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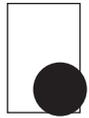
Anthropology's ethics: Moral positionalism, cultural relativism, and critical analysis

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Abstract

In a programmatic article, published in late 2008 in *Anthropological Theory*, the French anthropologist Didier Fassin explores the vexed question whether anthropology should be moral or not. Observing a general discomfort with the question of morality in the discipline of anthropology, Fassin argues that such a discomfort might actually serve a valuable heuristic function for the development of a moral anthropology in the near future. What Fassin means by moral anthropology is essentially a form of empirical inquiry that investigates how social agents articulate and negotiate moral claims in local contexts. In this response to Fassin's article, I address a crucial challenge at the heart of moral anthropology, or the anthropology of ethics, as I prefer to call it. The challenge is to bring the anthropology of ethics into a productive relationship with the ethics of anthropology. Building on Fassin's argument, I suggest that the discomfort with ethics indeed serves a valuable heuristic function because it is the spontaneous articulation of an ethics of discomfort.

In a programmatic article, published in late 2008 in *Anthropological Theory*, the French anthropologist Didier Fassin draws attention to a striking paradox. 'On the one hand', Fassin observes, 'morals are not considered as a legitimate object of study and are looked upon with suspicion' (Fassin 2008: 333). 'On the other hand', Fassin continues, 'there is an increasing concern for moral issues both in society and within the discipline.' In his article, which was published in the context of a debate with Wiktor Stoczkowski on the fundamental question whether

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anthropology should be moral or not (Fassin and Stoczkowski 2008), Fassin suggests the development of a moral anthropology.[1] By moral anthropology, it is important to underline, he does not mean that 'anthropologists should become moralists, but that they should study morals as they do politics, religion or medicine' (Fassin 2008: 333). According to Fassin, such a moral anthropology examines 'how societies ideologically and emotionally found their cultural distinction between good and evil, and how social agents concretely work out this separation in their everyday life' (Fassin 2008: 334). Just as there is a political anthropology, an economic anthropology, and a medical anthropology, there should be a moral anthropology, and that is to say, a form of empirical inquiry, which investigates by means of ethnographic fieldwork how social agents tell right from wrong. The key aim of such a moral anthropology is to situate, both historically and culturally, moral claims as they are articulated and negotiated by social agents in local contexts.

The essay I would like to offer here in response to Fassin's astute article addresses a crucial challenge at the heart of moral anthropology, or the anthropology of ethics, as I prefer to call it. The challenge is to bring the anthropology of ethics into a productive relationship with the ethics of anthropology.[2] Curiously enough, the rapidly expanding anthropological literature on ethics has largely dealt with these two matters separately, preferring to focus either on the anthropology of ethics (Heintz 2009; Howell 1997; Laidlaw 2002; Widlok 2004; Zigon 2008) or the ethics of anthropology (Caplan 2003; Fluehr-Lobban 1991; Murphy and Dingwall 2001; Whiteford and Trotter 2008). In my view, however, it is neither desirable nor even feasible to separate these two important matters, as I shall argue in this essay. How, then, can we forge a productive relationship between the anthropology of ethics on the one hand and the ethics of anthropology on the other? How can we establish a shared space of reflection, in which both matters can be addressed simultaneously? Here, Fassin's article is particularly helpful because it concomitantly indicates that the received perspectives of both moral positionalism and cultural relativism are fundamentally flawed. Neither the decisionism of moral positionalism nor the nihilism of cultural relativism are ultimately able to adequately respond to the challenges that we find at the core of contemporary anthropological research. Towards the end of his carefully argued article, Fassin outlines a third perspective, termed 'critical analysis', but this third perspective, I propose, must be specified in much more detail if it is to offer a real alternative. But before I turn to this third perspective and before I explore it in more detail, let me first say a few words about the role of both moral positionalism and cultural relativism in the practice of anthropology.

