just a special *kind* of ethics. It conceals but does not eliminate the ways ethics is socially embedded. And the ethnographic and historical records are indeed full of rules and obligations, put in very general terms, which are meant to be internally consistent, like the morality system Williams criticizes. Since these extend far beyond the tradition in Western philosophy that Williams had in mind, I will use the expression in the plural and propose that there are *many* morality systems, of which the tradition Williams attacks is only one example. In certain communities, following rules *is* what the virtuous life consists in. Here we might include my Sumbanese mother's view of the morality of kinship and marriage, which includes adherence to explicit sets of obligations and prohibitions, or the Hopi, who by one account treat ethical questions as concerning duties based on moral facts that one should know (Brandt 1954: 82). Other examples include imperial China and premodern Europe, where morality was often treated as something people could not be expected to grasp unless they had been instructed by authorities (Brokaw 1991; Schneewind 1998).

What often links rules and the virtuous life is reference to a deity. Sumbanese marriage rules, for example, are enforced not only by social means but also by the threat of sanctions from the spirits, which might take form as infertility, lightning strikes, or drought. More generally, the coherence and explicitness of religious morality systems are accounted for by their divine origins—their authority by the existence of a transcendental judge. For many secular philosophers, this disqualifies such systems from serious consideration.<sup>4</sup> Not so for the historian or anthropologist, since most of the people they

<sup>4</sup>Williams claims that the legalistic nature of the morality system is “modelled on the prerogatives of a Pelagian God” (1985: 38), echoing the position of Elizabeth Anscombe, that reducing ethics to obligation is incoherent “unless you believe in God as a law-giver” (1958: 6).

study have precisely such a view of the world. As we will see in chapter 6, some of the most historically influential morality systems are organized around the cultivation of piety. If Williams is right to insist we not reduce ethics to a morality system, we should still recognize that the production and inculcation of morality systems are among the looming historical realities we need to understand. Putting morality systems in the context of ethics encourages us not to take their existence for granted. Instead, we can ask what circumstances tend to foster or induce the development of morality systems: more or less context-free, more or less explicit, systems of obligations. This is the problem that this book takes on in part 3.

“Morality” can thus be treated as a special case within ethics. Studies that focus on virtues, values, and ways of life (like the values embodied in Sumbanese marriages) tend to fall under the rubric of ethics. Those that focus on obligations, prohibitions, general principles, systematicity, and momentary decisions (like the trolley problem) are treated as morality. But there is a great deal of overlap and interaction between these. Sumbanese social values and Kluane relations to animals do make reference to rules and obligations. Your resistance to pushing the fat man in front of the trolley may be due to what kind of person you want to be. I have found that in many actual instances, it is an artificial matter to try to keep the two distinct, and I have varied my usage accordingly.<sup>5</sup>

In this book, I will treat “ethics” as the more encompassing category of the two. The meaning of the word *ethics* as I use it here is very broad. It is tempting to follow U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stewart’s famous definition of pornography, “I know it when I see it,” or the words of the philosopher David Velleman, who says that since moralities are variations on themes that bear a family resemblance, “I do not offer a definition of what I mean by ‘morality’ or ‘moralities.’ I mean *that* family (you know which one it is)” (2013: 3). But this is unlikely to satisfy most readers. As a rough heuristic, I take ethics to center on the question of how one should live and what kind of person one should be. This encompasses both one’s relations

<sup>5</sup>I thank Ian Hacking for permission to relax this verbal distinction. Commenting on an earlier essay (Keane 2010), he noticed that efforts to keep the terms separate could lead to contortions of prose that suggested they were squeezing the usage into artificial straitjackets.

to others and decisions about right and wrong acts. The sense of “should” directs attention to values, meaning things that are taken by the actor to be good in their own right rather than as means to some other ends. This refers to the point where the justifications for actions or ways of living stop, having run up against what seems self-evident—or just an inexplicable gut feeling. As such, values can also motivate the sense that the rules and obligations of a morality system are binding on one’s specific actions. For even the taboo whose justification is simply that it was dictated by the ancestors can be understood this way, since as those who observe the taboo see things, it is not necessarily a means to some further end (Valeri 2000).

