

Book Review

Michael Lambek, ed. 2010. *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language and Action*. New York: Fordham University Press. 458 pp. USD \$95.00. ISBN: 978- 0823233168.

This collection is the latest contribution to the steadily growing anthropological literature on morality and ethics. In common with much of this literature, many of the contributors draw inspiration from and seek to engage directly with philosophy, and thinkers frequently cited here include Kant, Aristotle, Arendt, Williams and MacIntyre. What makes this collection distinctive is its treatment of morality or ethics as 'ordinary', an aspect of the human condition and intrinsic to action and practice. In this spirit, Lambek's introduction directs us away from objectifying ethics as a universal category or a distinct kind of human practice, and distances the collection from attempts to define the 'anthropology of ethics' as a separate subfield. Instead, he calls for recognition of the ethical as a modality of everyday action or being in the world.

What further distinguishes this collection from other recent works on this topic is its engagement with linguistic anthropology. Rumsey's contribution argues that the ethical is built into the structure of language, so that mundane communicative practices provide a basis for ethical action by engaging forms of regard for the other. The following chapter by Sidnell provides a detailed discourse analysis of a short everyday conversation among a group of friends to reveal the moral or ethical dimension that is inherent in all social interaction. A linguistic dimension is present in some of the other contributions as well, notably Richland's discussion of the ethic and aesthetic qualities of Hopi legal discourse.

The first section of the book attempts to establish a theoretical framework for ordinary ethics. Lambek's contribution builds upon Rappaport's ideas on the nature of ritual to argue that everyday speech and action generate 'criteria' or 'felicity conditions' which enable judgement and evaluation. Ethics is therefore an inescapable property of speech and action, rather than being a discrete object. Keane's essay explores the moral within ongoing sociability, and the acts of objectification that are an endemic feature of social life, permitting reflexivity, judgement and deliberation. Faubion's contribution, however, seems at odds with the central thrust of the collection. He seeks to define an ethical domain through a distinction he draws between the moral, or the 'themetical' as he prefers to call it, the reproduction of norms, and the ethical as moments of innovation and creativity by charismatic figures.

The call for a recognition of ethics as ordinary is one well worth making, but the value of this collection is not so much in the theoretical frame it seeks to establish for this, but in the rich, varied, and sometimes moving ethnographic explorations of ordinary ethics. Among those of particular note is Antze's discussion of moral agency in the context of self-advocacy by people on the autism spectrum. He draws on a distinction between the interactive standpoint demanded when we encounter other persons, and the objective one we adopt with things, to discuss the different ways that autism self-advocates call for recognition of their moral agency. The neurodiversity movement presents their 'Otherness' as different from 'neurotypicals' but nevertheless equally worthy of recognition as moral persons rather

than objects to be managed or treated. His discussion of autism and self-advocacy would seem to speak for a core concern of anthropology more generally, to engage morally with 'strangeness' and de-centre notions of 'normality'.

Young provides a reflexive and sensitive discussion of the personal moral dilemmas, negotiations, and embarrassments of the anthropologist conducting fieldwork in the politically charged environment of Jerusalem, while maintaining friendships on all sides of the divide. Kwon's essay deals with household rituals of commemoration of the dead which give recognition to the ghosts of strangers alongside genealogical ancestors. His account weaves together the post-war politics of memory, the experience of displacement and family division in the Vietnam War, and the constitution of community. Laidlaw's contribution is not ethnographic, but provides a thought-provoking exploration of notions of agency and responsibility. Particularly productive is his discussion of how specific forms and qualities of agency and responsibility become imaginable and are produced and proliferated through institutions and practices, which he does through a revisiting of Evans-Pritchard's classic work on Azande witchcraft.

The collection includes an unusually large number of essays, and this review can only mention some of them by way of example. In fact, almost any ethnographically grounded analysis could have found a home here, with a little tweaking of the analysis to bring out the moral dimension. The anthropology of morality and ethics might seem to have come full circle. From an implicit understanding that the moral is embedded in all social life so that an 'anthropology of morality' would be overly-inclusive, to an explicit working out of an anthropological approach to the ethical, and back to an ordinary ethics. Nevertheless there is great value in making explicit the ordinary quality of ethics.

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