Moral positionalism

In his article, Fassin observes that a 'significant proportion of contemporary anthropological studies deals with inequalities and violence, refugee camps and military conflicts, human rights and sustainable development, ethnic groups in

danger and social resistance to dominance' (Fassin 2008: 337). It is important to emphasize that this observation is not meant by the author as an accusation or denunciation. To be driven by a genuine concern for moral matters, Fassin notes, is not necessarily the same as to promote a moralistic view of the world. What Fassin means to say, rather, is simply that a moral hierarchy of legitimate objects of anthropological research, to modify a phrase originally suggested by Pierre Bourdieu, seems to be in place today (Bourdieu 1975).

Fassin's provocative remark, therefore, is primarily ethnographic. Observing his own profession from afar, he concludes that 'moral indignation has become a major resource in the choice of topics to be studied, in particular among younger researchers or students, with the obvious risk of confusion between anthropological interpretation and moral evaluation' (Fassin 2008: 337ff.). The problem with such evaluation is that it is based on a set of either explicit or implicit principles for moral judgment. These principles, however, cannot be derived from a specific cultural or historical context, or else they would rightly be accused of being ethnocentric. For the moralist anthropologist – Fassin specifically singles out Françoise Héritier and Nancy Scheper-Hughes in his article (Héritier 1995; Scheper-Hughes 1994, 1995) – the foundation of moral evaluation ultimately tends to be the anthropologist's own sense of right and wrong, and that is to say, his or her conscience. Confronted with a plurality of seemingly incommensurable worldviews and the presumable absence of universally recognized principles for moral judgment, the anthropologist is forced to make a personal choice in favor of what he or she considers to be moral progress. Among the most problematic aspects of moral positionalism is that it almost always ends up promoting a form of ethical decisionism. As Peter Pels recently argued, the unfortunate consequence of such a decisionism is that the moral increasingly begins to appear as something exterior and supplementary to professional practice (Pels 2005; see as well Weber 1946). The moral dimension of anthropological knowledge production, in other words, cannot be conceived of anymore except as an external concern imposed by the anthropologist from the outside. In this view, the practice of anthropological research as such appears as neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad. It is, rather, primarily the task of the anthropologist to be explicit about the good purposes to which anthropological knowledge can be put and ought to be put. The question, accordingly, often becomes one of good intentions.

The recent emergence of a moral sensibility among students and young researchers, Fassin points out, may result in a gradual 'moralization' of the entire discipline. Such a 'moralization' is analytically problematic because it conceives of the moral dimension of anthropological knowledge production as an external and supplementary concern to professional practice. But the 'moralization' of the discipline is not only problematic because it is based on a narrow account of the ethical; it is also politically questionable. Given the unfortunate history of the discipline and the fact that many scholars went astray in times of political, economic, and cultural colonialism, some form of restraint seems necessary, to be sure. Such a form of restraint becomes particularly important in a context in which the boundaries

between humanitarian and military interventions, for instance, are increasingly dissolving. As both an anthropologist and an activist, Fassin is particularly aware of the substantial risk posed by a morally inflected view of the world, not least because he himself has worked on a number of moral issues both in the North and the South (Fassin 2003, 2007; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Fassin and Rechtman 2009). Evoking the main objects of his own research, he adamantly declares that it is not the purpose of moral anthropology to 'act for the good of humanity' (Fassin 2008: 334). Just as it is not the aim of medical anthropology to offer a therapeutic treatment to the suffering patient, it is not the purpose of moral anthropology to propose ethical principles for the construction of a better society. The task of moral anthropology, rather, is to provide a historically and culturally situated account 'of the local sense of right and wrong' (Fassin 2008: 336). In so doing, moral anthropology renders visible and intelligible 'moral issues in a cultural, and consequently historical, context' (Fassin 2008: 341). In what sense such an inquiry nevertheless entails an ethical dimension even though it systematically resists and rejects explicit value judgments is a crucial question that is not immediately addressed by Fassin. The reason, as I will suggest below, may be due to the fact that Fassin generally appears to restrict the ethical field to an axiological system of moral values and rules. On the basis of such an axiological system it may become difficult if not impossible to articulate an ethos of the practice of anthropological inquiry.