One way to grasp the link between values and how one should live has been summarized by the philosopher Elizabeth Anderson this way: “Value judgments commit one to certain forms of self-assessment” (1993: 3). That is, there is a crucial link between one’s sense of self-worth and what one values beyond the self. Anderson goes on to say that because the meaning that values hold is public, one’s sense of self-worth is something that others can grasp as well. Indeed, much of the empirical evidence that we will examine in the following chapters concerns how people evaluate one another and how that mutual evaluation in turn reflects back on each one’s self-understanding. To invoke Velleman again, a core element of ethics (or what, reflecting the unruly application of these terms, he calls morality) is “valuing the personhood of people” (2013: 72). One of the challenges this book takes up is to justify this claim on empirical grounds and give it some psychological, ethnographic, and historical specificity. It aims to do so not just in the traditional anthropological manner, by demonstrating that cultural worlds vary, but also by exploring different scales of inquiry, including the budding abilities of young infants, the routines of conversational interaction among adults, and purposeful large-scale social movements that take generations to unfold.

## AWARENESS AND REFLEXIVITY

Cutting across the distinction between ethics and morality is another one, that between the tacit and the explicit, those background assumptions, values, and motives that go without saying or are difficult

to put into words, on the one hand, and those that easily lend themselves to conscious reflection, on the other. This distinction does not map directly onto that between ethics and morality. Ethical life often involves psychological phenomena that work beneath the level of awareness, like one's emotionally powerful repugnance at pushing the fat man in front of the trolley (Greene et al. 2001). As we will see in the next chapter, people's gut-level responses to situations like that might, if they were asked to reflect on it, just induce what the psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2001) calls "moral dumbfounding," a puzzled inability to give good reasons in support of a strong ethical intuition. Ethical life also draws on social and cultural background assumptions, like Kluane ideas about the personhood of rabbits or Sumbanese assumptions about marriage. Although these assumptions can be made explicit, most of the time they are likely to remain unspoken—until someone like a moral reformer or an anthropologist asks questions about them. When either background assumptions or gut-level responses are put into words, they undergo changes in both their cognitive and their sociological character. As a result, verbal report is at best a poor guide to the sources of people's feelings and decisions or even to what they know or believe (see Bloch 2012 for an overview). But ideas and values that are subject to conscious apprehension can have important social and historical roles. For one thing, they are more easily transmitted to distant times and places, for instance, as doctrinal teachings and codes of conduct (Silverstein and Urban 1996). This is one reason why morality systems tend to favor explicit formulations. By the same token, they are also rendered easier to scrutinize from the outside, as it were, and so more subject to post hoc justifications, to criticism, and to instrumental manipulation. Indeed, several ethical traditions worry that self-consciousness will disrupt the spontaneity or disinterestedness that should mark virtue. According to Edward Slingerland (2007), a scholar of Chinese religion, early Confucian and Daoist philosophers grappled with the paradox that results from holding both that one should actively strive to be virtuous and that the purposeful effort contaminates the result. We will examine all these issues in more detail in the chapters that follow.

If we accept that morality systems and ethics can be treated within a single field of inquiry, then what should we make of the distinction

between explicit and tacit, what is put into words and what remains taken for granted or beneath awareness altogether? We might divide the question into two parts: First, what conditions induce explicitness, and second, what are the practical or conceptual consequences of explicitness? To see what is at stake here, let's turn to another contrast. Many definitions of ethics in the Western philosophical tradition turn on a distinction between the causes of an action and the reasons for it (Darwall 1998). In these traditions, for an action to count as ethical it must be directed or justified in the light of some values recognized as ethical by the actor (Parfit 2011). This requires both some degree of autonomy from natural causality or social pressure (one could have done otherwise) and some quality of self-awareness (one must know what one is doing). Something like this distinction apparently holds even in traditions as far from Western philosophy as South Asian karma. At first glance it may seem mere fatalism to attribute my misfortunes to actions carried out in a previous life that I cannot remember. But in some common views of karma those actions are *ethical* misdeeds because they were carried out by those who were responsible precisely because, at the time of the misdeeds, they had volition and knew their moral obligations (Babb 1983).

Even the social theorist Michel Foucault (1985, 1997), an heir to Nietzsche's skeptical quarrel with much of the Western philosophical tradition, holds that ethics depends on reflexivity. In Foucault's view, this reflexivity turns on a capacity for self-distancing, since "thought . . . is what allows one to step back . . . to present [one's conduct] to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals" (1997: 117). This takes the relative freedom or autonomy that defines an action or stance as being ethical to be inseparable from heightened self-consciousness (Schneewind 1998). Foucault, in this respect at least, seems to be working within the broad parameters of that tradition that places ethical life in the domain of reasons and justifications.

