Negative Ethics: Taking the Bad with the Good. An Introduction

L'éthique négative : prendre le mal avec le bien. Une introduction

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A fieldworker who is especially interested in people's negative characteristics
—their fears, hostilities, aggressions, and deviant behaviors—
is likely to elicit descriptions of behavior from [their] informants
that include a liberal sprinkling of such negative attributes
(Pelto 1970: 97).

THIS SPECIAL issue re-envisages the anthropology of ethics from the point of view of "the negative". The negative is a gloss for actions, practices and social formations that our interlocutors view as bad, troubling, threatening, immoral or unethical, and the varied local categories and discourses through which they are evaluated. Anthropology has often overlooked immorality in its study of ethics (Yan 2011, 2014; Csordas 2013; Fassin 2015; Olsen and Csordas 2019), privileging "the good" and people's practices of self-cultivation (*e.g.* Robbins 2013; Laidlaw 2014).[1] This elision reflects an underlying tendency within some strands of Anglophone anthropological thinking towards

1. We use the terms "ethics" and "morality" interchangeably throughout the Introduction. Some authors use "ethics" to signal a departure from Durkheimian conceptions of morality which emphasise unconscious, collective moral codes (*e.g.* Laidlaw 2002; Zigon 2007, 2008; Fassin 2015: 176). However, there is arguably enough overlap in and conflicting usages of this terminology that such a clear separation is no longer necessary (Kleinman 2006; Fassin 2012, this volume; Mattingly and Throop 2018; though see also Fedirko, this volume).

viewing sociality as inherently positive or benign (Strathern 2014: 58), a latent value orientation that we term the "methodological good". What might moral life look like, we ask, if we begin our analyses with the study of wrongdoing, misconduct, bad behaviour, and people's anxieties about them?

The authors in this special issue examine the negative across a broad range of everyday settings. This includes middle-class Baptists' concern about the immoral behaviour of particular working-class people with whom they share neighbourhood spaces in urban Zimbabwe, which prompts ethical dilemmas about balancing care for others with morally fraught forms of self-protection (Leanne Williams Green); terrains of vested interests and morally dubious patron-client relations that Ukrainian journalists routinely navigate (Taras Fedirko); a desire to extract oneself from obligations to share food among the egalitarian Papuan Asmat, for whom food division is the prototype of moral action (Tom Powell Davies); intense, often personally offensive barter negotiations in the Argentinean Andes, in which accusations of cheating do not undermine social relations, but rather are the ground on which they are formed (Olivia Angé); and the minutiae of moral distinctions in rural Peruvian debt arrangements, where good acts of lending can create bad borrowers (Corinna Howland). In these accounts, ethics is not so much an inward-looking deliberative exercise oriented towards moral self-improvement, nor is morality centred on rule-following and breaking. Rather, our interlocutors look outward to kin, friends, neighbours and others who are, in their estimation, behaving badly, or find themselves accused of unethical action by these same people. Relationships, in these case studies, often bind self and other in problematic or uncomfortable ways.

Our work extends recent conversations in "light" and "dark" anthropology to further the case for attention to the negative as a constituent part of moral life (building on Csordas 2013; Yan 2014; Fassin 2015; Olsen and Csordas 2019). We break from perspectives that pigeonhole the negative as a structural ill, excess of human depravity, or violation of the social. Instead, we pose the provocation that the negative is generative of social life and for anthropological analysis (note: this does not imply that the negative is "good"). Attending to the negative also highlights the positional dimension of ethical evaluation. Whether something appears "good" or "bad" is often a matter of perspective. A perspectival approach to morality in turn prompts us to consider the relation between positionality and moral contestation, mutual understanding and mental opacity, and the role of interest as a corollary motivation in ethical life—in ways which complicate neat binaries separating "interested" from "ethical" behaviour. We find that people do not simply seek to enact ethical conventions, but rather innovate around them from the perspective of positioned interests.

Across this issue's diverse case studies, we identify five patterns in how the negative is experienced and negotiated, which we term "the Five Fs". At times, negative acts and evaluations of them are the "foundation" against which the good is defined. They may also act as focal points which bring people together and galvanise action. Immorality may be experienced as a form of "failure" or "falling short" intrinsic to social processes; as "frisson", an alluring transgression of moral norms; or through a quality of relational "frostiness", as people bound, distance or extract themselves from morally fraught relationships. In these case studies, negative acts and evaluations do not undermine social life, but rather set it in motion. Without rejecting wholesale "the good" as it is experienced emically, or the disciplinary spirit that tends towards it, we argue that conceptualising social relations from the perspective of our interlocutors' distrust and moral anxieties offers a productive method of taking the bad with the good.

A Question of Emphasis?
Positive-ism in the Anthropology of Morality and Ethics

Within the discipline's ethical turn over the last two decades, anthropologists have distinguished themselves from earlier Durkheimian-inflected approaches to the study of morality (discussed further below) through a focus on evaluation. As James Laidlaw writes, the anthropological study of ethics does not rest on "an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative" (2014: 3). Consequently, an anthropology of ethics ideally examines the full gamut of ethical life, from forms of immoral, problematic and unethical behaviour, through doubt, pain and suffering, to moral striving, virtuous self-cultivation and the pursuit of *eudaimonia* (Fassin 2015).

