ethical life

its natural and social histories

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WEBB KEANE

CONTENTS

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NATURES

Ethical impulses, judgments, and goals are features of everyday life in every known societ[y], past and present. Does this mean that the propensity for taking an ethical stance arises fro[m] human nature itself? If it is innate, does it follow that we could be ethical without knowin[g] it? There are many who would reject that idea. Some people hold that ethics is based o[n] reason; others, that its sources are divine. If ethics is based on reason, must each individu[al] be capable of working it out in his or her own inner thought or at least of learning from t[he] wisdom of those who have? If ethics is divine, does this require adherence to the right law[s,] faith in the right gods, or consultation with one's conscience? Or is it, rather, the fact th[at] ethics is something each society creates on its own, so that each of us is stamped with t[he] impress of a particular tradition, borne within a specific community? And in that case, do[es] that mean each ethical world is ultimately incomparable to any other since each is t[he] 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 b[y] mechanisms that themselves have nothing specifically ethical about them?

This book looks at several ways of answering these questions through empirical researc[h.] Broadly speaking, the approaches we will examine here fall within the traditions of eith[er] natural or social history and can lead to very different views of ethical life. Indeed, som[e] scholars think that these two approaches are quite incompatible and insist that we mu[st] choose between them. I think that is a mistake: it is important that we are all talking abo[ut] the same world. But the differences matter. Naturalistic research, in fields such a[s] neuroscience, cognitive science, linguistics, developmental psychology, and biologic[al] anthropology, tends to seek out human universals. These often (but not always) invol[ve] processes that work beyond the scope of anyone's awareness. The research commonly (bu[t,] again, not always) takes the individual as the primary unit of explanation. It describ[es] changes that usually unfold on the vast timescale of evolution. What I call social histor[y] includes not just the scholarly discipline of history proper but also cultural and linguist[ic] anthropology, historical sociology, sociolinguistics, microsociology, and conversatio[n] analysis. These approaches tend to stress the diversity of existing ethical worlds. Althoug[h] they often describe economic, political, and other forces of which people are unaware, the[y] are prone to giving a central place to the agency of people who act with self-consciousne[ss] and purpose. The focus is typically on life within communities. The time frame of soci[al] change can be as narrow as a few decades.

Natural and social histories offer more than different points of view, since they challeng[e] not just each other but also certain dominant strains of ethical thought in philosophy an[d] religion. If some naturalistic explanations, such as seeking causes of behavior [in] neurophysiological mechanisms, can undermine our confidence that ethical choices are rea[l] choices, cultural relativism can seem to undermine the sense that ethics is objective[ly] 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 historie[s]

converge, we can gain new insights into ethical life, the fact that humans are inevitab[ly] evaluative creatures. We might also gain something looking the other direction as well: th[is] book also stems from the conviction that the more familiar ways of distinguishing betwee[n] natural and social realities no longer serve us well and that ethics, with sources in bo[th] biological mechanisms and social imaginaries, is a good place to start rethinking the[ir] relations. With these purposes in view, this book works with a broad definition of *ethical li[fe]* to refer to those aspects of people's actions, as well as their sense of themselves and of oth[er] 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 soci[al] histories tend to stay housed within their separate silos. With some notable exceptions, the[y] rarely take advantage of what they could learn from one another's research. Indeed, the[y] often have principled criticisms of other styles of research, which can reinforce the idea th[at] their findings contradict each other. The natural scientists may object that too much emphas[is] on social construction overlooks the objective foundations on which moralities are buil[t]. Some even suggest that resistance to naturalistic explanations betrays a lingering taste for th[e] "supernatural." The social historians and ethnographers, in turn, worry that naturalist[ic] 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 o[ut] 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 fro[m] genetics to social movements, say, or from game theory to theology. Rather, these chapte[rs] scout along borderlands where certain fields converge and overlap. For example, they tra[ce] out those points where cognitive science meets child development and blurs into th[e] microsociology of face-to-face interaction, which in turn provides materials that can inspi[re] ethical reformers working on the vast scale of religious or political revolution. The approa[ch] developed here is based on two premises. One is that both approaches, from natural an[d] social history, respectively, provide crucial insights into ethics—I refuse to dismiss either o[ut] 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 ful[ly] explained or subsumed by the other. For natural historians are right to insist that humans a[nd] animals are subject to causalities of which they are not aware. But the social historians a[re] right to insist that self-awareness and purposes matter. To repeat, we cannot step direct[ly] from the one to the other. This book follows them into the middle ground of soci[al] interaction, where people are provoked to cooperate or dispute, to explain themselves to o[ne] 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 a[nd] historical in its origins, we might start by examining some of the points of articulation whe[re] natural and social history approach, as well as push back against, one another. Th[is] examination is what this book aims to accomplish.