Challenging this tradition are the apparently corrosive effects of both the natural and the social sciences on Euro-American ethical thought. Since the era of Darwin, Marx, Comte, Quetelet, and Freud, both naturalistic and sociological explanations have challenged the human self-mastery and self-awareness implicit in the morality

system. By pointing to forces and causes beyond ordinary awareness, these explanations can seem to debunk the feeling that your actions are guided by your own conscious purposes. The neurologist and “new atheist” Sam Harris (2012) gives one example. In 2007, two men in Connecticut committed a completely unmotivated rape, murder, and arson. It turned out that they suffered from brain malformations that deprived them of any capacity for empathy. Harris 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” (2012). In his view, the third-person perspective that reveals mechanical causality simply trumps the first-person point of view, the actor’s own grasp of what he or she is doing. Harris asserts that such findings eliminate any role for the concepts of morality or justice. Coming from a very different intellectual tradition, heading toward different conclusions, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1988) notes a parallel implication. To see human activity as the product of ideological state apparatuses or neoliberal economics is a “science of unfreedom” (see Laidlaw 2014). As with neuroscience, so too sociology: causal explanations that cast doubt on freedom likewise seem to eliminate responsibility. This is exactly what the hoods in the musical *West Side Story* try to take advantage of when they address a policeman: “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). These approaches exemplify the problem faced by any concept of ethics that relies on notions of self-awareness, self-mastery, or freedom.

But if people are largely unaware of who they are and why they do what they do, we may ask with Harris or Bauman whether their characters or their actions can really count as ethical at all. What would distinguish ethics from matters of taste, operant conditioning, or obedience to authority? What would make an instinctive revulsion against pushing a fat man in front of a trolley part of the same family of considerations that includes support for gay marriage, respect for rabbits, rejection of ethnic cleansing, and obedience to ancestral marriage rules? The approach I take in this book is two-fold. First, I argue that reflexivity is not a necessary precondition for



ethics as such. But it can play a catalyzing role in producing that public knowledge that feeds back into people's unself-conscious responses to other people and their actions. For people's ethical intuitions may not always be subject to reflection—hence the common gut reaction against pushing the fat man in front of the trolley and perhaps the Polish woman's comment that saved the Jewish girl. However, in order to identify certain situations as posing a distinctively ethical question or an individual as having a character of a certain ethical kind, people can draw on those descriptions that are available to them. Those descriptions—some might be summed up in simple words such as *lie* or *loyalty*, others require more elaborate discussion—are public knowledge: you can expect other individuals to recognize them much as you do. In its fullest form, this public knowledge plays a crucial role in defining for people whether a given act or way of life *is or is not an ethical matter at all*. Second, I pay attention to the social circumstances that induce reflexivity. They are crucial to understanding ethics, because they also enter into the dynamics of recognition and self-recognition that underlie the sense of self-affirmation Anderson refers to and the valuing of personhood of which Velleman speaks.

In short, taken as an object of empirical research, ethics is defined neither by rationality nor by special kinds of self-consciousness. Nor should we decide in advance what, in any given empirical case, will turn out to count as ethical. Sally's stand in defense of gay adoption confronts opponents who may take their position to be just as firmly ethical in character. Yukon rabbits may seem off the radar altogether. But because, as I will argue, ethics draws on a *heterogeneous* set of psychological and sociological resources, some account is needed for what *groups them together* as ethical. As Velleman's invocation of the idea of family resemblance suggests, this grouping might not be due to any single essence that they all have in common. Certainly it does not depend on specific content. The ethnographic evidence makes clear that what counts as ethical in one social context—what one eats or how one dresses, for example—or who is the proper object of ethical concern—say, rabbits or ecosystems—lies altogether outside the domain of ethics in another (Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller 1990). Given the heterogeneity of all the things that might fall under the

rubric of “ethics,” it is the existence of publicly known descriptions and categories and their role in people’s own ability to reflect on themselves and their situations that help define the common threads of value running through them.

Any investigation of how the domain of the ethical comes to be defined needs to include—but not simply rest with—the dynamics of reflexivity. The evidence in the chapters that follow suggests that we should not put individual psychology, private contemplation, or cultural and religious systems at the center of that dynamic. Rather, in order to understand what produces ethical reflexivity, we must look at what happens when all of these are put into play in social interactions. For social interactions are the natural home of justifications, excuses, accusations, reasons, praise, blame, and all the other ways in which ethics comes to be made explicit. Put crudely, they always require a self and an other to whom that self owes an accounting. In part 2, we examine patterns of social interaction as critical components of ethical life. What’s crucial here is not to take the domains of reflection and talk in isolation or to treat them as simply expressing preexisting cognitive or emotional dispositions, moral codes, ethical precepts, cultural values, or social categories. To understand how ethical reflections emerge, they must be situated in relation to other dimensions of ethical life. These include both those psychological processes that work beneath people’s normal awareness and the historical ones that may range beyond it.