However, the anthropology of ethics has largely focused on positively coded categories of ethics and morality, either implicitly or explicitly. Take an early introduction by Michael Lambek (2010). Lambek suggests that the ethical turn arose out of a recognition by ethnographers "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" (*Ibid.*: 1). As scholarship has accumulated, a preoccupation with the good in various guises—values, virtues, self-cultivation, obligation—remains a central frame for understanding otherwise heterogenous projects of world- and self-making. Joel Robbins (2013) has developed this into an explicit comparative project, arguing for an "anthropology of the good" that revives a key conviction of earlier culturalist paradigms: that other people must conceive of good lives

in ways we are not yet aware of, and that these conceptions might indeed challenge our own. Robbins delineates three core areas of study: 1) how the good and its proper pursuit is (culturally) defined, including questions of "value, morality and, well-being" (*Ibid*.: 457); 2) how the good is generated in social relations, including questions of "empathy, care, and the gift" *(Ibid.)*; and 3) belief and action towards future goods, including questions of "time, change, and hope" (*Ibid*.: 458). While this comparative framing is productive, an emphasis on positively coded ethical thought and practice leaves little room for detailed consideration of the negative aspects of social life, and what they might tell us about human lived worlds. As Yunxiang Yan shrewdly observed, "immorality is rarely examined by anthropologists, let alone explored in ethnographic depth" (2011: n.p.; see also Csordas 2013; Fassin 2015: 201-202; Olsen and Csordas 2019). According to Yan, this situation is not unique to anthropology, but also true of moral philosophy, which frequently focuses on questions of moral success to the exclusion of immorality and individual moral failure (Hampton 1989; see also Rorty 2001).

Why might this be the case? Yan (2014) identified a disciplinary reticence to cast one's own interlocutors as anything other than "good" people, or in terms that might put them at risk (see also Good 2019: 62). Thomas Csordas, meanwhile, claimed that a disinclination to examine evil stems from a "failure of intellectual nerve" (2013: 526). We suggest that the elision of the negative is also connected to a broader bias towards the good in some anthropological approaches to modelling "the social", alongside normative values that saturate the concepts with which anthropologists routinely analyse social life. For example, Jeanette Edwards and Marilyn Strathern identify an implicit inclination to view the category of kinship in terms of its most positive enactments, which they gloss as the "sentimentalised view of sociality as sociability and of kinship ('family') as community" (2000: 152). Indeed, many of the concepts that we use to model sociality in Anglophone anthropology—such as amity (Fortes 1949), solidarity (Schneider 1972), relatedness (Carsten 1995) or mutuality (Sahlins 2013)—routinely cast human interconnection as inherently benign or positive (Mimica 2020: 97; Strathern 2020: 26-27). For Simon Harrison (1993), this positive valuation of social life at times reflects an unacknowledged, implicitly Hobbesian understanding of society and human nature. Here, social bonds are viewed as preventing conflict and anarchic self-interest (or that, if they do not, they really should), reflecting a dim assessment of human nature as essentially negative when unconstrained by our "good" societies. A similar trend towards "positive-ism" might also be identified across classic studies of community (*e.g.* Srivinas 1960) and reciprocity (see Browne 2009 for

an analysis) through to some contemporary considerations of care (*e.g.* Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016) and wellbeing (*e.g.* Fischer 2014). Yet, as Nils Bubandt and Rane Willerslev (2015: 34) have convincingly argued in the case of empathy, an academic and popular tendency to "assign empathy the status of a virtue" overlooks its negative enactments, including how their Indonesian and Siberian interlocutors use it to manipulate and deceive.

We term the naturalisation of a positive value orientation towards social life the "methodological good". Inspired by Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller's account of "methodological nationalism" (2003: 576), and their observation that the nation state has become a taken-for-granted unit of social analysis, we argue that positive orientations to the social are frequently structured into anthropological methods and concepts, albeit in a latent manner. This occurs in two modes. There is a descriptive mode, outlined above, in which positive associations are built into particular disciplinary concepts. There is also a normative mode, discussed below, in which the absence of the good is taken up as an anthropological problem through cultural critique, animated by a belief that if social situations are not presently good, then they normatively should be. Within the methodological good, positively coded concepts are often used as organising categories that contain what comes to be understood as their direct opposite or inverse (see also Houseman 2015 [1984]). For example, the term "ethics" encompasses ethical-and-unethical. The language of morality and ethics also skews towards its more positive valences: the good is both an explicit object of interest, and a methodological and analytic orientation that encompasses negative ethics. The challenge for a truly negative ethics is to overcome this bias by adopting "negative strategies" that do not simply invert it (Strathern 1990: 210), and to find ways of taking the bad with the good that move beyond such dichotomous thinking (see also Strathern, this issue).

Within the anthropology of ethics in particular, underlying theories of action may encourage practitioners to favour questions of the good, the virtuous and the right over the bad, the immoral and the negative. For several key anthropologists of ethics, the good is a core telos of (moral) action. Didier Fassin, for example, advocating for a moral anthropology, writes: "I simply refer to the human belief in the possibility of telling right from wrong and in the necessity of acting in favour of the good and against the evil" (2008: 334; also Lambek 2010; Keane 2016; though see also Fassin 2015). Similarly, Robbins suggests that the "good is what people are aiming for in action, what they desire [and also] what people [find] desirable", a magnetic, motivating end towards which people are drawn (cited in Venkatesan 2015: 455). Robbins contends that it is impossible to be an anthropologist without holding the good as a central theory of

human motivation, as we would be unable to account for why people do things. While the good is no doubt a telos in many situations, moral action and *askesis* is also often directly oriented towards the bad and the negative, through concern, torment, outrage and attempts at mitigation. Indeed, if the good is an overarching human motivation or concern, why are so many explanations of what it means to be good framed as injunctions of what *not* to do?

