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3. Moral anthropology and apriori enunciations, Kirsten Bell

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Numerous commentators have pointed to an ethical turn in anthropology since the beginning of the twenty-first century, which has seen the emergence of an approach focused on questions of morality and ethics. Under the rubric of ‘the anthropology of ethics’ (Faubion 2011, Laidlaw 2014) and ‘moral anthropology’ (Fassin 2008, 2012),ⁱ it has been described as “one of the fastest-growing fields within the discipline” (Fassin 2014: 430). At first glance, the ethical turn seems merely to call for an expansion of the anthropological gaze to include a new set of concerns: the ‘ethnography of moralities’, to use Signe Howell’s (1997) older term. But closer inspection reveals a strikingly ambitious project—one that essentially calls for a wholesale re-visioning of anthropology. For this reason, it is deserving of sustained scrutiny.

In principle, I have no problem with anthropologists turning their gaze towards the study of morals and “how moral questions are posed and addressed or, symmetrically, how nonmoral questions are rephrased as moral” (Fassin 2008: 4). Nor do I disagree that morals should be a legitimate object for social anthropology in much the same way that politics or medicine is, although I think that ‘morals’ are objects of a fundamentally different order than either of these examples—and not just because of the normative connotations of the term ‘moral’ itself.

There are dangers here, ones that relate to the question of what is meant by ‘morals’ and ‘ethics’; this is something glossed over in many accounts. For example, Didier Fassin explicitly avoids defining these terms, justifying this via recourse to the lack of philosophical agreement on their meaning and “because for social scientists there is a benefit from proceeding in this inductive way” (Fassin 2012: 6). But ‘morals’, ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’ are loose and encompassing concepts. Especially when used as synonyms for ‘values’—which they generally seem to be by those who have piloted the ethical turn—they are “far too broad, far too promiscuous” (Edel and Edel in Howell 1997: 2); potentially anything and *everything* is within their ambit.

This encompassing scope is something proponents themselves occasionally highlight. For example, James Laidlaw argues that the anthropology of ethics shouldn’t be thought of as a new specialism: “Instead, its mission should be an enrichment of the core conceptual vocabulary and practice of anthropology, and its proper place an integral dimension of the anthropological enterprise as such. The reason for this is that ethical considerations pervade all spheres of human life” (2014: 1-2). Indeed, the anthropology of ethics is presented both as something new and simultaneously *what we have always done*. To quote Laidlaw again:

I have said that the anthropology of ethics has developed largely within the last couple of decades, and in the relevant sense this is true.... But it is also and equally importantly true that morality has never been absent from anthropological thought. Many of the greatest ethnographies written throughout the discipline's history have at their heart sophisticated discussions of moral concepts and reasoning (Laidlaw 2014: 10).

He goes on to produce a strikingly presentist account in which various classic ethnographies are reclaimed as examples of the anthropology of ethics—among them E.E. Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*.

There is little question that Evans-Pritchard saw notions of witchcraft as morally invested; in his words, "It is in the idiom of witchcraft that Azande express moral rules which mostly lie outside of criminal and civil law" (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 51). But what happens when an ethnography whose primary significance resides in the ways it "opens up new horizons of understanding that are embedded in magical practices" (Kapferer 2002: 3) is reduced to a discussion of local conceptions of the person and prevalent moral values? I would argue that prefiguring 'the moral' in this way serves to *transform* the phenomenon in question: reducing it to terms external to it and foreclosing other equally important 'horizons of understanding' that magical beliefs and practices speak to.

In fact, this danger is something alluded to—albeit unwittingly—by Laidlaw (2014: 2) himself, who points to the study of gender as a precedent for the anthropology of ethics, noting that what started out as a sub-discipline of anthropology (feminist anthropology) ultimately became a pervasive modification of the field as a whole. I suspect the analogy is more accurate than he intends because the past quarter century has made the "totalizing gestures of feminism" (Butler 1990: 18) starkly apparent—not only in relation to the binary of sex/gender it was founded upon, but in terms of the ways that 'gender' has been prefigured at the expense of everything else (e.g., class, culture, race, religion). Thus, if anything, the comparison illustrates the need to proceed cautiously.

This brings me to the second premise of the ethical turn, which makes a series of claims not only about *what* we should study but *how* we should study it. It's in relation to the latter topic that the extent of the ambition to reshape anthropology becomes apparent. Although a preoccupation for all those involved in the field, it arguably reaches its clearest articulation in Didier Fassin's (2008, 2012) work. As Carlo Caduff (2011) notes, Fassin essentially proposes a means of bringing together the anthropology of ethics and the ethics of anthropology; indeed, this is precisely why Fassin prefers the term 'moral anthropology'. This term, he suggests, urges us to consider our *own* moral positioning: "whether we recognize it or not, there is always a moral positioning in the objects we choose, the place we occupy in the field, the way we interpret facts, the form of writing we elaborate" (Fassin 2012: 5).