To summarize thus far: many traditions of moral thought propose that ethics must have a universal and comprehensible basis if it is to make serious claims on people. Empirical research has long posed two kinds of challenge to these assumptions. One is relativist: the historical sciences often stress the existence of dramatic cultural differences against claims about the universality of ethical intuitions. By contrast, naturalistic explanations in psychology or neuroscience often suggest that apparent diversity masks shared human traits. But such accounts pose another challenge, seeming to replace judgment with causality. As I have noted, this runs counter to one philosophical position, that ethics cannot just be doing the right thing but must be doing it for the right reason. If so, either causal explanations are not really about ethics or else they require that ethics be redefined.

How do we reconcile explanations that posit causes that people are not conscious of with the idea that ethics involves self-awareness? What place should cultural and historical differences have in our understanding of ethics as a dimension of all human communities? To address these questions, this book draws on research findings from across several disciplines, especially psychology, conversation analysis, ethnography, and social history. The purpose is to reconstruct an approach to ethics that looks at the points of articulation among these domains. It aims to illuminate the dialectic between the shared human capacities explored by fields such as psychology and the variability that is at the heart of ethnography and history. *Dialectic*, in this sense, is an imprecise term, meant only to indicate that the relations among these dimensions of human life are neither wholly deterministic nor unidirectional. Sometimes they have a character similar to what philosopher Ian Hacking calls looping effects: “People classified in a certain way tend to conform to or grow into the ways that they are described; but they also evolve in their own ways, so that the classifications and descriptions have to be constantly revised” (1995: 21). But looping does not seem to cover all cases. We also need a concept that will allow us to grant the reality of certain properties that humans possess, without forcing us to conclude that these properties necessarily *determine* the results in every case. Here we might speak of ethical affordances.

## ETHICAL AFFORDANCES

By *ethical affordance* I mean any aspects of people’s experiences and perceptions that they might draw on in the process of making ethical evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not. The idea of affordance originated in the psychology of visual perception but has influenced wider developments in situated cognition (Clark 1997; Hutchins 1995) and cultural psychology (Wertsch 1998). As defined by psychologist James J. Gibson, “the affordance of anything is a specific combination of the properties of its substance and its surface” in light of what it offers, provides, or furnishes for the animal that perceives it (1977: 67–68). Or as the philosopher George Herbert Mead

put it, “The chair invites us to sit down” (1962: 280). Gibson stresses that although the properties are objective phenomena, they serve as affordances only in particular combinations and relative to particular actors. Thus,

if an object that rests on the ground, has a surface that is itself sufficiently rigid, level, flat, and extended, and if this surface is raised approximately at the height of the knees of the human biped, then it affords sitting-on. . . . [But] knee-high for a child is not the same as knee-high for an adult. (Gibson 1977: 68)

Two crucial points in this original definition are, first, that affordances are objective features in contingent combinations and, second, that they only exist as affordances relative to the properties of some *other* perceiving and acting entity. Gibson was interested in animals’ relations to their environment, not just humans, so there is another implication as well. One’s response to an affordance does not depend on cognitive representations. A weary hiker may ease him- or herself onto a rock ledge without conceiving of it as chair-like or even being aware that he or she is doing so at all. But the idea of affordance does give great weight to perceptual experience with the forms of things (Keane 2003).

Affordance is an alternative to a classic argument from design—that if something functions in a certain way, then that must be its original purpose. What is crucial here is the fact of (mere) potentiality: a chair may invite you to sit, but it does not *determine* that you will sit. You may instead use it as a stepladder, a desk, a paperweight, or a lion tamer’s prop or to prop up an artwork, to burn as firewood, to block a door, or to hurl at someone. Or you may not use it at all. Affordances are properties of the chair vis-à-vis a particular human activity. As such they are real and exist in a world of natural causality (chairs can hold down loose papers or catch fire), but they do not induce people to respond to them in any particular way. I want to argue that this quality of potentiality is a necessary consideration in any empirical approach to ethics, if we accept two basic propositions: first, that ethics has some naturalistic components and, second, that to be properly ethical, an act or way of living cannot simply be the inevitable outcome of a set of causes.