The anthropology of ethics' bias towards the good also means that the negative, where engaged with explicitly, is often treated as an epiphenomenon of positively coded morality. For example, Ellen Oxfeld (2010: 27), in her study of morality in the rural Chinese village of Meixian, follows John Barker (2007) by suggesting that moral breaches can alert researchers to their interlocutors' more tacit moral orthodoxy. Similarly, Melissa Caldwell, in her treatment of the negative aspects of compassionate care in Russia, claims that "concerns about moral decay are, at heart, concerns about order and rightness" (2017: 61). The negative, here, is a signpost that points anthropologists in the direction of the good, the moral, or the right. However, this analytic strategy presents an altogether-too-settled account of the role of negative acts, and the work of negative evaluations of personhood and action, in ethical life. We propose an alternative approach: attending to our interlocutors' identifications of the negative *as* negative.

Turning to the Negative:
From "Dark" Anthropology to Ambivalence and Evil

While the negative has been overlooked within the anthropology of ethics, there is a burgeoning "negative mood" in other contemporary strands of the discipline. This includes dark anthropology's structural analyses of the negative effects of inequality; ethnographic studies of alterity, ambivalence and negative practice; and recent calls to investigate the phenomenon of evil. Our examination of these areas of research is indicative rather than exhaustive, identifying key points of departure for this special issue. Where these literatures present the negative as a structural ill, a quality of relatedness, a form of excessive degeneracy, or a violation of the social, we argue that the study of emic negative evaluation reveals that immorality is often generative of social life.

According to Sherry Ortner, anthropological theory since the 1980s has been dominated by dark anthropology, accounts which emphasise "the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them" (2016: 49). This includes political-economic critiques of inequality (*e.g.* Allison 2013); avaricious accumulation and

dispossession (*e.g.* Kasmir and Carbonella 2008); dominance, hierarchy and power (*e.g.* Fassin 2015); state and interpersonal violence (*e.g.* Das 2006); corruption (*e.g.* Mattioli 2020); and everyday and acute forms of oppression and suffering (*e.g.* Han 2012). Ortner cautions that "anthropologies of the good", including the studies of morality and ethics outlined above, can lose sight of how structural forces shape people's existential horizons (2016: 47). Ultimately, Ortner encourages anthropologists to envision "positive alternatives" to the negative situations that they encounter through cultural critique and activism (*Ibid.*: 66).

Ironically, Ortner's dark anthropology is a morally positive project that instantiates the methodological good in a normative mode. Dark anthropological analysis draws a contrast between a degraded present and visions of a just and progressive future, one ideally ushered into being in part through the discipline's critical interventions. Here, anthropologists investigate and align with projects of socio-political transformation by interrogating the structural forces that generate the "ugly realities of the world today", such as colonialism, capitalism, neoliberalism and the patriarchy (*Ibid.*: 60). These are important, urgent goals—politics that we also share—to which anthropology has much to contribute. However, dark accounts of structure and history do not exhaust the full possibilities of negative action and emic evaluation for our interlocutors, nor the negative's analytic possibilities for anthropologists. Indeed, the locus of the negative is clearly defined (if not predetermined) in structural accounts: "bad" structures impinge on the lives of otherwise "good" people, causing harm to them while rendering others complicit (see also Yan 2014).

Our interlocutors' explanations of immorality include not only political and economic perspectives, but also *moral* judgements about the actions and personhood of others, which crucially inform how the "dark" is experienced. Consider, for example, Leanne Williams Green's contribution (this volume). Her middle-class Baptist interlocutors recognise how "prospects for moral life are undermined by socio-economic conditions" (p. 48) in Zimbabwe's stagnant economy, but understand this as symptomatic "of pervasive [human] sinfulness and its effects on the world" (p. 32). Williams Green's interlocutors nevertheless also attribute negative moral characteristics to working-class others, despite acknowledging the latter's structural and spiritual vulnerability. For example, minibus touts, by virtue of their profession and mobility, are perceived as a threat to domesticity: "loud, sexually promiscuous, reckless, unstable and lacking proper hygiene" (p. 49). Attending to our interlocutors' own negative evaluations and varied theories of human motivation and causality allows us to determine the significance of these phenomena in the social worlds of which they are a part. Indeed,

foregrounding moral debate is an important first step for understanding how and to what extent emic perspectives articulate with structural concerns, and offers valuable insights into how these broader social formations are experienced and negotiated in people's everyday ethics.

A negative mood also inflects contemporary studies of alterity and ambivalence. This includes recent works on mistrust (Carey 2017; Mühlfried 2019); mental opacity (Robbins and Rumsey 2008; Stasch 2008); suspicion (Archambault 2017; Bonhomme 2012); deception (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015; Smith 2007); conning (Newell 2012; Walsh 2009); envy (Hughes *et al.* 2019); difficult kinship (Peletz 2001; Lambek 2011); and disagreement (Elinoff 2021). While some of these authors could fit within the category of dark anthropology as Ortner has sketched it, we suggest that the overall thrust of their analysis is different. Instead of approaching ambivalence as a moral or political problem to be solved, this problematic is examined as an intrinsic or inescapable aspect of social, political and economic life (Elinoff 2021: 36; see also Højer 2004). Remaining close to the ground, these authors ethnographically examine how ambivalent modes of relating and structural conditions shape social formations and interactions, rather than framing research as instances of broader-scale orders (*e.g.* capitalism). We bring these disparate threads together under the meta-category of the negative—and go a shade darker. Where many of the studies cited above emphasise uncertainty and indeterminacy, this issue's focus on the evaluative categories of "bad" and "good" embeds a turn to the "dark side" more explicitly within the organisation of moral life in the settings that we study.

