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## ORDINARY ETHICS



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# Ordinary Ethics

ANTHROPOLOGY, LANGUAGE, AND ACTION

*Edited by*

MICHAEL LAMBEK

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*For Aram Yengoyan  
and in memory of Roy (Skip) Rappaport*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book had its germ in a graduate seminar entitled *Subjects of Speech*, conceived and taught jointly with Paul Antze and Jack Sidnell at the University of Toronto in fall 2006. Paul and Jack were central in planning the subsequent workshop and book. Their intellectual curiosity and acuity have been inspirational and their advice indispensable and reassuring. Members of the original seminar included Donna Young and Shirley Yeung, and their rich contributions helped prompt us to move on to the next stage. Veena Das and Bill Hanks visited the seminar and inspired all of us.

Fortuitously, that fall Alan Rumsey approached me with the suggestion that we co-organize a workshop on ethics. Together with Francesca Merlan, we made a bid to the Wenner Gren Foundation. Their initial response led us to realize that a more viable course of action would be for me to seek support from a variety of sources and hold the workshop at the University of Toronto; Alan and Francesca remained staunch supporters behind the scenes. Held on October 3 to 6, 2008, at the University of Toronto's Centre for Ethics, the workshop received generous funding from: the Connaught Foundation and the Centre for Ethics, both at the University of Toronto; the Canada Research Chair fund, University of Toronto at Scarborough; the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada; and the Wenner Gren Foundation. In addition, the cost of this book is partially subsidized by the CRC fund. I am very grateful to each of these institutions.

The first versions of most of the essays in this volume were discussed at the Toronto workshop.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, three of the participants, Jennifer Jackson, Elinor Ochs, and Robin Shoaps, had already promised their excellent papers elsewhere. The workshop was greatly enriched by a series of appointed discussants, including Joshua Barker, Girish Daswani, and Valentina Napolitano, as well as some of the authors, and by the session

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1. Naisargi Dave served as a discussant and was subsequently invited to submit a paper. The chapter by Veena Das is different from the one she presented.

chairs, including Janice Boddy, Mieke de Gelder, Sarah Gould, Pamela Klassen, Amira Mittermaier, Andrea Muehlebach, Maureen Murney, and Jackie Solway. Together they showcase the rich environment in which anthropology subsists in Toronto, and they must stand in here for all my wonderful colleagues and students. We were honored to have as summary discussants political theorist Melissa Williams and philosophers Judith Baker and Ian Hacking. Melissa graciously hosted the event at the Centre for Ethics she has created at the University of Toronto, and Ian persevered despite the flu. Mark Reczkiewicz was an excellent graduate assistant, and Audrey Glasbergen and Gail Copland each provided, as usual, unstinting administrative support, as did Sam Grey with the Web page.

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## ORDINARY ETHICS



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## INTRODUCTION

*Michael Lambek*

Ethnographers commonly find that the people they encounter are trying to do what they consider right or good, are being evaluated according to criteria of what is right and good, or are in some debate about what constitutes the human good. Yet anthropological theory tends to overlook all this in favor of analyses that emphasize structure, power, and interest. The essays collected in this volume demonstrate the centrality of ethical practice, judgment, reasoning, responsibility, cultivation, and questioning in social life. They develop a cumulative argument for attending to the ethical in the anthropological study of social action and, indeed, in the human condition, and hence recast discussion “in ways that will force a rethinking of ‘power.’”<sup>1</sup>

The phrase “ordinary ethics” signals several things. First, contributors argue that ethics is part of the human condition; human beings cannot avoid being subject to ethics, speaking and acting with ethical consequences, evaluating our actions and those of others, acknowledging and refusing acknowledgment, caring and taking care, but also being aware of our failure to do so consistently. As a species, given our consciousness, our socialization and sociality, and our use of language, we are fundamentally ethical; as Signe Howell puts it, “humans everywhere are cognitively and emotionally predisposed toward moral sensibility” (1997: 10). I argue below that ethics is intrinsic to speech and action, and other contributors show how it is specified through cultural values and social projects. Moreover, as Alan Rumsey argues in his chapter (supported by arguments in Webb Keane’s), the bases of the ethical predisposition are no doubt both ontogenetic and phylogenetic. Indeed, recent work by developmental psychologists more or less corroborates long-standing arguments by psychoanalysts that ethics is intrinsic to human character formation. Freudians argue that healthy socialization entails the development of a conscience,

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1. The phrase is Webb Keane’s (pers. comm.). Thanks to him, James Laidlaw, and Shirley Yeung for very helpful comments on the penultimate draft, and Kristina Kyser for superbly insightful editing.

and they have observed the significant operations of guilt—at both conscious and unconscious levels.<sup>2</sup> Moving beyond drive theory, psychoanalytic object relations theorists (e.g., Mitchell 1988) analyze the ontogeny of moral selves with respect to a relational matrix. In being acknowledged and in internalizing the acknowledgment of others, infants grow capable of acknowledging others and themselves. Concomitantly, ethology has begun to shift from neo-evolutionary obsessions with aggression and selfishness toward the ethical (Warneken and Tomasello 2006).

Aristotle saw ethics as indicative of the human telos; humans strive for excellence and well-being, asking everywhere “How ought I to live?” But insofar as ethics is in all these respects basic to the human condition, it need not be singled out as an explicit category or department of human thought nor constituted, as Maurice Bloch (1992 and elsewhere) sees religion and as some philosophers have seen metaphysics, at the expense of the ordinary. A call for “ordinary ethics” echoes arguments of Wittgenstein and Austin with respect to “ordinary language.” We may find the wellsprings of ethical insight deeply embedded in the categories and functions of language and ways of speaking, in the commonsense ways we distinguish among various kinds of actors or characters, kinds of acts and manners of acting; in specific nouns and adjectives, verbs and adverbs, or adverbial phrases, respectively; thus, in the shared criteria we use to make ourselves intelligible to one another, in “what we say when.”<sup>3</sup> At least we can say that “only ordinary language is powerful enough to overcome its own inherent tendency to succumb to metaphysical denunciations of its apparent vagueness, imprecision, superstition—not overcome this once and for all, but in each incidence of our intellectual and spiritual chagrin” (Cavell 2004: 8).