The concept of affordance has been usefully extended since Gibson's original formulation. It helps industrial designers (e.g., Norman 2002) pay attention to how tools and other devices give their users cues to how they should be used. Archaeologists (e.g., Knappett 2005) have been interested in finding those cues in artifacts, as evidence for the concepts and purposes of their long-vanished users. And cultural anthropologists (e.g., Ingold 2000) have sought in affordances a way to understand things such as weavers' embodied knowledge of their craft and its raw materials. These various approaches have brought out three aspects of affordances. One is that affordances usually work along with other sources of information, such as cultural routines. Carl Knappett (2005) points out that a postbox has affordances very similar to a trash can, so some background knowledge is still needed to use each the way it was intended. A second point is that people seek out affordances not as a matter of contemplation but in the course of practical activity (Norman 2002). The nature of that activity and its goals will affect what affordances they discover in their surroundings. A chair is for sitting if that is what one is seeking, but given another activity, it is for blocking the door or holding down a windblown tarpaulin. The third is that for humans affordances can be social. According to the evolutionary anthropologist and psychologist Michael Tomasello (1999: 62–63), a critical juncture in a child's cognitive development comes with the ability to enter into joint attention to an object with another person. Mediating this social relationship is shared alignment to certain aspects of the object. Among mature adults, this alignment can become a matter of negotiation, disagreement, or exclusion. This is apparent, for instance, in the process by which police decide whether an object is evidence of criminal activity. Investigators

evaluate the objects that have been seized from the persons accused, categorize them, and decide what they imply for their (ex-) owners. This occurs within an interaction context of multiple agents, such that the affordances of the objects are explored and shared. . . . Consequently the police officers go through an extensive shared manipulation of the knives; handling them, understanding their particular affordances. They discover that one of the knives is burnt at the blade,

prompting them to accuse its owner of using it for hashish. Another blade is broken—the owner claims to have done it opening a tin—the officers suggest he broke it trying to force open a car door. (Knappett 2005: 47)

The idea of affordance usefully draws us away from treating material forms as wholly transparent in three ways. First, it shows the role of past experience: people respond not just to immediate percepts in isolation but to recognizable patterns over time. Second, affordance can be understood to refer not to objects or people who interact with them but to entire situations (Kirsh 1995). Finally, the idea of affordance brings out the fundamental sociality of those situations.

To extend the concept of affordance to ethics, we might start with the simple observation that not just a physical object but *anything at all* that people can experience, such as emotions, bodily movements, habitual practices, linguistic forms, laws, etiquette, or narratives, possesses an indefinite number of combinations of properties. Even the well-known psychological phenomenon of “hearing voices” can be taken up as an affordance, providing evidence of benevolent gods in Ghana, kindly relatives in India, or hostile strangers in the United States (Luhmann et al. 2014). In any given circumstance, properties are available for being taken up in some way within a particular activity, while others will be ignored.

As we will see in the next chapter, many researchers have argued that the child’s cognitive, emotional, and social development is not simply a matter of unfolding genetically preprogrammed potentials. The ability to acquire language, for example, requires that the child be engaged linguistically by other people before reaching a certain age. Otherwise that cognitive window of opportunity shuts forever. Many other aspects of the child’s mature capacities also come to fruition only when prompted through interactions with other people or aspects of his or her surroundings. Like language, those interactions and surroundings will bear the mark of specific social histories. In some respects, this prompting in turn is prompted, as the child actively seeks it out. The developmental relationship between the child and his or her surroundings is not simply one of learning from others or just the expression of innate abilities: it is, at least in part,

one of *discovering what they afford*. The specific activities that facilitate the child's development may reflect particular ways of life. Which affordances the child takes up may be shaped by that "training in everyday tasks whose successful fulfilment requires a practised ability to notice and to respond fluently to salient aspects of the environment" (Ingold 2000: 166–67).

This account of the child's active role in learning is one consideration that has led me to prefer the idea of "affordance," rather than, say, "precondition," as a useful way to grasp the process. To call something a precondition suggests that there is only one relevant outcome. Affordances leave things more open-ended—without, however, turning the infant into a *tabula rasa*. I argue that the idea of affordance does a better job of illuminating links between the particularities of social and historical circumstances and the universal capacities on which ethical responses draw than do the more traditional versions of cultural construction. This argument aims to open up a more productive relationship between disciplines that stress diversity and change on a historical scale, on the one hand, and those that stress universality and change on an evolutionary scale, on the other.