In Fassin's programmatic outline of a moral anthropology, the concept of culture is granted analytic pride of place. Moral discourse and moral practice, Fassin suggests, are always culturally constructed and necessarily so. Such discourse and practice inevitably takes a particular shape at particular times in particular places. Needless to say that Fassin's strong emphasis on the concept of culture as a key theoretical orientation and methodological commitment concomitantly raises the vexed question of cultural relativism. If the concept of culture constitutes a key analytic term in this form of anthropological inquiry, is a relativist account of the world the necessary result? What, in fact, is Fassin's take on the question of cultural relativism?

Cultural relativism

In anthropology, cultural relativism is traditionally traced back to American anthropologist Franz Boas. In his work, published in the early 20th century, Boas famously mobilized the concept of culture against the racist views of 19th-century scholars and their evolutionist representations of primitive peoples, so called. Rather than to rank primitive peoples ethnocentrically in relation to modern societies, so called, Boas conceived of cultures as bounded wholes. This incredibly productive theoretical and methodological approach inspired, among others, by German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder allowed Boas to stress the singularity, diversity, and incommensurability of cultural systems (Stocking 1996). The analytic concept of culture and the philosophical perspective of cultural relativism constituted a powerful political strategy against all forms of racism

(though see Trouillot 2003). Taking shape at a particular moment in modern history, the scientific promotion of cultural relativism was part of a broader social and political struggle in 20th-century America.

As the historian of anthropology George W. Stocking observed, once

> the 'one grand scheme' of evolutionism was rejected, the multiplicity of *cultures* which took the place of the cultural *stages* of savagery, barbarism and civilization were no more easily brought within one standard of evaluation than they were within one system of explanation. Each was an integrated way of life, and although they might be based on 'different traditions' and on a different 'equilibrium of emotion and reason,' they might still be of 'no less value' than our own. (Stocking 1968: 229)

By questioning the universal standards of comparison promoted by the theory of evolution, Boas opened the door for the eventual emergence of cultural relativism. 'The shattering of the vertical order of evolutionary schemes', anthropologist Paul Rabinow noted, 'left a horizontal plane on which each culture had a place which was as valuable as any other' (Rabinow 1983: 54). Each culture was seen in this context as distinctive, unique, and inherently valuable.

In his 1949 textbook *Man and His Works* (sic), Melville Herskovits, a student of Franz Boas, offered a concise statement of cultural relativism. For Herskovits it was a matter of fact that 'every society has rules of conduct, an ethical system, a moral code, that the individual members rarely question' (Herskovits 1972: 56). In philosophical terms, cultural relativism was a perspective 'which, in recognizing the values set up by every society to guide its own life, lays stress on the dignity inherent in every body of custom and on the need for tolerance of conventions though they may differ from one's own' (Herskovits 1949: 76). The philosophical perspective of cultural relativism enabled scholars to recognize 'the validity of every set of norms for the people whose lives are guided by them, and the values they represent' (Herskovits 1949: 76). In this account of anthropology as a scientific discipline, cultural relativism implied a form of moral relativism, which resulted – when taken to its extreme – in Herskovits' dubious claim that 'the concept of freedom should be realistically redefined as the right to be exploited in terms of the patterns of one's own culture' (Herskovits 1972: 9). According to Herskovits, the epistemological function of anthropological research was to observe, describe, and analyze axiological systems of value and to grant pride of place to the specificities of distinctive moral regimes even if these moral regimes were constructed and maintained to justify existing social inequalities. The political function of anthropological research was to reject ethnocentric accounts of the social world and to promote a tolerant attitude.