Our turn to the negative also builds on and seeks to bring together recent, independently articulated calls for an anthropology of immorality and evil. Yan thoughtfully argues that immorality—"deliberate harm to other people's interests, or even lives, through coaxing, cheating, extortion, or abuse of power [and] the violation of the principle of reciprocity" (2014: 484)—is a significant feature of social life, both for our interlocutors and us as analysts. He elaborates on cases of intentional food adulteration resulting in sickness and death, and the extortion of Good Samaritans who help victims of road and other accidents, actions which have led to a perception of moral decline among his Chinese interlocutors. In parallel, William Olsen and Thomas Csordas (2019; see also Csordas 2013) reposition evil as an analytic category that invites reconsideration of the limits of the human, following David Parkin's earlier efforts (1985). Evil, in their view (2019: 2), is situationally specific "malevolent destructiveness", at scales from the interpersonal (*e.g.* abuse, witchcraft, murder) through to the structural (*e.g.* genocide). For Csordas, the question of morality and evil are one and the same: *"if it wasn't for evil morality would be moot"* (2013: 525, original emphasis).

To establish immorality and evil as important objects of enquiry for the anthropology of ethics, Yan, Olsen and Csordas gravitate towards more extreme oppositions to the "good", to drive home the point. Building on these studies of radical divergence from moral norms, we examine everyday wrongs in which the relation between the "bad" and the "good" is not already settled. The category of evil, for example, can present the worst excesses of human depravity as morality's opposite, which as Fassin notes, obscures the "trivial […] expressions" of the negative in quotidian practice (2015: 201; see also Calder 2013). Commonplace moral transgressions vary by degree, intensity and kind. Our case studies speak to banal experiences of the negative, including regular interpersonal attributions of bad behaviour and character to proximate and intimate others (see Angé; Howland; and Powell Davies, this volume), immoral situations so pervasive as to be routine (Fedirko, this volume), or foundational human conditions that give rise to everyday ethical concerns (Williams Green, this volume). We argue that emic typologies, continuums and slippery slopes of bad behaviour are important arenas of inquiry for the study of negative ethics, with implications for understandings of moral personhood. This approach foregrounds emic moral reasoning about redeemable or tolerable forms of human fallibility, why people put up with "bad" behaviour, and how it is explained (or explained away, especially by those who perpetrate it).

We argue that "the negative" is generative of social life, which requires clarifying the relation between them. This entails sensitively navigating what Yan (2014: 486) has identified as the Durkheimian obstacle, a lingering hurdle for the study of immorality. Durkheim conceived of society as an intrinsically moral "thing or entity" to which individuals adhere (Laidlaw 2014: 16). For key authors establishing the new anthropology of morality and ethics, this is an intellectual cul-de-sac that reduces morality to limited functionalist questions of rule-following and rule-breaking (*e.g.* Laidlaw 2014; Zigon 2008; though see also Robbins 2007 and Englund 2008 for a defence). As Yan (2014) notes, Durkheim paid careful attention to the "bad", but ultimately argued that people's identification of others' bad behaviour performed the function of (re-)asserting and affirming shared values, an act of social integration:

> Crime *brings together upright consciences and concentrates them*. We have only to notice what happens, particularly in a small town, when some moral scandal has just been committed. They stop each other on the street, they visit each other, they seek to come together to talk of the event and *to wax indignant in common*. From all the similar impressions which are exchanged […] there emerges a unique temper […] which is everybody's without being anybody's in particular. That is the public temper… (1960 [1893]: 102, our emphasis; see also Yan 2014; Edel and Edel 2017 [1968]).

Taking the Bad with the Good: An Introduction

We argue that negative acts are not solely prompts for the reassertion of shared ideas of social conduct. Instead, we advocate for approaching "the social" not simply as a set of conventions to be upheld—or violated, in Yan's terms (2014)—, but rather as something people reflexively mobilise in ethical claims-making and moral reasoning, and innovate around in creative ways. Put in these terms, we can examine the social effects of negative acts and evaluations, the visions of the social that people conjure in making ethical judgments, and why people may sometimes be moved to make negative evaluations using the language of the social itself. In this special issue we propose that the negative can be *generative*: not only in a functionalist sense of reinforcing an existing social system, but of emic-level interest, judgement, and social action, and of new ways of thinking analytically about the resonance of immorality in people's ethical lives, beyond an epiphenomenon of the good, structural ill, aberration or social violation.