Now child development is only one part of the evidence we will examine. But it is an important starting point in our discussion, because so many strong claims about innate ethical universals have rested on this research. Affordance is a useful way to understand how the kinds of data found within the distinctive research traditions into humans' natural and social histories might be connected. It suggests a way to explore their connections without assuming that they must lead either to sheer determinism, on the one hand, or to pure self-invention, on the other.

*Ethical affordance* refers to the opportunities that any experiences might offer as people evaluate themselves, other persons, and their circumstances. What those experiences can be will vary widely. In the next chapter, we will look at some of the fundamental capacities and propensities that children develop that enter into the ethical life of adults, such as empathy, intention-seeking, sharing, helping, conformity, discrimination, norm-seeking, and norm-enforcing. Among these, very young children develop an ability to draw inferences from what they perceive in order to impute intentions, desires, and beliefs



to other people. This is sometimes called “mind reading,” although it always depends on perceptions—it is not telepathy. It is impossible to really learn to speak without this ability. Viewed from one perspective, mind reading is a precondition for speech. But, as we will see in chapter 3, mind reading, especially in intention-seeking, can also be a source of ethical affordances. I can only help you if I have some grasp of what you intend to do or what you desire. You can only insult me in certain ways if I understand that your words were intended to wound. In both situations, the ethical character of the action presupposes mind reading. This ethical dimension can itself become the focus of people’s attention. One reason why the existence of other people’s hidden intentions can be a source of special anxiety is precisely because they can be malevolent or benign. In some societies, there is a history of fascination with these questions, and mind reading has become the focus of enormous attention. It may well be, for instance, that the modern English novel, with its focus on subjective experience, arose when and where it did (and not at other times and places) in part because of this fascination among eighteenth-century readers (Hunt 2007; Zunshine 2006). In other societies such as the Korowai of West Papua, as we will see in chapter 3, the opposite has been the case, and people deny even having the ability to guess at intentions at all (Robbins and Rumsey 2008). Mind reading and its denial are ethically fraught. To elaborate or deny one’s mind-reading capacities, and the impulses behind them, is to respond to an affordance that human social cognition offers. Ethical affordances are those features of human psychology, face-to-face interaction, and social institutions that can be taken up and elaborated within ethical projects. They are part of what makes it possible for ethics to be both a universal feature of human existence as an animal species and something that has a variable social history.

## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book is divided into three parts, looking in turn at psychology, everyday interactions, and social movements. One difference among these fields is the role played by people’s self-awareness. At the

psychological level, ethical affordances involve processes that mostly (but not always) operate beneath the level of ordinary awareness, such as seeking out another person's intentions or grasping his or her emotional state. By contrast, social movements respond to moral systems that have been developed by highly self-conscious historical actors such as religious reformers or lawmakers. Depending on which dimensions of ethics they look at, and at what scale, the natural and social sciences will see different processes at work. As the anthropologist James Laidlaw points out, "Moral codes and ethics must be distinguished analytically, because they may change independently" (2014: 111). One reason for this is that they tend to draw on different kinds of affordances. Some, for example, derive from the mechanics of human neurophysiology; some, from the dynamics of face-to-face interaction; some, from the logic of arguments; and some, from the power of institutions. A central argument of this book is that what links the psychological and historical dimensions of ethical life is the dynamic of everyday social interaction. Psychological processes become visible and ethically pertinent when other people have to respond to them. Explicit moral reasoning and justification arise most often when people are called on to account for themselves to others. This is not to deny the creative and critical powers of introspection, but, as I will suggest in the chapters that follow, even solitary thought draws on the resources of a life filled with actual conversations and imagined interlocutors. When moral ideas become explicit, they are made more readily available for purposeful historical actors to work with. Social interactions, in turn, must draw on the resources of psychology and ethical history. Each of these dimensions of ethical life serves as a context for the realization of the others.

