

BOOK REVIEWS

FASSIN, DIDIER (ed.). *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*. Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012 Pp. 664. ISBN: 978-0-470-65645-7 (hardcover), 978-1-118-95950-3 (paper back), 978-1-118-29058-3 (ebook).

Morals, morality and ethics have become a popular field of anthropological research and discussion in recent decades. Probably the most comprehensive edited volume dealing with treatment of the subject in anthropology is Didier Fassin's *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*. Fassin notes that he prefers to use the concept of moral anthropology (despite its historical and semantic problems), rather than anthropology of moralities since he understands the latter as too narrow a concept: 'the domain under study and the issues that are raised go far beyond local moralities; they include but exceed them' (p. 4). Secondly, he argues, discussing anthropology of moralities may confuse the role of the anthropologist as a scientist who also has a moral position that emerges from her/his own context.

Moral anthropology 'deals with how moral questions are posed and addressed or, symmetrically, how nonmoral questions are rephrased as moral. It explores the moral categories via which we apprehend the world and identifies the moral communities that we construe, examines the moral signification of action and the moral labor of agents, analyzes moral issues and moral debates at an individual or collective level' (p. 4).

However, throughout the book, scholars use the concepts of 'moral', 'moralities' and 'ethics', sometimes making a distinction between them and sometimes using them in a unified manner, depending on their stance and philosophical or scientific approach. This may sometimes feel a bit confusing to the reader, yet it is justified. Fassin argues that the studies of what is moral should be both reflexive and descriptive. He traces diverse philosophical and social scientific approaches to the subject, identifying two main orientations which derive from Émile Durkheim and Michel Foucault respectively.

The first main orientation is Durkheim's proposition concerning 'moral facts' by which he meant that while morality emerges out of rules of conduct, at the same time people have a desire to do good (act well). In Durkheim's view then, morality is both about duty and desire. This line of thought has its genealogy in Kantian philosophy. However, Durkheim saw morality as an object of study. Ethnographies in the Durkheimian tradition tend to look at how action is related to rules of conduct in the community in question.

The second approach derives from Michel Foucault who was interested in 'ethical conduct' and subjectivation or 'the determination of the ethical subject' (p. 7). This approach stresses process and the self, and explores the 'freedom' of agents in becoming moral actors. In this approach people are not seen as trying to adapt themselves to rules but rather their actions are directed towards what they perceive as good life. This line of thought derives from Aristotelian philosophy. Fassin refers to Joel Robbins as he notes that there is a tension 'between the reproduction of a moral order and the recognition of an ethical freedom: are human beings doomed to conform themselves to rules or are they able to determine the right action by themselves?' (p. 8).

Fassin implies that this book is not a Kantian effort to impose moral laws on human society, but rather draws from Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, taking an analytical rather than normative approach to morality. In this line of thought, moral anthropology is not concerned with making normative statements, but rather with studying moral debates and tensions, and the different moral positions of different parties to these debates or conflicts.

The book includes 34 articles that are divided into six thematic discussions: legacies, approaches, localities, worlds, politics and dialogues. The first section on legacies includes the thinkers and topics that have shaped the anthropological discussion of moral and ethical issues. In these articles writers discuss Durkheimian (Bruno Karsenti), Weberian (Isabelle Kalinowski), and Foucauldian (James Faubion) approaches to the anthropology of morals. It also takes up some general themes such as relativism and universalism (Richard Shweder). As an exception, one article explores the role of anthropologists as ethical actors and discusses the primary and secondary harms anthropologists may cause. Primary harm refers to that inflicted on the people studied by, for instance, not informing them of the real purpose of the research; secondary harm when the misconduct of the anthropologist causes harm to the reputation of anthropologists (Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban). In this section one of the most intriguing articles is Marc Edelman's text on E.P. Thompson and a forgotten genealogy of the 'moral economy' concept, which became widely used among anthropologists after the work of James Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976). Edelman argues that Thompson has not been widely referenced, even by anthropologists, though many have analyzed resistance and social mobilization in terms of moral economy, discussing sharing and exchange as moral values in contrast to individualism and the market economy.

