

LIDLAW, JAMES. *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. 267. ISBN 9781107697317 (paperback).

There has been a virtual deluge of anthropological books during the last couple of years that take up ethics or morality as their central concern. Despite this, James Laidlaw's *The Subject of Virtue* feels like a fresh addition to this literature. It succeeds in the difficult task of making moral philosophy and moral anthropology talk to each other in a meaningful way, and manages to provoke the reader with its agenda of putting morality right in the middle of the anthropological enterprise. However, the kind of morality the book talks about is very specific. For example, it does not engage with new research in other disciplines such as social psychology or cognitive science. It is a matter of taste whether this is perceived as a weakness or strength of the book.

The book's opening chapter presents a programmatic list of anthropology's obstacles to taking ethics seriously. The first problem lies in locating the moral in society instead of the individual, as was most famously argued by Durkheim. The second obstacle, as identified by Laidlaw, is 'the mirage of relativism' (pp. 23–29), by which he means the crippling effect of a faux-relativism in serious analyses of ethical systems. He argues that when anthropologists are describing a cultural system, too often they are simultaneously denying the freedom of the people inhabiting it. A 'well-integrated' (p. 26) culture contains only habitual action, and has no space for ethical reflection. The third problem for an anthropology of ethics is to see Western selves as mirror-images of people everywhere else. The main culprit here for Laidlaw is Dumont, who famously argued that the individual does not exist in India. The fourth challenge is 'a too shallow relationship with moral philosophy' (p. 39). Somewhat unsurprisingly, Laidlaw seeks to redress this shortage by drawing from virtue ethics and Foucault-inspired genealogical studies—exactly the two philosophical traditions most engaged by existing moral anthropology.

The book has four main themes and respective chapters, discussing virtue ethics, Michel Foucault, freedom and responsibility. Laidlaw starts with a general review of how anthropology has engaged with virtue ethics. His main focus is a critical discussion of the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, and how his branch of virtue ethics has affected ethnographies of morality in anthropology. In *After Virtue* (2007 [1981]), his breakthrough monograph, MacIntyre is still quite close to the Aristotelian virtue ethics, which has recently been advocated by Michael Lambek as a model for an anthropology of ethics. However, in his later works, MacIntyre advocates a view that is dismissive of rational reflection, and emphasizes the role of authority in ethical traditions. This makes his work unattractive to Laidlaw, who is after an anthropology of ethics as a study of freedom and responsibility.

Next in line for Laidlaw is to present Foucault's ethical thinking. He argues against common misunderstandings and critiques directed towards Foucault's understanding of ethics, and summarizes Foucault's thinking on subjectivation and freedom very eloquently. Laidlaw emphasizes Foucault's distance from Deleuze and Althusser, and points out how his thinking about self-formation can be used by anthropologists to analyze ethical systems. Now, Laidlaw is not the first to argue this, but he does it very lucidly. For example, Laidlaw criticizes Jarrett Zigon for confusing Foucault's methodology and analytics when

Zigon claims that Foucault's use of the concept of problematization corresponds with Heidegger's 'moral breakdowns'. For Zigon, moral breakdowns are times of crisis, in which people are forced to reflect on their moral choices. Outside these breakdowns, morality is 'unconscious embodied practice' (p. 118). Zigon's emphasis on habitual reproduction of moral systems is incompatible with Laidlaw's reading of Foucault, where the historically (and culturally) varying modalities of freedom are at the heart of morality. For Laidlaw and Foucault, ethics is an ongoing day-to-day concern, but its object—what is being 'problematized'—varies.

The third theme of the book is freedom. Here Laidlaw introduces different concepts of freedom from different philosophical traditions, and pits them against Saba Mahmood's (2011) and Charles Hirschkind's (2006) analyses of Islamic piety in contemporary Egypt. He argues that we cannot simply reduce the discussion to ideas of 'liberal' or negative freedom (of choice) and ideas of positive freedom (as being able to pursue a distinct normative ideal). Laidlaw thinks we need to account for what he calls 'reflective' freedom (p. 154), which is needed in order to attain the sort of instinctive habits Mahmood describes in her ethnography but, paradoxically, at the expense of that freedom. Following Foucault, Laidlaw says that the different forms of reflection that we have vary according to time and place and depend on practices of subjectivation. Here he implies a research project for an anthropology of freedom.

Laidlaw moves on to discuss the concept of responsibility in anthropology. He argues that two major theoretical trends in anthropology, practice theory and actor-network analysis, both fall short of the mark regarding responsibility. Practice theory's problem is its conception of agency, which defines an action efficacious only when successfully resisting a structure. Actor-network theory, on the other hand, is blind to the fact that identifying causality itself requires attribution of responsibility, which varies greatly across cultures. Laidlaw's alternative to these perspectives draws from Bernard Williams (2008), who argues that a reconciliation of the concepts of determinism and free will needs to take into account a third element, which is a set of ethical terms such as blame and responsibility. The point for Laidlaw is that institutions and practices shape the way people assign responsibility, and this is what an anthropology of morality should examine.

The book ends on a programmatic note, where Laidlaw proposes an anthropological pursuit that is both ethical and of ethics. Again he takes his cue from Williams (2008), who argues that ancient Greek ethical concepts should be taken as an alternative for, not merely an alternative to, our own ethical thinking. This means we should take the ethical thought and practice of others seriously, as something that pertains to us. Instead of seeing radical alterity, Laidlaw wants us to focus on the pedagogical aspects of ethnographic work. Ethical practice presupposes an initial disjunction between the inquirer and the teacher or exemplar, but this is a difference that can be overcome by learning. The point here is not to eliminate differences, but to practice an inquiry that allows for the possibility of changing the inquirer.

Laidlaw's overview of anthropology of morality and ethics is firmly embedded in the Aristotelian and Foucauldian thinking that is the analytical toolbox of choice for most anthropologists working with these kinds of questions. I especially admired the chapters on Foucault's thinking and on the concepts of freedom in contemporary anthropology, both of which are required reading for anyone interested in state-of-the-

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art moral anthropology. Presented in the latter half of the book, Laidlaw's programmatic argument for the necessity of a pedagogic anthropology of ethics was also convincing to me. However, I think we should also look further afield, for example at what is being said about human morality in the recent work being done in so-called 'experimental philosophy', social psychology and cognitive science.

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