BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Channeling the super-natural aspects of the ethical life

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Webb Keane's *Ethical life: Its natural and social histories* (2016) is a key text, perhaps *the* key text, in the rebirth of descriptive moral anthropology.[1] The book is a highly satisfying combination of cross-disciplinary erudition, analytic sophistication, and open-minded engagement with two sides of the story about the human involvement with value. Keane aptly defines the empirical object for a descriptive moral anthropology as actions and conceptions of self and others "that are oriented to values and ends that are not in turn defined as a means to some further ends." (4). That is what he means by the ethical life. He then gives character to his definition by demonstrating how such ends (ultimate and highly valued) are the ones that a person (or people) who leads an ethical life honors, seeks to achieve, or makes manifest in various ways: (a) in their face-to-face social interactions (including verbal interactions), (b) in their spontaneous judgments about what is right and wrong (including making accusations and offering excuses), and (c) in their more self-reflective and deliberate attempts to justify their behavior or develop an explicit and consistent moral ideology or theory of the meaning of an ethical life.

So the book is about human involvement with a reality populated with values. The two sides of the story explored in the book ("the natural" as viewed, for example, by the evolutionary psychologist and "the social" as viewed, for example, by

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1. Concerning the rebirth of descriptive moral anthropology see for example Cassiniti and Hickman (2014), Fassin (2012), and Shweder (1982). For a brilliant precursor essay, one that has received far less attention than it deserves, perhaps because it was so ahead of its time, see Read (1955).

the cultural anthropologist) are both historical. They are about contingencies (biological, psychological, social, or environmental) viewed on some temporal scale (evolutionary, ontogenetic, moment-to-moment) and explained by reference to functional or purposeful contexts of one sort or another.

There is however a third side to this particular story, which is somewhat elided in the book. It is the normative side of moral anthropology and it is about the role of moral absolutes in any description of the ethical life of a person or a people. There is a graceful aphorism formulated by Clifford Geertz (2000), which states, "Relativism disables judgment; absolutism removes judgment from history." To his credit Geertz believed in ethical judgment but only when it did not pretend to be context-free. Nevertheless, his adage, while true and important, is incomplete because it omits the fact that any natural or social history that is entitled to be called a history of the ethical life must be a history framed, traced, and ultimately justified by reference to moral absolutes. It is that less salient (or perhaps less explicit) part of Webb Keane's masterful and munificent book that will be the main focus of this commentary.

I adopt this focus because the definition of the ethical life put forward by this brilliant author seems to me a bit too ambiguous (or perhaps agnostic) with regard to the answer to this unavoidable question: From which of the three perspectives explored in the book (first-person, second-person, or third-person) are the worthy ends that frame a truly ethical life to be defined? Here is another way to formulate the question: In order to construct a credible history (or ethnography) of the ethical life, don't we have to at least partly transcend history and appeal to value concepts from the realm of moral absolutes? How does Webb Keane position himself with respect to the problem of moral absolutes?

By moral absolutes I mean the undeniably valid and genuinely self-evident rules of moral reason that some moral philosophers call "intuitions." Moral absolutes of the sort I have in mind are self-evident in the sense that reason requires of them no further justification or deliberation. Their self-evidence is not an illusory air or an ethnocentric conceit produced by familiarity, habit, repetition, custom, or dumbfounding passions. With respect to genuine moral intuitions the fact that they deserve to be honored simply goes without saying. They possess their categorical, objective, imperative, fast, and spontaneous force largely because they are constitutive of moral reason itself.

Possible examples of these self-evident rules of moral reason include the following: That one ought to give every person their due, treat like cases alike and impartially apply rules of general applicability (justice); that one ought to speak the truth (veracity); that one ought to requite benefits received as gifts or patronage (reciprocity); that one ought to protect those who are vulnerable and in one's charge (beneficence); that one ought to respond to the urgent needs of others if the sacrifice or cost to oneself is slight; that one ought to pursue the more certain of two equal goods; that one ought to select a greater good in the future over a lesser good now (if both are equally certain); that one ought to never pursue a lesser good over a greater good (prudence) (see Sidgwick 1884).

Even the meaning of "ought" embedded in those moral intuitions has a categorical, objective, and imperative quality. As the nineteenth-century moral philosopher Henry Sidgwick observes in his famous book *The methods of ethics*, the moral sense

of the English word "ought" is "inseparably bound up with the conviction, implicit or explicit, that the conduct approved [for example, protecting the vulnerable who are in one's charge] is 'objectively' right—i.e., that it cannot, without error, be disapproved by any other mind" (1884: 28).