Paradoxically, as Rabinow pointed out in his essay, this presumably politically progressive perspective of cultural relativism ultimately amounted to a form of nihilism. By nihilism Rabinow means, following Nietzsche, 'the equating of all beings, the leveling of meaningful differentiation, the transvaluation of all values' (Rabinow 1983: 52). According to Rabinow, the anthropological project pursued

by Boas and his students was based on the recognition of the Other and was aimed at the preservation of difference, but it actually had – despite its original intent – the opposite effect. As Rabinow explains:

> First, difference is emphasized, the uniqueness of each culture; then it is reduced to the Same. They are all doing the same thing. All these value systems are the same insofar as they are world views, or echoes; their content differs but there is no way to choose between them as long as they survive. . . . Each way of life is worthy of respect because ultimately each is equally untrue. (Rabinow 1983: 60)

Paradoxically, difference was suppressed at the very moment of its (academic) recognition because no difference that would make a difference appeared to exist anymore.

But it is not just the charge of nihilism that has profoundly challenged the philosophical perspective of cultural relativism in the past few decades. What one also finds at the heart of Herskovits' anthropological account is a conspicuous tendency to reduce the ethical field to a question of moral values and to confine its scope within the rigid boundaries of a 'culture' or 'society'. As Herskovits claimed, 'every society has rules of conduct, an ethical system, a moral code, that the individual members rarely question' (Herskovits 1972: 56). In recent years, this problematic approach has been systematically questioned and a growing number of anthropologists has become aware that 'we must now face a much less tidy, much less insular sociocultural landscape, in which the boundaries of neither cultures nor traditions can be taken either analytically or methodologically for granted', as James Faubion pointed out (Faubion 2001: 84). The perspective of cultural relativism, Faubion suggested, 'must consequently always fall short' in a world profoundly shaped and reshaped by ever-accelerating, ever-expanding processes of globalization and fragmentation (Appadurai 1996). Durkheim's distinctive 'equation of the moral with society', as James Laidlaw phrased it a few years ago, is simply no option anymore for the contemporary anthropology of ethics (Laidlaw 2002: 314; see as well Zigon 2008).

In his article, Fassin frequently invokes the concept of culture but he concomitantly rejects the classical perspective of cultural relativism. His rejection, however, is of a particular sort, for he also suggests that the discomfort with ethics, of which cultural relativism is a historical articulation, actually serves a valuable heuristic function for the development of a moral anthropology. 'Since value judgment is the most commonly shared attitude toward the social world', Fassin reasons, 'the anthropologist cannot avoid and should not elude the moral position he or she adopts, either explicitly or implicitly' (Fassin 2008: 341). Still, moral anthropology is not a scholarly undertaking actively promoting its own morality. It is therefore crucial, Fassin underscores, that anthropologists deploy their discomfort as a heuristic and continue to 'question the values and judgments that underlie our work' (Fassin 2008: 341). Accordingly, the ideal result of moral anthropology is not a relativist description but a critical account of the social world. And precisely

because the anthropologist inhabits that world too, his or her values must also become objects of scientific investigation. Moral restraint is central, Fassin suggests, but this moral restraint should not be anchored in the problematic perspective of cultural relativism. It is because anthropologists may not always necessarily be aware of the values that they entertain in the first place that reflexivity rather than relativism is required. The kind of restraint necessary for this form of moral anthropology is the result of the relentless work of reflexive inquiry (for an account of such a form of reflexive inquiry see Bourdieu 1993, 2000). What we find at the methodological heart of Fassin's outline of a moral anthropology is thus not cultural relativism but anthropological reflexivity.

In Fassin's article, it is thus neither the perspective of moral positionalism nor the perspective of cultural relativism that are supposed to bring the anthropology of ethics into a productive relationship with the ethics of anthropology. It is, rather, the notion of anthropological reflexivity conceived of as a form of critical analysis that is invoked by the author so as to forge a robust connection between the anthropology of ethics and the ethics of anthropology. Critical analysis, Fassin notes, necessarily entails a process of permanent questioning; ideally it contributes to a growing state of self-awareness within the discipline. Moral anthropology, and that is to say, the systematic investigation of moral reasoning based on ethnographic fieldwork, 'should always remain problematic, in the sense that it should always pose problems to the researcher both epistemologically and ethically' (Fassin 2008: 341). The general discomfort with the question of morality in the discipline of anthropology therefore serves an important heuristic function for the development of a moral anthropology, pushing scholars to gradually become aware of their own moral values and assumptions.