The second part is called Approaches. In this section, the writers explore moralities and ethics in relation to values. Here the role of culture in the shaping of moral values and the role of morality in the making of cultural values, and conflicts between values, or the hierarchies and compromises to which they give rise, are explored. This section provides an interesting compilation of anthropological studies on relations between culture, morals, ethics and values. For instance, Joel Robbins proposes that 'an analysis of the role of cultural values in shaping moral life enables us to encompass the morality of reproduction and that of freedom within a single framework' (p. 130–131). He believes this focus on values and pluralism takes us back to political philosophy debates. In a way, this discussion summarizes a lot of what the book is about for many anthropologists: an emphasis on culture and values in relation to the moral. Other writers discuss ordinary ethics (Veena Das), moral sentiments (Jason Throop), moral reasoning (Karen Sykes), virtue (Thomas Widlok), and narratives (Jarrett Zigon), thus exploring different philosophical approaches to moral in anthropology.

The third part, Localities, explores social contexts that make morals meaningful. Many of the approaches in this section stress an Aristotelian and Foucauldian approach, or 'ethics as a set of practical activities whose value resides not so much in what they mean but in what they do or achieve' (Mahmood, p. 223). Saba Mahmood's article on piety and ethics is a thoroughly Foucauldian exploration of the relationship between moral codes and actions (subjectivation), or more precisely an 'analysis of the specific

shape and character or ethical practices [through which] one can apprehend the kind of ethical subject that is formed' (p. 234). Harri Englund's article discusses poverty in relation to economic rights and obligations and dissolves the boundaries between ethics and morality. Caroline Humphrey discusses inequality in terms of commensurability that produces 'distinct regimes of serial value, precedence, and hierarchy', stressing fairness, rather than justice which she relates to formative law (p. 303).

This section also provides two somewhat personal ethnographic approaches to moral anthropology (João Biehl and Yuehong Zhang). They are refreshing in that they engage anthropologists as subjects in the study of morals, thus indicating that our moral stances are an integral part of the research on morality. Biehl offers an ethnographic and quite personal narrative of care and 'social death', showing how certain technologies of care fail and how family relations are complexly intertwined with technologies of care that may become 'evil'; this is vividly illustrated by the case of Catarina who has been placed in an asylum that Biehl calls a zone of social abandonment—there the patients are neglected by their families and are over-medicated for their 'mental illnesses'. These 'unwanted' people are most probably neglected because of the increasing role of the family in a health care system in which medical antipsychotic treatment has become the main instrument, but which also affects family relations by producing too heavy a burden for them to carry. Everett Yuehong Zhang has done fieldwork in her home country China, tracing changes in expressions and feelings of loss or mourning. She argues that accounting for deaths has become an important means for achieving social solidarity; life-centered grieving in its different forms and contexts have become central to the understanding of mourning. Affects are important in the study of moral anthropology.

The fourth section, *Worlds*, discusses morality and ethics through broad universal concepts deployed in particular situations (religion, science, finance etc.). Once again, ethics and morality are not necessarily separated; rather, ethics can be seen as implicit in every human action. For instance, Michael Lambek combines the Weberian and the Durkheimian streams as he explores ritual as action. In this way, he avoids juxtaposing religion as a code of conduct and religion in practice. In other articles, the global and the local—the theme that unites the articles in this section—is discussed by exploring charity or global aid through the theories of exchange systems (Jonathan Benthall), and medicine as a set of cultural values (Adriana Petryna). Michael M. J. Fischer's article on science provides an interesting view on medical ethics through a personal narrative of the pioneer of immunology called Dr. Fritz Bachm, whose campaign against animal organ xenotransplanting to humans provides an ethnographic case study. Rules of law and legal practices have been a topic in anthropology at least since Malinowski (1926). Carol Greenhouse combines a Durkheimian approach—'law as the visible product of particular institutions at work'—with Malinowski's view that law is social or the 'binding effect of a particular reciprocal relation' (p. 436), showing how both Durkheim and Malinowski localized the law; her article is an argument against a universalizing human rights law.