The idioms used for acknowledging moral absolutes may vary across history and cultures. Nevertheless an experiential core is recognizable: The feeling of being under the command of God or bound by some force greater than the self; the experience of guilt, dread, shame, or a loss of sanctity; the experience of a compulsion or constraint superior to the ego; Freud's super-ego, Kant's categorical imperative.

Ontologically speaking, moral absolutes of the sort just illustrated are widely experienced as meta-physical ahistorical norms. Like mathematical truths or the laws of logic they have a transcendental quality precisely because their status in reality is not biological, psychological, or social. The anthropologist Raymond Firth (2004: 335) nicely captures this in his summary of the ethical life of the Tikopia people, who express their (very human) metaphysical engagement with a reality populated with ultimate values this way: "The spirits, just as men, respond to a norm of conduct of an external character. The moral law exists in the absolute, independent of the Gods."

It is not surprising that natural historians (for example, evolutionary psychologists), guided by their own ultimately physicalist metaphysics, disparage such views as "a lingering taste for the supernatural" (Keane 2016: 4). But so too do the social historians, for example Émile Durkheim or Ruth Benedict, for whom social consensus makes morality and the "collective conscience" is assumed to be the only source of moral obligations.

How does Webb Keane position himself with regard to such issues? Does he believe moral absolutes exist? If yes, what are they? If not, without some reliance on moral absolutes how can one reliably identify which activities in the life of a person or people are deserving of the moniker "the ethical life"? I raise these metaethical questions as a way of honoring Webb Keane's accomplishments in this heroic book. I also raise them because my own approach to moral anthropology is rather closely aligned with many of his arguments. Nevertheless by the time I arrived at the conclusion to the book I felt somewhat uncertain about his answers to those admittedly deep and perplexing questions.

After conducting several decades of research on comparative ethics and moral psychology I arrived at the following definition of a "moral" judgment: A moral judgment is the expressed (or more typically implied) judgment that person P ought to do X under such-and-such circumstances [e.g., arrange the marriage of her now marriageable daughter; circumcise his now eight-day-old son], where the doing of X under those circumstances is thought to be the right thing to do because it is presumed to be productive of some objective good [for example, justice, loyalty, reciprocity, protection of the vulnerable, sanctity]. I believe that anywhere you go in the world judgments of that kind are made (and in that sense the ethical life is universal). It comes as no surprise to anthropologists that the concrete moral judgments made around the world about actual customs and cases (such as arranged marriage or the reshaping of the genitals of males and females) often diverge across individuals and groups. I believe those concrete judgments are produced via multiple processes, some genuinely intuitive, some acquired through participation

in local practices, some deliberative (see, for example, Much and Shweder 1978; Shweder, Turiel, and Much 1981; Shweder 1982, 1992, 2012; Shweder and Much 1987; Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller 1987; Shweder and Haidt 1993; Shweder et al. 1997; Shweder and Menon 2014).

So after following along on Webb Keane's spectacular tour through various literatures, levels of analysis, and shifts of perspective, and admiring as I do many of his critical judgments (for example, his critique of the idea of "dumbfounding" and of the current fashion within the psychological sciences to equate fast cognitions with feelings or emotions), I found myself pondering this question: How does an ethnographer of the ethical life who aims to locate other peoples' actions, habits, and customs in a moral framework identify those ends that actually possess ethical value? Is this done from a first-person (read individually subjective), second-person (read collectively subjective), or third-person (read objective) point of view? Here it is worth noting that some major theorists of the development of moral thinking (Kohlberg 1981, for example) have even argued that there is a stage-like progressive evolution of moral thinking in individuals and groups. Ontogenetically and historically it amounts first to the rejection of the first-person point of view (what is ethical is what I like) and the embrace of the second-person point of view (what is ethical is what is customary or legal for members of my group). According to their developmental account it then moves onward and upward to the rejection of that second-person point of view in favor of the third-person or transcendent objective point of view characteristic of the rules of moral reason.

Where does Keane stand on such questions? I finished his book uncertain of his view of the nature and source of the ultimate values that define the ethical life. Uncertain means I can imagine him favoring an approach that relies on the first-person or second-person point of view. Such an approach might simply stipulate that ends are ultimate and have value whenever a person or people pursues them without an ulterior motive and sincerely believes (whether rightly or wrongly) that those ends are objective imperatives inherently worthy of respect. In other words, personally or collectively believing they are ultimate makes them ultimate.