Despite the crucial work that the notion of critical analysis is asked to accomplish in Fassin's outline of a moral anthropology, the author does not elaborate it further in his article. Here, at the most decisive juncture of his endeavor, Fassin's account remains somewhat vague, and the important problem, the problem of anthropology's ethics, is not explicitly addressed. If the anthropology of ethics and the ethics of anthropology are linked by a form of critical analysis, how can we define such an analysis? What kind of analytic work does it entail? How can this work be accomplished? What are the implications and ramifications of such a work? And finally, what role does the anthropological discomfort with the question of morality play in all this? It is to these questions that I now turn.

Critical analysis

If I have just suggested that Fassin's article apparently fails to elaborate the crucial notion of critical analysis, my remark is actually somewhat inaccurate. Fassin's proposal, as a matter of fact, is to distinguish between moral discourse on the one hand and critical analysis on the other – a distinction that he considers important in theory but 'difficult to establish in practice' (Fassin 2008: 339). Moral discourse, Fassin argues, 'evaluates, judges, sanctions' (Fassin 2008: 339). Critical analysis, by

contrast, 'proposes a possible intelligibility by considering the sense that words and acts have for social agents'. While moral discourse 'simplifies for the purpose of its cause', critical analysis foregrounds the inevitable complexity of issues and positions (Fassin 2008: 339). While moral discourse is enunciated a priori, critical analysis is crafted a posteriori. In contrast to moral discourse, critical analysis necessarily requires empirical investigation and theoretical elaboration.

The seemingly straightforward distinction between moral discourse on the one hand and critical analysis on the other is not without its problems, however. Among these problems is the considerable risk of inadvertently reducing the aim of moral anthropology to the empirical analysis of moral claims in local context. Contrasting moral discourse with critical analysis, Fassin seems to situate moral anthropology firmly within the framework of cultural anthropology and its constitutive concern with the contextualization of thought, action, and passion. However, to suggest that it is the aim of moral anthropology to put moral claims into local context and explore 'local systems of moral values within specific societies' may ultimately deprive the scholarly endeavor of its theoretical and methodological specificity (Fassin 2008: 336). Without a distinctive analytical framework, the result may very well be that moral anthropology gradually returns to a conventional form of cultural anthropology. Significantly, Fassin's call to analyze moral claims in local context also runs the risk of taking the local for granted as a presumably self-evident empirical reality rather than to conceive of the term as a normative construct deployed for heuristic purposes. Rather than to insist on the local as the 'only relevant site of anthropological inquiry' (Lakoff and Collier 2004: 421), scholars have increasingly suggested in the past few years that it is necessary to replace anthropology's 'time-honored commitment to the *local* . . . with an attentiveness to social, cultural, and political *location*' (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 5; see as well Lakoff and Collier 2004; Lambek 2011). The task of the anthropologist, according to Gupta and Ferguson, is not necessarily to put things into local context, but to investigate contemporary practices of localization across multiple scales. What eventually counts as 'local' may differ from time to time. Such a strategy that considers the 'local' as a question rather than an answer seems fruitful for future empirical inquiries in the kind of moral anthropology outlined by Fassin.