This book does not try to encompass the full range of current naturalistic explanations for ethics but concentrates on the borders where natural and social sciences come closest, especially those points where they seem to be looking at the same phenomena. Still, the reader may want to know where this book does or does not touch on evolutionary theory, given its dominance in the natural sciences. Can evolution explain what makes humans the kind of animal that is capable of taking, and perhaps compelled to take, an ethical stance toward other humans and their actions? Evolutionary

theorists sometimes put the question this way: If we take as our starting point the reproductive success of an entity such as a gene, or an individual organism, how do we explain altruism, defined as “behavior that benefits another organism, not closely related, while being apparently detrimental to the organism performing the behavior, benefit and detriment being defined in terms of contribution to inclusive fitness” (Trivers 1971: 35; see Wilson 1976)? We will return to the problem of defining altruism and its connection to ethics in the next chapter. For the moment, consider two basic approaches to this question, one looking to the logic of natural selection and another, to organic mechanisms. Although in principle they should converge, the research tends to work along separate lines. For example, to answer the question of “how cooperation can emerge among egoists without central authority” (1984: viii) the political scientist Robert Axelrod turned to game theory. His computer simulations showed that the most effective long-run strategies for the egoists led to cooperation. Since it is the logic of the system that produces the results, the model is meant to apply equally to microorganisms and political coalitions. Like artificial intelligence modeling of moral cognition (e.g., Wallach, Franklin, and Allen 2009), the system does not require any particular material processes.

By contrast, neuroscience looks for organic mechanisms to explain a rather heterogeneous set of definitions of *ethics* and *morality*, such as reciprocity, empathy, extended attachment, fairness, in-group identification, and disgust, not all of which map easily onto altruism. For example, neuroscientist Donald Pfaff (2007) argues that an impulsive and potentially self-sacrificial act, such as leaping onto a train track to rescue someone, is due to a momentary cognitive loss of information about self-identity. He proposes that this loss leads one individual to momentarily identify with another one, motivating him or her to prevent harm to that person. Interestingly, he finds more than one possible neuroanatomical explanation for this effect. Other researchers (e.g., Immordino-Yang et al. 2009) propose that the kinds of social effects on which phenomena we might call “ethics” depend arise from interactions between brain regions that in themselves serve quite different functions from anything particularly social. In fact, a many-to-one relationship between mechanism and

function and vice versa seems to run through both the approaches I have sketched here. As the neuroscientist Valerie Stone (2006) remarks, brain functions that enable social cognition also serve a host of other purposes such as syntax, planning, and episodic memory: there is no firm evidence that they evolved to serve any one particular function. Such findings suggest why affordance can be a useful heuristic. It offers us one way of understanding how the results of natural selection might come to serve an array of different human purposes without reducing those purposes to a single deterministic source—while at the same time keeping their basis in the natural world clearly visible. More generally, if a given mechanism may serve many functions, and many mechanisms can serve the same function, explanations of ethics that rely on natural selection may turn out to give us only very general claims. For the purposes of this book I will bracket the question of origins—how people came to be the kind of animals capable of taking ethical stances—and treat as given the fact that this is how they have ended up. We can then concentrate on how natural processes articulate with the particular purposes and projects that loom large in people’s awareness of themselves as agents who are guided by values and judgments—how those processes enter into diverse social histories.

The chapter following this introduction reviews some of the major findings in developmental, cognitive, and moral psychology that have been taken as evidence for the foundations of ethics. It looks at research on human capacities and propensities for things such as sharing and cooperation, intention-seeking, empathy, self-consciousness, norm-seeking and enforcement, discrimination, and role-swapping. It argues that they are necessary but not sufficient conditions for ethical life. What they help explain is what it is about humans that makes them prone to taking an ethical stance. But to understand how that mere potential can be realized in actuality requires attention to interaction. A central thesis of this section is that for the psychology of ethics to have a full social existence, it must be manifest in ways that are *taken to be* ethical by someone. Ethics must be embodied in certain palpable media such as words or deeds or bodily habits. The ethical implications must be at least potentially recognizable to other people.

To supplement what psychology shows us, we need to put it in the context of an account of the self in relation to other people. This is the focus of the second set of chapters, on social interaction and intersubjectivity. Chapter 2 works at the intersection between psychology and the study of conversational interaction. The ethical implications of the basic features of interaction are registered in the ways people probe one another's intentions and character, for example, or take others to be according or denying them recognition. Picking up on these themes, chapter 3 looks at a variety of ethnographic cases to show how recognition and intentionality are elaborated and brought into focus in different cultural contexts. It argues that if recognition and intentionality are basic features of all social interaction anywhere, they also serve as affordances for dealing with, or reflecting on, particular ethical questions that concern a given community. Chapter 4 centers on the problem raised by some of the psychological research, the relationship between those processes that work beyond the scope of the individual's awareness, and what it is people actually think they are doing. It asks what contexts tend to instigate ethical reflections and what resources are available for those reflections. This brings us into a public world of stereotypes, gossip, and other kinds of description, characterization, and evaluation that circulate within a community. It shows how empirical research fleshes out the philosophical idea that people act under the guidance of certain descriptions, frames for making sense of what is going on, what kinds of people are acting, and how actions should be judged. These descriptions circulate in a public world, where part of their power derives from their availability to others. Even if justification, excuses, and blame are post hoc rationalizations of underlying psychological or sociological processes, as the debunkers might say, they come to have a real social existence when they are expressed. They arise in social interactions where these are demanded, accepted, and rejected; here ethics is catalyzed into forms available to other persons. At this point, they are made available for further development, criticism, adoption, or rejection within a larger community. They might become part of a social history of ethics.