One of the most intriguing articles in this section is Karen Ho's article on finance. She explores Wall Street morality through various actors such as traders or investment managers in a Wall Street setting; the article is theoretically and ethnographically interesting and answers to calls in anthropology to explore not only local populations

in far-away-places but also powerful actors in the 'centers' of the world. This article is specific in that it calls for an understanding of capitalism as a moral order and finance as part of this moral order.

The fifth part, Politics, explores boundaries between morality and politics, and how they articulate in specific settings, focusing on world politics. The article by Peter Redfield explores how actors use moral arguments to legitimize their actions as parties to humanitarian work, which he says is a form of action that claims to be inherently antipolitical. This claim to be beyond the political is problematized in the article: humanitarianism has become a secular theology to the agents of humanitarian work. Human rights is explored as 'poetics of the impossible', as Mark Goodale argues that there is a growing disparity between the global human rights discourse and discourses of local populations which are 'caught within spirals of despair and misunderstanding' (p. 479). Catherine Lutz and Kathleen Millar have written one of the few articles that explores morality in terms of its production in a 'privileged site': war. War is a morally weighted locus and moral understandings of war are constantly shifting; what becomes interesting is the labor that produces these 'shifting moral understandings of war' (p. 496). This kind of ethnography may reveal different moralities and the sites for the production of morals in a similar manner to Karen Ho's article on finance. Other articles touch upon issues such as violence (Alexander Hinton), punishment (Roger Lancaster), and borders (Josiah M. Heyman and John Symons).

In the final part, Dialogues, writers draw from neighboring disciplines such as moral philosophy, psychology, neurology, but also from evolutionary and cognitive anthropology. In this section universality and particularity emerge as the main points of debate. Nicolas Baumard and Dan Sperber claim that anthropologists have rejected methods and theories that discuss universal moral norms because their ethnographic studies, based on participant observation, show how moral judgments vary widely in different cultures. They wish to show, drawing from evolutionary theories, that despite various moral judgements and particular moral norms, 'there may well be universal foundations to human morality' (p. 612). In a way, neuroethics assumes the same position, claiming that morality emerges from our brains, which are physical entities; this deterministic view critically explores the view that people have a free will, but also shows that the constitution of morality is a very complex issue (Massimo Reichlin, p. 607). Kwame Anthony Appiah develops a dialogue between moral philosophy and anthropology drawing from Hume and the metaphysics of fact/value distinction; or how things are and how they ought to be. The main debate is about moral relativism and particularism; while philosophers have mainly explored 'cognitive relativism' in the Anglo-American world, anthropologists have produced ethnographic case studies. However, as with neuroethics and evolutionary anthropology, moral philosophy carries an assumption that despite cultural particularities, there is something universal to human morality.

Throughout the book, dialogues between philosophies and anthropological case studies produce rich understandings on various approaches, philosophical backgrounds and ethnographic specifics. The book asks: should we have moral anthropology? Without answering the question, it opens up new ways to discuss and approach moral questions through critical anthropology or by 'corresponding respectively to theoretical, methodological, epistemological, and political dimensions' (Fassin, p. 15). The problem

BOOK REVIEWS

with the book is that it is almost too exhaustive; nearly all the articles are extremely tight, theoretically-oriented contributions. Furthermore, when reading each section one sometimes wonders why the articles have been divided the way they have been, as similar approaches seem to appear in different sections, making it sometimes difficult to get a holistic view of the book. Nonetheless, this edited volume is a huge and very welcome contribution to the discussion of morals in anthropology and includes articles that are extremely profound and well written.

ANU LOUNELA
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
anu.lounela@helsinki.fi