What is perhaps most problematic about the distinction between moral discourse on the one hand and critical analysis on the other is that it may be misread by anthropologists as inadvertently promoting a form of cultural relativism despite its intent. When all is said and done, it is indeed difficult to decide to what extent the detached stance of critical analysis proposed by Fassin differs from the classical perspective of cultural relativism. If, however, as Fassin vigorously underscores, it is not the task of moral anthropology to promote the perspective of cultural relativism, the concept of critique as a form of reflexive analysis needs to be specified in much more detail, or else Fassin's outline of a moral anthropology runs the risk of eventually turning, almost by necessity, into a belated version of Herskovits' cultural analysis of local systems of moral values.[3]

In the second part of this essay, my aim, therefore, is to explore the concept of critique in more detail. The concept of critique, I belief, is indeed essential for Fassin's project to succeed, for it also appears to be the only available term today which is able to bring the anthropology of ethics into a productive relationship with the ethics of anthropology without concomitantly invoking either the problematic perspective of moral positionalism or cultural relativism. It is perhaps no coincidence that so many scholars currently find themselves laboring with so much passion and so much dedication over the crucial question of critique. Addressing the question of critique in this essay, my hope is to sketch an analytic perspective which is able to provide the anthropology of ethics not only with a distinctive empirical domain but also with a specific theoretical and methodological approach. Significantly, the concept of critique concomitantly entails a certain understanding of the ethical field, as we shall see shortly.

Let me start this second part of my response not with the concept of critique itself but with a closely related notion. In his *Keywords*, published in 1976, Raymond Williams observed that 'criticism' has become 'a very difficult word' (Williams 1976: 84). It has become a very difficult word because 'it has an underlying sense of judgment' (Williams 1976: 84). As Williams notes in his historical overview, 'its predominant early sense was of fault-finding' (Williams 1976: 85). But what is at issue, he suggests, 'is not only the association between "criticism" and fault-finding but the more basic association between "criticism" and judgment as apparently general and natural processes' (Williams 1976: 86). This notion of 'criticism', he underlines, 'prevents that understanding of response which does not assume the habit (or right or duty) of judgment.' What needs to be understood, rather, is the 'specificity of the response, which is not a judgment but a practice' (Williams 1976: 86). The critical response, Williams points out, must be conceived of not as a judgment but as a practice.

If, as Raymond Williams suggests, the critical response must be understood as a practice irreducible to judgment and in complex relations with specific situations, what kind of practice is it exactly? It is in the work of philosopher and historian Michel Foucault where we might find a tentative answer to the question. As Foucault remarked in an interview, 'I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life.... It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep' (Foucault 1997: 323; see as well Deleuze 1997). In his essay entitled 'What is Critique?', Foucault examined in more detail what he termed the 'curious activity of critique' (Foucault 1996: 383). As Foucault observes, 'there was in the modern West (dating, roughly, from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century) a certain manner of thinking, of speaking, likewise of acting, and a certain relation to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, as well as a relation to society, to culture, to others, and all this one might name the "critical attitude"' (Foucault 1996: 382). For Foucault critique is a practice, which can take the form of a dispositional attitude once it is exercised in a systematic and methodical fashion. Nevertheless, the curious activity of critique cannot be

defined by itself. It cannot be defined by itself because it 'exists only in relation with something other than itself' (Foucault 1996: 383). Critique is always the critique of something, and that something is always different from critique. Critique, Foucault suggests, is a function, it is 'an instrument, a means for a future or a truth that it will not know and that it will not be' (Foucault 1996: 383). But even though it is impossible to define the critical attitude by itself, Foucault nonetheless suggests a kind of definition when he writes that there is 'something in critique that is related to virtue' (Foucault 1996: 383).

In order to more fully grasp Foucault's concept of critique as a form of virtue, we must consider his distinctive view of the ethical field more generally. What, in fact, might he mean by 'virtue?' If, indeed, there is something in critique that is related to virtue, what exactly is virtue? Here we enter into a broader discussion, which concerns Foucault's distinctive understanding of the ethical field. In the introduction to 'The Use of Pleasure', Foucault indicates what he means by the 'ethical' or 'moral', two terms that are used interchangeably in the following section, but that are distinguished later on. He says:

> For an action to be 'moral,' it must not be reducible to an act or a series of acts conforming to a rule, a law, or a value. Of course all moral action involves a relationship with the reality in which it is carried out, and a relationship with the self. The latter is not simply 'self-awareness' but self-formation as an 'ethical subject,' a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself. There is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without 'modes of subjectivation' and an 'aesthetics' or 'practices of the self' that support them. Moral action is indissociable from these forms of self-activity. (Foucault 1990: 28)

What is important here for our purposes is that Foucault conceives of the ethical as a specific kind of practice, a practice irreducible to the prescriptions entailed by a moral code of conduct. Ethics, in other words, should not be reduced to the question of following the prescriptions of a given norm or rule. For Foucault, ethics refers to a different set of practices, it refers to an 'exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being' (Foucault 1997: 282). Although the constitution of the self as an ethical subject always occurs within a specific situation circumscribed by a given set of norms, the *practice itself*, which takes the distinctive form of a regular exercise, is irreducible to these norms.

For Foucault, as Judith Butler once suggested, the ethical life is necessarily an inventive life and therefore a critical life. The self is not given in advance; it must,

on the contrary, be crafted. But this crafting is not a miraculous act of autonomous self-creation. Butler puts it nicely:

> From the outset, what relation the self will take to itself, how it will craft itself in response to an injunction, how it will form itself, and what labor it will perform upon itself is a challenge, if not an open question. The injunction compels the act of self-making or self-crafting, which means that it does not act unilaterally or deterministically upon the subject. It sets the stage for the subject's self-crafting, which always takes place in relation to an imposed set of norms. The norm does not produce the subject as its necessary effect, nor is the subject fully free to disregard the norm that inaugurates its reflexivity; one invariably struggles with conditions on one's own life that one could not have chosen. If there is an operation of agency, or, indeed, freedom in this struggle, it takes place in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraint. (Butler 2005: 18)

Because ethical life necessarily involves a certain critical distance towards oneself and others, it cannot be captured by an exhaustive account of moral values or codes of conduct as they may exist at a particular place at a particular time for a certain group of people.

As Foucault underscores, ethical projects always take shape in concrete contexts defined by power relations and normative constraints but they nevertheless cannot be reduced to these contexts. 'If I am ... interested', Foucault writes, 'in how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group' (Foucault 1997: 291). Although the role that culture and society play is invoked here, these entities are not conceived of as 'insuperable boundary, either to the ethical imagination or to ethical practice' (Faubion 2001: 89). Although ethical practice and ethical imagination necessarily emerge in distinctive social and cultural contexts, which circumscribe the possibilities of ethical life, it is not Foucault's aim to put ethical practices and imaginations back into these contexts. Foucault is just as much interested in how these practices and imaginations may be able to break with these contexts under particular circumstances and become parts of a new form of life. The field of ethical practice, James Laidlaw once observed, is 'wider than the following of socially sanctioned moral rules. . . . It also includes our response to invitations or injunctions to make oneself into a certain kind of person' (Laidlaw 2002: 321).

Conclusion: Towards an ethics of discomfort

Let me conclude this response with four propositions that I consider essential for a critical engagement with the question of ethics today. The first proposition concerns the ethical field, the second concerns the ethical subject, the third concerns the ethical imagination, and the fourth concerns critical analysis.

1. The ethical field

There is a strong tendency, both in the academic and the non-academic context, to confine the ethical field to a set of moral values and rules and to reduce the ethical problem to a question of deliberation and judgment. This characteristic circumscription and reduction of the ethical field to an axiological system is also at work in the perspectives of moral positionalism and cultural relativism, even though they are diametrically opposed in other respects. The tendency to confine the scope of the ethical field to a set of moral values and rules and to reduce the ethical problem to a question of deliberation and judgment is also acute in debates about the ethics of anthropology. Documenting and analyzing a series of discussions within the anthropological profession, which led to the formulation of ethical codes for anthropological researchers, Lynn Meskell and Peter Pels have argued that these abstract and isolated ethical guidelines for practicing anthropologists 'disembed, exteriorize, and alienate ethics from everyday scientific practice' (Meskell and Pels 2005: 1). Not surprisingly, discussions about ethical codes of conduct have by and large focused on the identification and formulation of rules and values for anthropological researchers, the examination and investigation of the extent to which the researchers comply with these rules and values, and the formation and constitution of professional agencies and institutional review boards charged to enforce them.