What are the stakes in raising such questions at all? Before I proceed, let me be clear th[at] saying ethics is a ubiquitous feature of human life does not mean that all people are incline[d] to the good, an assertion so obviously absurd that it's hardly worth denying. Perhaps le[ss] obvious is this: I do not mean that even good people are likely to come to a consensus abo[ut] 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 asse[rt] diametrically opposed positions or values, such as hierarchy and equality, loyalty and justic[e] or fairness and discrimination, with equal ethical conviction. Rather, this book starts with th[e] proposition that, with some borderline exceptions such as psychopathology, humans are th[e] kind of creatures that are prone to evaluate themselves, others, and their circumstances. The[y] may act in defiance of those evaluations but are rarely just indifferent to them. Consider th[e] 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 actu[al] 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 an[d] Thomson 1976; a recent popularizing summary is Edmonds 2013). Its basic form presents yo[u] 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 switc[h] that diverts the trolley onto another track, where it will hit only one person. Utilitaria[n] reason says that the death of one person is better than that of five. Most people who a[re] presented with this situation in experimental settings agree and say they would pull th[e] switch. The interesting complication arises in the second scenario. The five people are at ris[k] as before. Now there is a man standing on a bridge over the tracks. He is so fat that were yo[u] to push him off the bridge, his body would stop the trolley. The utilitarian calculatio[n] 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 tw[o] responses and the endless variations they have given rise to. We will return to some of the[se] topics in the next chapter. Here I want to make just a few observations to clarify th[e] approach to ethics taken in this book. Obviously the trolley scenario is highly artificia[l,] although analogous problems do arise, for example, in warfare and medical triage. Moreove[r,] as historians and anthropologists will quickly note, the results are assumed to apply to a[ll] humans, yet the subjects of such experiments are usually drawn from a much narrower rang[e,] typically educated members of present-day urbanized, industrialized societies—seriou[s] problems arise when you try to set up the problem in other cultural contexts (Bloch 201[4,] 65–66). Still, the findings are provocative. What is more relevant for the purposes of th[is] chapter, however, is the way in which the trolley problem depicts "ethics." The ethic[al] 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 s[et] of clear options, which have immediate and unambiguous results. Those results can b[e] measured on a single scale of value, numbers of lives saved. The experiment takes its intere[st] from the contrast between ideal and actual responses to the emergency. The ideal is based o[n]

the assumption that there is a rational solution revealed in the consequences of each choic[e] the discussion is provoked by the ways people's actual gut feelings deviate from that solutio[n] In short, the time frame is narrow, the social focus is on the individual actor, and the bas[ic] contrast is between rational and irrational decisions. Some aspects of ethical life are like th[is,] but much is not.