Despite moral anthropology's disavowal of normative moral positions, there is an implicit normative moral position being taken here. In other words, its assertion

there is a moral positioning in our objects of study that needs to be reflexively considered is *itself* a normative moral position. Thus, moral anthropology seems to slide into exactly the sort of moral discourse it interrogates; it too is “enunciated a priori (it knows where good and evil are located) on the basis of intangible principles: *it does not need ethnographic validation*” (Fassin 2008: 339, emphasis added). In essence, doesn’t this perspective assume the very thing it aims to study? Just to be clear, I’m not asserting that our work is ‘neutral’, ‘objective’ or a ‘view from nowhere’—assumptions that were decisively shattered with the postmodern turn (which moral anthropology is arguably the latest incarnation of). But I’m far from convinced that the ‘values’ that drive it are a priori *moral* ones.

Let me turn to an example Fassin himself provides to illustrate my point.ⁱⁱ Fassin (2012) argues that until twenty or thirty years ago, topics such as violence, suffering, trauma, humanitarianism and human rights received little attention from anthropologists. This “remarkable evolution”, he suggests, has frequently been accompanied by a more engaged positioning, raising the question of why we were so obli. Such a remarkable evolution raises the question of why we were unaware of or indifferent to the tragic of the world before and, symmetrically, why we became so passionately involved in it in recent years (Fassin 2012: 5). Instead, “kinship or myths, witchcraft or rituals, peasantry or development” (p. 5) were the primary objects of our gaze. Characterizing this Today, however, , were seen as more relevant for the understanding of human societies. This transformation of our gaze and of our lexicon

Fassin doesn’t attempt to explain the reasons for this transformation in the anthropological gaze, although it’s clear that he sees it driven to some extent by “moral indignation” (2008: 337) and the emergence of a moral hierarchy of legitimate objects of study that increasingly dictates *what* we study and *how* (Caduff 2011). But there are other ways this ‘evolution’ might be read. As Bruce Kapferer notes, “the major problem with some views concerning new developments in anthropology and cognate disciplines is a failure to examine them against processes occurring in the wider global political scene” (2000: 175). More recently, Kapferer has highlighted the “intense pressure” anthropology faces “by governments and business to be pragmatically relevant” (2012: 815)—surely this, as much as anything, explains anthropology’s growing preoccupation with social ‘problems’. To echo Wiktor Stoczkowski’s (2008: 349) observation, even the overtly morally committed anthropologist “does not cease to be a *homo economicus academicus*”.

Writing in 1997, Simon Marginson highlighted the rise of what he termed the ‘managed university’ and the ways in which institutional autonomy and academic freedom were being fundamentally reworked. I suspect that the shift in topics Fassin highlights over the past two or three decades maps quite neatly onto these transformations in the academy that anthropologists have elsewhere explored under the guise of audit culture (e.g., Strathern 2000; Shore 2008) and the rise of the neoliberal academy (e.g., Shore 2010). For example, in Canada, where I resided for more than a decade, academics are expected to focus on research that

contributes in a direct way to solving social, economic and cultural challenges and problems (Dehli and Taylor 2006). Thus, the anthropologist studying “violence and suffering, trauma and mourning, prisons and camps”—especially if her research promises to produce the holy trinity of ‘impact’, ‘relevance’ and ‘significance’—stands a far better chance of obtaining funding (on which academic tenure increasingly depends) than the one studying “kinship or myths, witchcraft or rituals”. The decision to pursue these topics is as much a matter of livelihood as morality, even if framed in moral terms.ⁱⁱⁱ

In sum, moral anthropology aims to introduce new objects of study whilst respecting (and protecting) the epistemological grounds of our work—opening up the “black box” (Fassin 2008: 338) of our own moralities and those we study. But by prefiguring ‘the moral’ as the primary grounds of our engagements, I can’t help feel that one black box is being replaced with another.

Notes

- i. Although there are differences in anthropologists’ individual positions, I treat the ‘anthropology of ethics’ and ‘moral anthropology’ as largely synonymous (although I tend to use the anthropologists’ own designation when talking about their work). I think this is justified by the fact that there are common strands in their vision and arguments, despite the evident contrasts.
- ii. See Bastin this volume for a more in-depth critique of Fassin’s arguments.
- iii. To such observations Fassin might well respond that this is precisely the sort of thing moral anthropology seeks to uncover! After all, moral anthropology is not only concerned with how moral questions are posed and addressed but “how nonmoral questions are rephrased as moral” (Fassin 2008: 4). But I suspect this says more about the colonizing tendencies of the ‘morals-as-values’ frame than it does about the nature of the phenomenon in question.

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