2. The ethical subject

In the growing literature on the anthropology of ethics and the ethics of anthropology, the subject of ethical deliberation and judgment is often considered given from the outset. The inevitable result of such an account of ethical practice has been the profound alienation so distinctive of the liberal subject, whose relation to 'his' or 'her' values can only be conceived of in terms of 'his' or 'her' personal choice. Once this choice systematically evades the difficult work of forming and reforming the self in relation to oneself and to others, it has – literally – no substance anymore (MacIntyre 1984). The choices become arbitrary and the 'values' may be changed according to the exigencies of the moment. The challenge for the development of an anthropology of ethics is to shift the focus from the ethical subject to modes of subjectivation. And that is to say, to shift the focus towards historically distinctive practices, in which a self constitutes itself as an ethical subject. What is important here for our purposes is that we conceive of the ethical as a specific kind of practice, a practice irreducible to the prescriptions entailed by a moral code of conduct inscribed in an axiological system. Although the constitution of the self as an ethical subject always occurs within a specific situation circumscribed by a set of norms, the practice itself is irreducible to these norms. What matters, therefore, are modes of existence and their immanent capacities (Deleuze 1997).

3. The ethical imagination

Ethical projects always take shape in concrete contexts defined by power relations and normative constraints, but they cannot be reduced to these contexts. If we are interested in how persons constitute themselves as ethical subjects through historically specific modes of subjectivation, these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the persons themselves. They are based on models that people find in particular contexts. As Faubion suggested, entities such as society and culture should not be conceived of as a boundary to ethical imagination. Although ethical practice and ethical imagination necessarily emerge in distinctive contexts, it should not be the aim of anthropology to put ethical practices and imaginations back into these contexts. Anthropologists must just as much be interested in how these practices and imaginations may be able to break with these contexts under particular circumstances.

4. Critical analysis

If the anthropology of ethics and the ethics of anthropology are linked by a form of critical analysis, how, then, can we define such an analysis? Here, Foucault's work is especially helpful. 'What', he once asked, 'is philosophical activity... if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently?' To clear an imaginative space, Foucault's first choice was to swerve away, not so much from others, than from himself. The purpose of critical analysis is to learn 'to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently instead of legitimating what is already known' (Foucault 1990: 9). What we can find in Foucault, as I have argued in this essay, is an understanding of critical analysis as itself a form of ethical practice or mode of existence. In an article where he calls for an 'ethics of discomfort', he writes:

> never to consent to being completely comfortable with one's own presuppositions. Never to let them fall peacefully asleep, but also never to believe that a new fact will suffice to overturn them; never to imagine that one can change them like arbitrary axioms, remembering that in order to give them the necessary mobility one must have a distant view, but also look at what is nearby and all around oneself. To be very mindful that everything one perceives is evident only against a familiar and little-known horizon, that every certainty is sure only through the support of a ground that is always unexplored. ... In that lesson, there is a whole ethics of sleepless evidence. (Foucault 2000: 448, translation slightly modified)

Here, then, we might perhaps find an answer to the question as to why the discomfort with ethics might serve a valuable heuristic function for the development of a moral anthropology, as Fassin suggested it in his inspiring article.

The answer might very well be that it serves such a function because it is the spontaneous articulation of an ethics of discomfort.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. For Stoczkowski's companion piece, see Stoczkowski (2008). A rejoinder was published recently by Zigon (2010).
2. My distinction between the ethics of anthropology and the anthropology of ethics is inspired by Luc Boltanski's distinction between critical sociology and the sociology of critique, although it is not entirely congruent with it (see Boltanski 2009).
3. A similar problem lies at the heart of Jarrett Zigon's approach (2008).

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