Perspectival Moralism: Ethics from Somewhere

Attending to "the bad" necessarily prompts the question: "bad for whom?" In any given setting, what appears immoral to one actor may be evaluated as positively moral to differently positioned others. For example, in Powell Davies' examination of Asmat food-sharing (this volume), the perspectives of those with and without food clash substantially, despite a shared set of values about the relation-making affordances of distribution. Those without food "think that those with it are immorally 'eating it by themselves' […], while those with food may feel that those without it impinge on their autonomy through requests for a share" (p. 96). Whose perspectives, then, should we privilege? Taking the bad with the good does not simply mean engaging with a wider spectrum of ethical evaluations beyond a focus on virtue, values and the good. It involves analysing how various moralising points of view are ordered in the settings that we study, and the wider social ecology that makes such variable perspective-taking possible. Indeed, perspectival difference is a key resource for keeping both the bad and the good in view simultaneously, rather than presupposing that one is merely the inversion of the other. One analytic move in the anthropology of ethics is to delimit ethical ideas and practices as standalone objects of study (for example, in the identification of broadly shared "values" that organise the settings of which they are a part—see *e.g.* Robbins 2009: 65-66). This can, at times, dissolve peoples' positionality towards those ideas (Martin and Lembo 2020; see also Fedirko, this volume). By contrast, a focus on how social processes can produce different experiences for those involved forces us to engage with both the positive and the negative.

While perspectivism has a rich history in philosophy (Leibniz cited in Strickland 2014: 25; Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]; Nietzsche 1998 [1887]) and art history (Kern 1983), anthropology is particularly well-placed to consider how differences of perspective contribute to the construction of social reality in practice (see also Kwon 2012). This includes: the relationship between contrasting seasonal morphologies of social organisation (Mauss 2004 [1950]; Evans-Pritchard 1940) or segmentary forms of social structure (Evans-Pritchard 1940); how conflicting systems of social ideas can co-exist as poles around which life is lived (Leach 1954); how social space can contain distinct (for example, gendered) subject positions, mediated by transactions (Strathern 1988); and in recent Amazonian perspectivist literature, how ontological distinctions between categorically separate entities can rest solely in their difference of perspective on shared cultural practices: thus, "non-humans see things *as* 'people' do. But the things *that* they see are different: what to us is blood, is maize beer to the jaguar" (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 478, his emphasis). Positionality is also foundational to differences between systems of morality—see, for example, Nietzsche's controversial but influential account of master *versus* slave moralities (1998 [1887]). Thus, Carlos Londoño Sulkin emphasises that there is a moral component to perspectival ontologies among the Muinane people of southern Colombia, such that animals are viewed as morally fallen humans, while the bad behaviours of "Real People" are often attributed to the "false Speeches" of animals altering human action and sensibilities (2005: 12). In each of these cases, differences of perspective inflect social processes and shape how ethics is understood.

Useful models for understanding the role of perspective in moral life can also be found in classic exchange literature and its unpacking of how differences in points of view structure and saturate transactions. Nancy Munn (1986: 220-228), for example, in her pioneering account of the social spacetime of Gawan exchange and witchcraft, highlights how any act that is "value-creating" from the point of view of one observer might be experienced as "value-destroying" for others called to witness the transaction but not included in it (whose presence is required to bolster the transaction's fame). The moral relation-making capacities of exchange are predicated on the production of corresponding forms of immoral social exclusion, creating the possibility of feelings of deleterious rejection and sowing the seeds of witchcraft. However, even those included in a transaction may make contradictory assessments of it. Annette Weiner (1992), for example, highlights that transactions may be evaluated in terms of what is kept back. This may prompt exchange partners to appraise gifts by imagining the discrepancy between the actual gift and what potentially

could have been given, creating competing virtual points of view centred around the different affordances of these hypothetical gifts and the reality of the exchange (Copeman and Banerjee 2021). At broader scales beyond the concrete transactions studied by Munn and other exchange theorists, differences of moral point of view are also built into social reproduction. Here, the perpetuation of social forms over time, particularly in capitalist social formations, may come at the expense of the continued survival and wellbeing of segments of its population, such that there is a fault-line between the logics of the former and the experiences of the latter (Weiss 2021). Relation-making and reproductive acts, here, produce simultaneous ethical "goods" and "bads", which are entwined in ways that shape people's sense of the ongoing viability of the worlds in which they live.

The authors in this issue approach moral perspective-taking as an ethnographic object. This involves acknowledgement of standpoint, social location, and circumstance. Each contributor encountered their interlocutors acting, and ethically evaluating self and others, from situated perspectives. These include: the differential productive capacities of ecological niches, such as highland herding and lowland cultivation (Angé); forms of material possession and lack, such as having the capacity to lend or needing to borrow (Howland), or having or lacking food (Powell Davies); professional commitments in a divided industry, to either mainstream or independent journalism (Fedirko); and intersections of class position, religious affiliation, and residence between members of the Baptist middle classes and various working-class others (Williams Green). Such situatedness does not determine the moral perspectives that our interlocutors take up, nor "the shape of their ethical acts" (Fedirko, p. 85; see also Williams Green). However, positionality does shape how perspectives are formed and expressed, and how they articulate with those of others. Indeed, as the Manchester School identified, moments of contestation between diverging perspectives can offer revelatory insights into social processes (Kapferer 2015: 3). Anthropological theory has often conceptualised comparison as either a "lateral" analytic juxtaposition between ethnographies, or a "frontal" one between an ethnographic setting and a "familiar background" (such as that of the anthropologist) (Candea 2016: 184). Here, we highlight the potential of internal comparison between emic perspectives within an ethnographic setting to de-centre our understanding of ethical life.