The third set of chapters is concerned with the public world and its historical dimensions. Chapter 5 introduces the idea of ethical

history. It looks at situations in which hitherto taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life came to be the focus of attention, such as feminist consciousness-raising in the 1960s and 1970s. It argues that processes like this play an important role in the historical transformations of ethical and moral worlds. Chapters 6 and 7 then look at case studies of social movements that took purposeful ethical transformation as one of their goals. Their motives are religious (Christian and Muslim piety movements) in the first of these chapters and atheist (Vietnamese communism) in the second. Juxtaposing religious and atheist movements offers us insight into the different kinds of social conditions that can facilitate, and even demand, the kind of coherence and universality that Williams calls a morality system. One thing piety and communism have in common is the cultivation of a transcendental point of view that can make any apparent ethical inconsistency a problem requiring every effort to overcome. The concluding chapter briefly discusses the problems faced by the universal aspirations of contemporary human rights and humanitarian movements. It then summarizes the case for a multidimensional approach to the study of ethical life in first-, second-, and third-person perspectives, bringing into focus the points of convergence between psychology and the public life of ethical reasoning.

Lurking behind much of the empirical research on ethics, although often unacknowledged, is this question: Why should one be ethical, with what justification? Natural and social scientists may consider this normative question to exceed their brief. Recalling Hume's (1978) distinction between fact and value, for instance, they might reply that their work lies on the side of fact. Yet the question haunts the empirical study of ethical life and often motivates it. For some scientists, the flip side of the causal explanations that seem so debunking may be this: "Because we can't help it—that's the sort of animal humans are." Alternatively, there is the sideways approach of ethnography, to ask how the people we study have themselves answered the question. In the latter case, perhaps the most common answer has been to appeal to ancestral traditions or divine mandates—which, for those who make that appeal, have the status of facts, of a sort. These sorts of authorities were not always as free from challenge as is sometimes imagined, however, and questions

about the foundations of ethics have been posed in circumstances as different as ancient Athens and Confucian China (Lloyd 2012). The roots of contemporary scientific research on ethics, however, lie in Europe and America. There, by the end of the eighteenth century, foundational questions could begin to arise, at least in certain schools, salons, and coffeehouses: What, if not biblical command, *are* the sources of and justifications for ethics? A century later, in an intellectual milieu faced with the death of God and the birth of Darwinism, Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov could conclude that if there is no God, then everything is permitted, a conclusion whose implications philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche would notoriously pursue.

By the twentieth century, both the natural and the historical sciences could be brought to bear on the empirical foundations of ethics. Naturalistic research on ethics and morality often seeks to justify the demands of ethics by demonstrating that it is not contingent but grounded in universal and innate human capacities or by accounting for its origins, thereby showing that ethics is not arbitrary, because it fulfills an adaptive function. These approaches describe a world of causes and effects, mechanisms, or statistical correlations of which people are largely unaware. In contrast, research in history, anthropology, and some related fields tends to seek answers within a world of decision making carried out by self-conscious agents. Although few practitioners in the latter sciences would deny the power of forces that lie beyond ordinary awareness (which might include economics, power relations, demographic effects, and so forth), they usually insist at least on the importance of this: when people act, they have some notion—whether dimly intuited or carefully conceived—of what they are doing. When people act or live in ways taken to be ethical, those notions concern values, exemplary virtues, or ideas about rightness and wrongness. When other people, in turn, respond to those acts or ways of living, they are guided partly by how they do or do not make sense of those ideas. But making sense of ideas is not the end of the story. Ethical life is not just a matter of knowing the rules of the game, something any idle bystander might accomplish as well. It is being committed enough to that game to care how it turns out. A full account of ethical life should help us grasp that too.