Second, then, the “ordinary” implies an ethics that is relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself. When, by contrast, ethics does become explicit, that is generally (1) in respect to its breaches; (2) with regard to ethical problems or issues in which the right thing to do is unknown or hotly contested; (3) in prophetic movements of social and ethical renewal; and (4) among priestly classes attempting to rationalize and educate. Historically, ethics has been closely related

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2. For a classic ethnographic assimilation of these ideas, see Obeyesekere (1981).

3. Wittgenstein’s and Austin’s invocations of the ordinary are not identical, and Cavell’s own profound exploration is largely beyond the scope of this essay. Austin’s attention to the spoken word is most straightforward; his “A Plea for Excuses” (1961b) is a classic locus.

to religion, to theodicy and the problem of evil. Through religion, the ordinary is transcended and ethics intellectualized, materialized, or transcendentalized. Today, in a context one can loosely call “secular” (bearing in mind the debates that currently swirl around the concept), the subject of “ethics” is more closely connected to law and regulation, with respect to such matters as professional conduct, human rights, refuge and citizenship, retributive and redistributive justice, reproduction, and bioethics. However, the present book intends to go deeper; the focus is less on special cases, unusual circumstances, new horizons, professional rationalizations, or contested forms of authorization than on everyday comportment and understanding. Some chapters do touch on such matters, but precisely to show how they are drawn into and draw from the ordinary.<sup>4</sup> One of the questions implicitly raised is whether and how ordinary ethical sensibilities are coarsened or heightened with respect to broad social forces such as consumer capitalism, media advertising, inequality, violence, and specific forms of discipline, such as boot-camp army training (or other ascetic practices).<sup>5</sup>

The ordinary might be compared to Aristotle’s concept of actuality (*energeia*) and the unity of means and ends. Consider Hannah Arendt’s gloss on this. Actuality designates “all activities that do not pursue an end and leave no work behind, but exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself” (1998: 206, Greek omitted).<sup>6</sup> This is life as lived for itself.

This specifically human achievement lies altogether outside the category of means and ends; the “work of man” is no end because the means to achieve it—the virtues, or *aretai*—are not qualities which may or may not be actualized, but are themselves “actualities.” In other words, the means to achieve the end would already be the end; and this “end,” conversely, cannot be considered a means in some other respect, because there is nothing higher to attain than this actuality itself. (ibid. 207)

In this sense, the ordinary is intrinsically ethical and ethics intrinsically ordinary.

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4. Contributors were instructed not to focus on bioethical regimes, human rights, or the ethics of anthropology. Naturally, these topics creep back in, as it is a feature of ordinary ethics that it cannot be compartmentalized, and likewise a feature of anthropological practice that it cannot be divorced from its subject matter.

5. Under certain circumstances, everyday acts of humiliation may come to seem very ordinary indeed. A comparison of Caton and Young’s chapters with those by Das and Kwon is instructive.

6. *Energeia*—full actuality—“effects and produces nothing besides itself” (Arendt 1998: 206n37).

Insofar as ordinary ethics refers to the actual and circumstantial—specific instances of conduct, insight, action, or dilemma—anthropology, in its ethnographic refraction, can usefully respond to Austin’s request for “fieldwork in philosophy.” Ethnography supplies case material that speaks to the urgency and immediacy yet ordinariness of the ethical rather than reverting to hypothetical instances and ultimately to reified abstractions.<sup>7</sup> “What we say when” is not always what armchair philosophers, or even seasoned fieldworkers, imagine. When a granary collapsed on a senior man in a village in Mayotte, people spoke not of witchcraft but of his survival as a sign of God’s mercy; yet the death of his daughter (who had not been anywhere near the granary) some years later was attributed to the man’s conduct while pinned under it (Lambek 1993). The individual incident is located within the stream of particular lives and the narratives that are constituted from them, changing its valence in relation to the further unfolding of those lives and narratives and never fully determined or predictable. Jack Sidnell’s chapter uses microscopic conversational analysis to show what we actually do say when—and how this saying is ethical to its roots.

Finally, ordinary ethics recognizes human finitude but also hope. Ordinary experience encompasses the inevitable cracks and ruptures in the actual and the ubiquity of responses to the ever-present limits of criteria and paradoxes of the human condition, hence the attempts in everyday practice and thought to inhabit and persevere in light of uncertainty, suffering, injustice, incompleteness, inconsistency, the unsayable, the unforgivable, the irresolvable, and the limits of voice and reason.<sup>8</sup>

### *Conversing with Philosophy*

This book emerges from a workshop on the anthropology of ordinary ethics held at the University of Toronto, October 6 to 9, 2008.<sup>9</sup> The workshop was organized to explore the significance of ethics for social theory and ethnographic depiction, and also to encourage conversation between anthropology and philosophy. Similar endeavors have been suggested in

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7. Philosophers have generally preferred the texts of literature to those of ethnography as source material, but see Lear (2006). Hacking (1998) has pursued actual fieldwork to brilliant philosophical effect.

8. See the compelling essays by Das (2007).

9. Papers were pre-circulated and intensively discussed at the workshop. For further details, please see the Acknowledgments to this volume.



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