Here is another story about a momentary decision, which opens up the range of question[s] we might need to take into account. It concerns a friend of mine, whom I will call Sally. Sal[ly] is a social worker in her fifties, married to a physical therapist. They have one grown chi[ld] and another who still lives at home. They get by, but their financial situation is neither eas[y] nor secure. Sally is the main breadwinner in the family, since her husband has been unable t[o] find fulltime employment in recent years, due to government budget cuts. For the last decad[e] or so, Sally worked for an adoption agency run by a religious organization. This organizatio[n] has never accepted unions between homosexuals and has a clear policy of refusing to help ga[y] couples adopt children. One day Sally decided that in good conscience, she could no long[er] work for an agency that held such a policy and abruptly, and without consulting her husba[nd] or children, quit her job. She felt that she simply couldn't live with herself otherwise. She ha[d] nothing else lined up and in the year or so since has been semiemployed like her husban[d.] 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 onl[y] by egocentric calculations of gain. Ethics, in this perspective, stands in opposition to th[e] values of economic rationality and to the idea that people's motives are always selfish. (B[ut] then the same can be said of the religious morality that leads the agency to reject ga[y] applicants.) It also stands for the role that abstract, general ideas, such as justice or equalit[y,] might play in specific, concrete actions, such as quitting a job, and in more gener[al] dispositions, such as one's politics. At the same time, the thought that she could not live wi[th] herself otherwise reflects Sally's stance toward her own life, not just toward gay couples. A[nd] it shows someone who was willing to put her immediate family at risk (something that cou[ld] be construed as unethical) for the sake of people known to her only as members of a gener[al] social category (gay couples)—that is, someone whose moral circle has expanded from th[e] 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 te[n] years ago she worked for this agency with few qualms. The rise of gay marriage as a civ[il] 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 th[is] happen? Yet another thing: Sally put her own family at risk. What ethical calculus allows h[er] to treat their interests as less important than those of unknown strangers? A utilitarian mig[ht] 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 g[o] 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 th[e] English thinker William Godwin in the eighteenth century: If a house is burning, and I ca[n] save either Bishop Fenelon (an important social reformer and defender of human rights) o[r] his chambermaid, but not both, which should I save? Godwin gives an early version of wh[at] would become a utilitarian answer. The rational choice is that which results in the greate[st]

> 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.[1]

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 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. The 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's 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 naturalist 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.[2] 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 sens responsible (Babb 1983; Doniger 1980; Fuller 2004). Nor does responsibility necessarily st with humans. Herodotus (1997: 525) reports that Xerxes had the Hellespont whipped ar verbally chastised for destroying a bridge; medieval European courts punished animals f crimes (Evans 1906). One need not venture so far: present-day middle-class Americans diff among themselves over such basic questions as the existence of angels, the reality of th immortal soul, the personhood of the fetus, the intervention of God in one's personal life, th responsibilities of corporations, and the rights of animals.

Listen to ethnographer Paul Nadasdy recount his experience of learning to hunt wi 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 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 in social relationships guided by the ethics of reciprocity. That basic ethics of reciprocity itself might not look so unfamiliar to, say, urban Euro-Americans. The difference, of cours lies in the scope of appropriate ethical concern.

Similar statements about the personhood of animals and other nonhumans abound in th ethnographic record. When people talk like this, however, they are usually not just engagin in dispassionate metaphysical speculation (Keane 2013). Often enough, what is at issue how one should properly interact with other beings. Anthropologist Irving Hallowell (196 observed that the Canadian Ojibwa in the mid-twentieth century did not normally se important events as resulting from neutral causes. Rather, they were the result of acts carrie out by some kind of person, which might be an animal or a human spirit. The ethic implications of this kind of ontology were spelled out by Knud Rasmussen, the explore ethnographer, who wrote of Arctic hunters such as the Inuit that "the greatest peril of life li in the fact that human food consists entirely of souls" (1929: 56). When ontologic assumptions differ, they may shape what kinds of entities should be objects of ethical concer 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, an Inuit are skillful hunters and observant naturalists who certainly do not rely just on prayer magic, or gifts to obtain meat. Second, they are hardly unaware that humans and animals a different: as Nadasdy points out, no one sets snares to trap people and eat them. So what ar we to make of such statements? This is hardly a settled matter among the ethnographers. B even a reader who finds it hard to imagine that a rabbit can really be an exchange partne who willingly gives itself up to the hunter might yet recognize the ethical obligations th Nadasdy's friend Agnes Johnson was talking about. Gift, reciprocity, and words of than might be applied to surprising social partners, but the ethical nature of the relationship th