A focus on positionality highlights that intersubjectivity is shot through with perspectival difference. Webb Keane has made the persuasive claim that "people's capacity to share and exchange perspectives and intentions with one another" is foundational to ethical life (2016: 81). Perspectival interaction and other-observation, he argues, is necessary for constructing

"a sense of shared reality" and establishing mutual regard (*Ibid.*: 91). Our studies of situated differences in ethical perspective-taking emphasise how this "shared reality" can be suffused with differing normative expectations, even in instances where people hold categories and concepts in common.[2] For example, Angé's interlocutors (this issue) share an historical formula for conducting direct exchanges fairly ("the elders' measures"), such as one *chalona* (dried mutton) for one sack of maize. However, the implementation of this agreed-upon ratio is often contested, amid disputes about what constitutes a full sack or a high-quality product, with implications for people's understanding of moral personhood. The perspectival dimension of intersubjective negotiation, here, unsettles the trope of ambiguity that has inflected social analysis in recent years, discussed above. In some cases, a lack of agreement about ethical problems may not result from uncertainty or indeterminacy, but rather from the disjunction between legible yet irresolvable differences of points of view. Intersubjective partiality—the encounter of perspectives that are at once alike and unlike—is therefore integral to ethical life. Furthermore, a routine "misalignment between […] perspectives" (Powell Davies, p. 96) can specifically encourage negative evaluation. Regarding others, as the contributors to this volume amply demonstrate, does not always mean regarding them tenderly. Intersubjectivity is not simply a foundation of ethical life, but also at times experienced as a source of threat or risk.

Finally, attention to competing ethical perspectives calls into question the firmness of analytic distinctions between ethics and interest (benefit-seeking, typically though not exclusively for oneself). Ethics and interest are often conceived as separate domains composed of "mutually exclusive drives" (Heilbron 1998: 83). Indeed, instrumentality runs counter to prevailing ideas about what "counts" as truly ethical. Thus, Lambek renders gifting an ethical practice by presenting it as "a form of activity whose aim is intrinsic to the practice itself, rather than an external end achieved by instrumental means" (Laidlaw 2014: 53). This delineation of the strategic from the ethical, inspired by the philosophical tradition of virtue ethics, underpins a tendency to focus on practices of self-making, character-building and ethical reflection (Fassin 2014; Piliavsky and Sbriccoli 2016; see also Laidlaw 2014; Keane 2016: 110-111).

2. Shared perspectives are achievements that require constant work to mediate between people's subjective interpretations. Interestingly, all of Keane's (2016) interactional examples are of people seeking to apportion blame or moralise negatively about others. For Keane and others, this leads to the conclusion that violation points to the importance of intersubjectivity (see also Garfinkel 1967). However, it should also alert us to the fact that violation is a constant and constitutive feature of our intersubjective interactions.

Taking the Bad with the Good: An Introduction

However, in this issue's case studies, we not only find people moralising *about* different forms of interest—as Fedirko's interlocutors do when critiquing oligarchic influence in Ukrainian mainstream media reporting—but also encounter potentially *interested* ethical perspectives, in which ethical evaluation can be mobilised to pursue other ends. This includes: to envisage oneself and one's own actions favourably (Fedirko; Howland); to make claims on others (Powell Davies); to protect self and property (Williams Green); or to achieve more beneficial material outcomes in exchanges (Angé). For example, the creditors in Howland's contribution use gossip about lending arrangements with less well-off others to construct themselves as "good people" in the eyes of the community. This paradoxical move interestedly draws attention to the lender's selflessness and dedication to impoverished others as a means of securing moral standing, but also, in at least one case, to secure future care of the lender's intellectually disabled daughter. Our study of moments where ethics are instrumentalised suggests that the rigorous separation of ethical from other motivations may not always hold in practice, or at very least can be difficult to fully tease apart (see also Fassin 2015). This does not mean that such evaluations cease to be ethical; indeed, it is arguably their ethical import that gives these strategic ascriptions such efficacy.

Our aim in emphasising the interested qualities of ethical life is not to collapse helpful distinctions or reduce ethics to individualist motivations, but rather to highlight that ethical ideas are conceptual objects that people use reflexively. Ethical practice, in this view, is always positioned from somewhere, just as every lived world *(Umwelt)* is first and foremost a lived world for someone (Gow 2001: 26-27). This examination of the tactical dimension of ethics builds on Theodoros Kyriakides' insight that tactics are a "locus between world and the self" (2018: 453), which offer a window into how people situate and visualise themselves in the settings of which they are a part. From this point of view, Robbins' astute observation that "most people in most places […] think of themselves as tolerably morally successful persons most of the time" (2012: 118) could be reinterpreted not as evidence of people's adherence to routine ethical expectations, but rather as an index of how self-regard partially informs ethical evaluation.

The Social Generativity of the Negative

This volume charts a course towards a vision of the negative as generative. By generative, we do not mean to imply that the negative ultimately reinscribes the good, understood as the reproduction of social life, nor that social reproduction is an unqualified good (see Weiss 2021). Rather,

we view negative acts and evaluations as "[setting] social life in motion" (Powell Davies, p. 121), tempting people, provoking outrage and galvanising action across a range of settings. In these diverse case studies, even when destructive of a particular normative order of sociality, negative acts are not a- or anti-social per se. Rather, negative action and evaluation catalyse other latent possibilities—alternative ways of being and relating—which are always already contained within the social fabric. In this sense, the negative contributes to the ongoing dynamism of social life, albeit perversely.