On the other hand I can also imagine Webb Keane wanting to remain entirely agnostic about the existence and nature of objective moral truths. For many students of the ethical life agnosticism is a correlate of the assumption that one can distinguish descriptive ethics from normative ethics. They believe that what *is* the case (the evaluative reactions of human beings, whether verbal or nonverbal, including their beliefs about what ought to be) can be described and interpreted without taking a position on what *ought to be* the case or whether there really are objective moral truths.

I have a problem with that agnostic approach. It seems to me the very concept of an ethical life and the human encounter with value is inherently normative. The ethical life is all about what you ought to do. Thus, if you are an ethnographer seeking to accurately describe and interpret a person's ethical life (a life involving actions and judgments that conveys a belief about what is objectively right or of ultimate value) then one can't really avoid evaluating that person's normative convictions. And to do that one must take a stance on the objectivity versus subjectivity of their source. Are those supposed valued objects of desire desire-worthy or merely a projection of personal taste? Are they nothing more than declarations of value

grounded solely in local custom? Frederick Nietzsche once commented that being ethical means being highly susceptible to fear. Is he right? Or are local customs, if properly understood, historical products of the vicissitudes of some base set of self-evident moral truths? With respect to such questions historians (natural and social) of the ethical life cannot avoid taking some stance. The way they represent the ethical life of others will be a reflection of the way they answer the question, is there an objective normative order populated with moral absolutes and what, if anything, is contained in its charter?[2]

Perhaps I can clarify this point by briefly addressing the issue of human rights. In his concluding chapter Webb Keane writes: "Recall the sociologists . . . who write of human rights that 'everyone now agrees that human beings have such rights. In contrast, no one can say from whence these rights derive or on what they are founded.'" He goes on to say, "this book should make clear why their diagnosis is off target; we should not expect to discover that the ethical life can only stand if it is provided with a firm foundation of a cohesive set of explicit justifications, religious or otherwise."

And indeed one of Webb Keane's several great accomplishments is to show that the foundations of an ethical life can be tacit or intuitively presupposed or expressed through actions (verbal and nonverbal) rather than through second-order reflective formulations of principle. Nevertheless it really matters for our understanding of the ethical life whether there is in fact an objective third-person human rights justification for one's spontaneous or nondeliberative judgments of outrage or moral indignation and associated verbal and nonverbal actions. With due respect to those sociologists mentioned by Webb Keane, not everyone does agree but what if those who do agree are wrong that human beings have such rights?

Ontologically speaking, what is a human right? Presumably it is something to which everyone is entitled simply by virtue of being a human being. Whatever it is, it is objective and inalienable and associated with a third-person point of view. If that is the case then it is an entitlement that derives not from who you are in particular or from what you have accomplished in life. And it is not an entitlement whose authority derives from the will of some person or group who decides or elects to honor the things called rights. A natural or inalienable right, in the strong sense, must be something transcendental or overarching, something that we may discover but not something we simply make up or invent, either individually or collectively; for then the right would be subjective (expressive of some person's or group's first or second person point of view), not objective, and it would not be universally binding.

If there actually are real, objective, natural, or inalienable human rights (for example, a right to freedom of association, freedom of expression, or the right of parents to educate their children into the beliefs and values of a particular way of life—the way of life of their ancestors) then one of the tasks for those who study the ethical life might be to trace the way local group formation and the entire symbolic

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2. Concerning universal moral foundations see Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park (1997) for a discussion of "The Big Three" (autonomy, community, divinity) and Haidt (2013) for a discussion of "The Big Five" (care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, purity/degradation).

and expressive side of any culture can be derived from those human rights and justified (to anyone who is willing to listen) by reference to them.

On the other hand, if real, objective, natural, or inalienable human rights don't exist, as some have argued, then to the extent there are rights at all, they exist only as "positive rights." Such rights when and where they exist (for example, the right of graduate students at private universities in the United States to unionize) are granted by consensus or declaration or promulgation by some groups at some points in history but not by other groups at other points in history. In other words, if they are convention-based, vote-based, or alienable then one's particular location in culture and history is the only source of authority for any claim to have that right. They derive entirely from a second-person point of view.

I believe Webb Keane is right: An ethical life may be able to stand without explication. But can it stand (and ultimately be justified) without some firm foundation in the land of moral absolutes? In that sense I suspect one must have "a lingering taste for the 'supernatural'" and the third-person point of view to write about the ethical life. Does Webb disagree?

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