these acts invoke should not seem utterly unfamiliar. In the midst of alien ontologies, do w
see the dim outlines of recognizable ethical intuitions? Is ethical concern something we ca
recognize even when applied to entities we might consider out of bounds? This book make
an argument that in many respects the answer will be a cautious yes and that to make sens
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 thes
themes—such as desire, emotions, and beliefs—are often treated as matters of individu
psychology. Others, such as altruism, utility, reason, freedom, and the ethical distinctio
between human and nonhuman, seem to fall in the domain of philosophical or othe
normative enterprises. Still others, such as politics, values, and cultures, are usually viewe
in terms of social institutions. And some, such as voice, can be hard to pigeonhole. One of th
tasks this book undertakes is to tease out the interconnections within this sprawling ar
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 th
conversion of Sumbanese ancestral ritualists to the Protestant Christianity brought to the
Indonesian island by twentieth-century Dutch colonial missionaries (Keane 2007). One of th
central challenges this situation presented was making sense of how Sumbanese were able
rethink and change ethical values that, on the face of it, should have been part of thos
background cultural and ontological assumptions that are so deep and so world-defining th
they can be almost impossible to question. But in this context "ethics" and "morality" seeme
to be relatively straightforward concepts. They were defined in terms of an institutionalize
religion with an explicit moral code. Matters became more complicated, however, when
ventured into the less self-conscious domains of habitual activities and everyday soci
relations that some ethnographers have called the "ordinary" (Das 2007; Lambek 2010). As
use it, "ethical life" starts from that sheer everydayness, that mere fact, as anthropologi
James Laidlaw puts it, that people "are evaluative" (2014: 3). But as I began to explore othe
work by social scientists, I discovered that there is no consistency in how they use the word
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 morali
illustrates the point. In his 1925 essay *The Gift,* Marcel Mauss (1990) never defines *moralit
but it is apparent that he has in mind those obligations between persons that constrain the
self-interest. Within the different African contexts they study, T. O. Beidelman (1980) use
morality to refer to character traits, and Wendy James (1988), to that which maintains
person's health and balance in the face of evil forces. For K. E. Read (1955), *morality* refers
specific rules and judgments, while *ethics* consists of the underlying ideas about humans ar
their relationships on which those rules are based. Arthur Kleinman (1998) seems to revers
this distinction, using *morality* to refer to ultimate values and *ethics* to speak of the explic
principles propagated by elites. Finally, *ethics* often refers to the regulation of a profession,
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 distinctio

articulated by the philosopher Bernard Williams (1985). Williams is critical of a domina[n]
view in modern Western philosophy that emphasizes obligations and blame and assumes the[y]
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 "th[e]
morality system," obscures other crucial aspects of what he calls "ethics." Whereas morali[ty]
deals with such questions as what one should do next, ethics concerns a manner of life—n[ot]
momentary events but something that unfolds over the long term and is likely to var[y]
according to one's circumstances. Viewed from this perspective, the trolley problem addresse[s]
an issue of morality, and the Kluane rabbit hunters, the nature of ethics. Ethics is thus le[ss]
about decisions and the rules that should govern them than about virtues, which "involv[e]
characteristic patterns of desire and motivation" (Williams 1985: 9). (Some psychologic[al]
research has been taken to challenge the realism of this view of the virtues, but th[at]
discussion must wait until the next chapter.) Although both ethics and morality say somethin[g]
about what one owes to other people and how one should treat them, they differ in how the[y]
portray social relations. Many of the most powerful rules and obligations of the morali[ty]
system are meant to be universal in application, drawing on principles that transcend an[y]
particular context or person, like Kant's Categorical Imperative. Moral obligations are th[e]
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)[3]

This emphasis on the social nature of ethics is one reason why Williams's distinction betwee[n]
the two terms has been especially congenial to researchers working in historically an[d]
sociologically complex situations. It attends less to how ethics constrains people than to th[e]
ways it facilitates their ability to act and provides them with goals (Faubion 2011; Humphre[y]
1997; Laidlaw 2014).

We should not draw the distinction between ethics and morality so sharply that we a[re]
forced to exclude some of the phenomena we want to understand. As I read Williams, ethi[cs]
does include the morality system—morality is just a special *kind* of ethics. It conceals b[ut]
does not eliminate the ways ethics is socially embedded. And the ethnographic and historic[al]
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 fa[r]
beyond the tradition in Western philosophy that Williams had in mind, I will use th[e]
expression in the plural and propose that there are *many* morality systems, of which th[e]
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 th[e]
morality of kinship and marriage, which includes adherence to explicit sets of obligations an[d]
prohibitions, or the Hopi, who by one account treat ethical questions as concerning dutie[s]
based on moral facts that one should know (Brandt 1954: 82). Other examples includ[e]
imperial China and premodern Europe, where morality was often treated as somethin[g]
people could not be expected to grasp unless they had been instructed by authorities (Broka[w]
1991; Schneewind 1998).