Across this issue's papers, we observe five patterns in how the negative is experienced and negotiated. We term these "the Five Fs": the negative as foundation; as focal point; as failure/falling short; as frisson; and as a frosty quality of relations. While we have separated these into categories for discussion, these articulations of the negative are at times mutually informing.

The Negative as Foundation

The negative can be the foundation, or ground, on which more positive social formations are formed. The Ukrainian journalists studied by Fedirko, for example, view those in positions of power as motivated by personal profit, locating "interests" at the heart of political life. Independent journalists frame their virtuous "ethics of values", and commitment to ideals of disinterested reporting, *via* negation of material interests of powerful patrons such as politicians and media owners. Meanwhile, mainstream reporters negotiate such interests through practical compromise (the "ethics of pragmatism") that eschews the high ideals of independent journalism. In this case, immoral interest is not antithetical to ethical journalism, but rather the precondition of it; independent journalists define themselves as ethical actors in contrast with what they perceive to be the immorality of others. Negative acts, meanwhile, are foundational to the constitution of social spacetime for Powell Davies' Asmat interlocutors, for whom jockeying around moral acts of food-sharing is animated by anxiety that others may be dividing food immorally. This mutual suspicion is founded in a structural misalignment between the moralising perspectives of those asking for food and those giving it, who experience shared values about the relation-making effects of food in different ways. The prospect of exclusion, as the underside of gift-giving, does not undermine Asmat social orders, but rather spurs on its ongoing constitution. The foundational place of the "bad", as Fedirko observes, articulates with wider patterns of understanding "virtues in relation to vice (Lambek 2008), good deeds in relation to sin (Robbins 2004), and interested acts within markets in relation to disinterested acts outside of them (Parry 1986)" (p. 85). The negative, in such instances, seems not so

much something that can be expunged once and for all, but rather as the ground around which people inventively improvise from the perspective of their situated cares and concerns (see also Wagner 1981 [1975]).

The Negative as Focal Point

In other settings, negative acts are a focal point for interest and activity, or a figure, around which social action is organised. Negative practices, perhaps even more so than good ones, command recognition, generate gossip and demand a response. The concerns of the Baptist residents of middle-class Zimbabwean suburbs studied by Williams Green coalesce around the potential criminal actions of proximate working-class others, in ways that shape the social spacetime of guarded neighbourhoods. While touts, discussed above, are perceived as a threat to Baptist normativity about domesticity, working-class street vendors are viewed as both a resource for protecting self and property and a potential threat. Negative moral concerns about safety, here, spur cross-class relationships that produce ethical double-binds pitting the middle-class "moral necessity to protect one's family" against "a Christian imperative to extend care in a sinfully disordered world" (p. 33). In Angé's examination of *cambio* barter between highland herders and lowland cultivators in the Argentinean Andes, cheating is a focal point of exchanges, both as a discursive regime and a transactional strategy. Cheating does not undermine the historical measures used to guide exchanges, but rather reinforces their importance as conventions around which people manoeuvre. Beyond simply advancing self-interest, accusation and transgressive bargaining in fact create resonant relations saturated with both intimacy and alterity. In each of these instances, negative acts, or the prospect of them, are socially dense sites of interaction where wider ethical principles, tensions and desires are intensified. This suggests that the anthropological study of the negative—and attending to why it is so socially fascinating for our interlocutors—offers a powerful method for understanding the connections between people's ethical ideas and the wider ordering of their social world.

The Negative as Failure

In a variety of settings, the negative also emerges in instances of failure as an inability to live up to exacting moral principles. In Howland's contribution, needing to borrow from another is an index of personal failure to amass wealth, "get ahead" (p. 171) and provision for one's family. Paradoxically, moral failure is generated through the disjunction between borrowers' and lenders' conflicting attempts to present themselves as good ethical actors, where lenders often succeed at the borrowers' expense. While

borrowers attempt to demonstrate that they are worthy recipients and mitigate potential indignity by keeping the loan secret, lenders inadvertently undercut this by publicising their good deeds in lending. Consequently, good acts create bad subjects. For Williams Green's Baptist interlocutors, meanwhile, sinfulness is a universal condition. Sin has a relativising effect, however, as all humans are fallible. Moral failure does not undermine ethical life in this instance, but rather motivates Baptists' ongoing attempts to transform everyday disorder, understood as "an index, and facilitator, of sin", into order, viewed as "the divine design" (p. 39). Robbins helpfully cautions us that people's ideals should not be "dismiss[ed] as unimportant or, worse, as bad-faith alibis for the worlds they actually create" (2013: 457). Equally, we suggest that taking people's ethical visions seriously requires taking the repeated failures of these visions seriously *as* failures. Indeed, the possibility of falling short is not only an unfortunate accidental outcome, but also the yardstick against which success is measured. In some contexts, the measure of success is so high people that seem unable to reach it. Rupert Stasch, for example, describes kinship-belonging as "an impossible standard: the ideal includes its own failure" (2009: 136). Here, living up to an ideal necessitates a condition in which it is possible to fail, and where people routinely do fail, otherwise nothing is ever really at stake. Indeed, a tolerance for everyday moral failure, such as routine deceit in the barter transactions studied by Angé, is at times required to carry on with social life.