What often links rules and the virtuous life is reference to a deity. Sumbanese marriag[e]

rules, for example, are enforced not only by social means but also by the threat of sanction 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.[4] Not so for the historian or anthropologist, since most of the people they 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.[5]

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 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 ca
grasp as well. Indeed, much of the empirical evidence that we will examine in the followir
chapters concerns how people evaluate one another and how that mutual evaluation in tu
reflects back on each one's self-understanding. To invoke Velleman again, a core element o
ethics (or what, reflecting the unruly application of these terms, he calls morality) is "valuir
the personhood of people" (2013: 72). One of the challenges this book takes up is to justif
this claim on empirical grounds and give it some psychological, ethnographic, and historic
specificity. It aims to do so not just in the traditional anthropological manner, b
demonstrating that cultural worlds vary, but also by exploring different scales of inquir
including the budding abilities of young infants, the routines of conversational interactio
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 th
tacit and the explicit, those background assumptions, values, and motives that go withou
saying or are difficult to put into words, on the one hand, and those that easily ler
themselves to conscious reflection, on the other. This distinction does not map directly ont
that between ethics and morality. Ethical life often involves psychological phenomena th
work beneath the level of awareness, like one's emotionally powerful repugnance at pushir
the fat man in front of the trolley (Greene et al. 2001). As we will see in the next chapte
people's gut-level responses to situations like that might, if they were asked to reflect on i
just induce what the psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2001) calls "moral dumbfounding,"
puzzled inability to give good reasons in support of a strong ethical intuition. Ethical life als
draws on social and cultural background assumptions, like Kluane ideas about the personhoo
of rabbits or Sumbanese assumptions about marriage. Although these assumptions can b
made explicit, most of the time they are likely to remain unspoken—until someone like
moral reformer or an anthropologist asks questions about them. When either backgroun
assumptions or gut-level responses are put into words, they undergo changes in both the
cognitive and their sociological character. As a result, verbal report is at best a poor guide t
the sources of people's feelings and decisions or even to what they know or believe (se
Bloch 2012 for an overview). But ideas and values that are subject to conscious apprehensio
can have important social and historical roles. For one thing, they are more easily transmitte
to distant times and places, for instance, as doctrinal teachings and codes of condu
(Silverstein and Urban 1996). This is one reason why morality systems tend to favor explic
formulations. By the same token, they are also rendered easier to scrutinize from the outsid
as it were, and so more subject to post hoc justifications, to criticism, and to instrument
manipulation. Indeed, several ethical traditions worry that self-consciousness will disrupt th
spontaneity or disinterestedness that should mark virtue. According to Edward Slingerlar
(2007), a scholar of Chinese religion, early Confucian and Daoist philosophers grappled wi
the paradox that results from holding both that one should actively strive to be virtuous ar
that the purposeful effort contaminates the result. We will examine all these issues in mor
detail in the chapters that follow.

If we accept that morality systems and ethics can be treated within a single field o

inquiry, then what should we make of the distinction between explicit and tacit, what is p[ut]
into words and what remains taken for granted or beneath awareness altogether? We mig[ht]
divide the question into two parts: First, what conditions induce explicitness, and secon[d,]
what are the practical or conceptual consequences of explicitness? To see what is at stak[e]
here, let's turn to another contrast. Many definitions of ethics in the Western philosophic[al]
tradition turn on a distinction between the causes of an action and the reasons for it (Darwa[ll]
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 bo[th]
some degree of autonomy from natural causality or social pressure (one could have don[e]
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 Wester[n]
philosophy as South Asian karma. At first glance it may seem mere fatalism to attribute m[y]
misfortunes to actions carried out in a previous life that I cannot remember. But in som[e]
common views of karma those actions are *ethical* misdeeds because they were carried out b[y]
those who were responsible precisely because, at the time of the misdeeds, they had voliti[on]
and knew their moral obligations (Babb 1983).

Even the social theorist Michel Foucault (1985, 1997), an heir to Nietzsche's skeptic[al]
quarrel with much of the Western philosophical tradition, holds that ethics depends o[n]
reflexivity. In Foucault's view, this reflexivity turns on a capacity for self-distancing, sinc[e]
"thought … is what allows one to step back … to present [one's conduct] to oneself as a[n]
object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals" (199[7:]
117). This takes the relative freedom or autonomy that defines an action or stance as bein[g]
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 th[at]
places ethical life in the domain of reasons and justifications.

Challenging this tradition are the apparently corrosive effects of both the natural and th[e]
social sciences on Euro-American ethical thought. Since the era of Darwin, Marx, Comt[e,]
Quetelet, and Freud, both naturalistic and sociological explanations have challenged th[e]
human self-mastery and self-awareness implicit in the morality system. By pointing to force[s]
and causes beyond ordinary awareness, these explanations can seem to debunk the feelin[g]
that your actions are guided by your own conscious purposes. The neurologist and "ne[w]
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 bra[in]
malformations that deprived them of any capacity for empathy. Harris writes, "Whateve[r]
their conscious motives, these men cannot know why they are as they are. Nor can w[e]
account for why we are not like them" (2012). In his view, the third-person perspective th[at]
reveals mechanical causality simply trumps the first-person point of view, the actor's ow[n]
grasp of what he or she is doing. Harris asserts that such findings eliminate any role for th[e]
concepts of morality or justice. Coming from a very different intellectual tradition, headin[g]
toward different conclusions, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1988) notes a parall[el]
implication. To see human activity as the product of ideological state apparatuses o[r]
neoliberal economics is a "science of unfreedom" (see Laidlaw 2014). As with neuroscienc[e,]
so too sociology: causal explanations that cast doubt on freedom likewise seem to elimina[te]
responsibility. This is exactly what the hoods in the musical *West Side Story* try to tak[e]

advantage of when they address a policeman: "Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke, / You got understand, / It's just our bringin' up / That gets us out of hand. / Our mothers all a junkies, / Our fathers all are drunks. / Golly Moses, natcherly we're punks!" (Sondhei 1957). These approaches exemplify the problem faced by any concept of ethics that relies 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 ma ask with Harris or Bauman whether their characters or their actions can really count ethical at all. What would distinguish ethics from matters of taste, operant conditioning, obedience to authority? What would make an instinctive revulsion against pushing a fat ma in front of a trolley part of the same family of considerations that includes support for ga marriage, respect for rabbits, rejection of ethnic cleansing, and obedience to ancestr marriage rules? The approach I take in this book is twofold. First, I argue that reflexivity 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 oth people and their actions. For people's ethical intuitions may not always be subject reflection—hence the common gut reaction against pushing the fat man in front of the troll and perhaps the Polish woman's comment that saved the Jewish girl. However, in order identify certain situations as posing a distinctively ethical question or an individual as havin a character of a certain ethical kind, people can draw on those descriptions that are availab to them. Those descriptions—some might be summed up in simple words such as *lie loyalty*, others require more elaborate discussion—are public knowledge: you can expect oth individuals to recognize them much as you do. In its fullest form, this public knowledge play a crucial role in defining for people whether a given act or way of life *is or is not an ethic matter at all*. Second, I pay attention to the social circumstances that induce reflexivity. The are crucial to understanding ethics, because they also enter into the dynamics of recognitio and self-recognition that underlie the sense of self-affirmation Anderson refers to and th valuing of personhood of which Velleman speaks.

In short, taken as an object of empirical research, ethics is defined neither by rationalit nor by special kinds of self-consciousness. Nor should we decide in advance what, in an given empirical case, will turn out to count as ethical. Sally's stand in defense of gay adoptio confronts opponents who may take their position to be just as firmly ethical in characte Yukon rabbits may seem off the radar altogether. But because, as I will argue, ethics draw on a *heterogeneous* set of psychological and sociological resources, some account is needed fo what *groups them together* as ethical. As Velleman's invocation of the idea of fami resemblance suggests, this grouping might not be due to any single essence that they all ha in common. Certainly it does not depend on specific content. The ethnographic eviden makes clear that what counts as ethical in one social context—what one eats or how or dresses, for example—or who is the proper object of ethical concern—say, rabbits ecosystems—lies altogether outside the domain of ethics in another (Shweder, Mahapatr and Miller 1990). Given the heterogeneity of all the things that might fall under the rubric "ethics," it is the existence of publicly known descriptions and categories and their role people's own ability to reflect on themselves and their situations that help define th 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 justification, 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 , 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

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