The Negative as Frisson

However, not all our interlocutors' experiences of bad behaviour are —for want of a better word—negative. Alongside the concern and ill-feeling that the negative provokes (see Angé; Williams Green), we also witness the thrill of transgression and illicit pleasure-seeking. While it is perhaps unsurprising that people sometimes prefer to do bad things, the fact that immoral acts at times appeal precisely because they flout ethical precepts suggests an ambivalent relation to the good that is worth unpacking further. In spite (or perhaps because of) immense social pressure to divide food in a demand sharing economy, Powell Davies' Asmat interlocutors ardently desire and occasionally seek out the forbidden indulgence of eating by themselves, savouring the sensation of excluding others and the feeling of mastery that it provides. Howland's lenders, striving to position themselves as good people through their financial support of others, do nevertheless also enjoy gossiping about their lending arrangements at the direct expense of their debtors' privacy. Attention to the negative as frisson calls into question whether our interlocutors are always taking "the good" seriously,

and encourages us to consider why, on occasion, fervent principle might be treated lightly (see also Mayblin 2017). The desirability of the negative, here, further unsettles the relationship between bad and good, encouraging renewed attention to perspective, and to how one person's pleasure can at times be another's pain.

The Negative as Frostiness

Finally, across the case studies in this issue, there is a common tactic of bounding, distancing, extracting oneself from or otherwise cooling off relations. Where Candea, Cook, Trundle and Yarrow (Candea *et al.* 2015: 1) identify how detachment is "ethically […] valued", our authors invert this framing, finding social proximity to be a source of ethical risk, and detachment a corresponding mitigation tactic. In Fedirko's contribution, independent Ukrainian journalists uphold "good" journalistic values by separating themselves from the oligarchic influence that they write about, eschewing relations of direct exchange with sources to avoid the obligation to reciprocate gifts of information with favourable press. In Howland's paper, meanwhile, moments of uncomfortable proximity between borrowers and their lenders can subject the former to negative, even internalised, judgement, such that exiting the orbit of others can become a desirable, if not strictly "ethical", condition. In both Powell Davies' and Williams Green's contributions, ethical binds prompt interlocutors to create distance from troubling others by controlling the organisation of social spacetime. In Powell Davies' case, spatial separation from food requesters allows food possessors to order distribution in a manner of their choosing, while in Williams Green's study, Baptists navigate the simultaneous protective and threatening qualities of relations with lower-class others through strategic acts of distancing. Across these case studies, sidestepping relationships is not a repudiation of the social, but rather the form that it takes. Thus, in Angé's analysis of barter transactions, affinity and antagonism are not mutually exclusive, but rather are produced simultaneously through the combination of recognition and mistrust that cheating elicits between exchange partners. Where methodologically good anthropological analyses have at times construed sociality as inherently benign or positive, we find our interlocutors viewing social relations with mixed feelings: as both valuable and a risk; and as a source of meaning and something that has to be reckoned with.

To conclude, we ask how a view from the negative might expand existing understandings of ethical life, which have frequently focused on more positive aspects of world- and self-making. From our enquiries in this volume, the negative is not an epiphenomenon of the good, but rather an important element of ethics in its own right. Immorality is a valuable focal point for anthropological enquiry, just as it is a central arena of attention and action for our interlocutors. Indeed, our sustained examination of the negative across various settings has generated compelling lines of analysis, including: the interplay of interests and varied moral perspectives; the difficulties of ethical double-binds; the ever-present spectre of failure; the resonance of pleasurable, but illicit, transgression; and how social relatedness is at times experienced as a source of ethical risk. Our case studies of everyday "bads" present the negative not as something that lies beyond the bounds of the social, but rather as phenomena that set it in motion. An attentiveness to the tactical dimension of negative evaluations and practices, and its blurring of ethical life and strategic interest, also suggests an additional avenue for escaping the Durkheimian trap of conceptualising moral rules as a form of social control. When viewed through the lens of people's reflexive use of ethical models and principles, moral conventions appear less as socially determining edicts than as the ground around which people inventively improvise from the perspective of their cares and concerns.

Our focus on perspective-taking emphasises the situatedness of people's ethical lives. Such an approach affords a different vision of ethics from either virtue-cultivation or values-based perspectives: one that foregrounds ethics as produced by and through relations between people, and embedded in the ways that social fields are organised. Attending to the perspectival dimension of evaluative practices also ensures that anthropologists continue to speak to moral complexity. The work of parsing the claims of, and relation between, differences in moralising points of view is a helpful prompt for capturing the multi-layered quality of human social worlds, allowing us to approach the relationship between positive and negative not as already-settled, but rather as an ethnographic question. This encourages us to stick with people, rather than scale up to value frameworks or develop etic structural critiques in ways that blanche out perspectival difference, while at the same time expanding out from self-cultivation to address broader spheres of action, interaction and, most critically, contestation.

A focus on the negative also offers a means of destabilising a tendency within Anglophone anthropology of viewing social relatedness as foundationally morally positive. We advocate for a heuristic misanthropology that

divests the normativity that often accompanies the methodological good, by investigating social relations from the perspective of people's distrust of and moral anxieties about them. Indeed, the litany of attempts to create distance from others examined in this issue shows that relations are not always viewed as "good to have", but are often significantly morally troubling or problematic. We are less likely to produce rose-tinted models of social life if we begin our analyses from a broader register of emic ethical evaluations and concerns, the negative chief among them. Taking a non-utopian view of social processes allows us to re-envision human life in ways that take the bad with the good.

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28

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