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Onto-epistemicide and the research ethics board

Onto-Epistemicide and the Research Ethics Board: Toward a Reflexive Ethics

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Abstract

This article posits that current priorities of many research ethics boards make them a self-undermining entity in that they perpetuate the erasure of certain knowledges and with them the bodies subjectivities and subjects that live them. Through obscuring the history, geography and onto-epistemology of the assumptions underpinning ethical review these boards reproduce dominant Eurocentric and postpositivist assumptions about what is and isn't valid or worthy research. Employing Santos's notion of epistemicide and joining it with Barad's ethico-onto-epistem-ology we explore how the instruments of "Ethics" act as a mechanism for reinforcing what Massey labels a dominant "geography of productions of knowledge"

Keywords

research ethics, onto-epistemicide, epistemicide, ethico-onto-epistemology, ethics

Setting Out Our Proposition

We start this article with a seeming contradiction: a strongly worded attempt to lay bare the irony—the self-undermining act—of the concept of the research ethics board. We start with the proposition that the research ethics board is implicit in epistemicide and we go on to stretch further this proposition, by showing how research ethics boards perpetrate what we define onto-epistemicide.

Ethics is a branch of Philosophy, and it explores and contests knowledges that pertain to moral principles, right and wrong, good and bad. As we will explore later, for the philosopher ethics does not give you right answers but a set of principles to navigate ethical dilemmas, and there are a wide set of principles to choose from, according to the theories and philosophical traditions one is enmeshed in and with. In short, ethical principles are to be thought in relation to, and with, specific theories (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023); and ethics, therefore, takes different shapes according to different philosophical and theoretical stances. Hence, these multiple approaches do not offer a singular answer on what is right per se, and for some the ambiguity this creates leads them to believe there is no single, or universal, "right" ethic somewhere.

The research ethics board that takes its title from this branching of multiple philosophical standpoints, however, often bears little resemblance to its disciplinary characteristics. As we will go on to argue, contemporary research ethics boards in the Western Academy have become procedural instruments that assess the worthiness of potential research through the application of a technology based on the validity of a particular way of knowing, grounded in the positivist and post-positivist tradition (see Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; St. Pierre, 2006; Tikly & Bond, 2013; Tolich & Fitzgerald, 2006). As Guillemin and Gillam (2004) have so poignantly stressed, "the traditional starting point and focus for discussions of research ethics has been the ethical principles formulated for biomedical research, usually quantitative in nature" (p. 262); however, such a starting point, theoretically located in a specific philosophical tradition, usually remains implicit and hidden within the (procedural) model promoted by ethics committees. In short, while the ethics boards are informed by very specific theoretical and philosophical underpinnings, there doesn't seem to be any recognition of this being the case: Therefore, the researcher's ethical conduct is envisaged as a universal set of general principles, born free of, and unrelated to, any specific and particular theoretical speculation. Using Haraway's (1988) famous metaphor, ethics in this manner, becomes too the product of "a god trick" (p. 581), presented as a

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general set of principles, universally applicable, and theoretically, geographically, historically, and culturally disembodied. Arguably, with little regard for dilemma or reflexivity (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), let alone for theoretical and methodological diversity, we argue the dominant model is to apply a tick-box approach based on a set of technicalities that substantially limits ways of knowing and, as we will explore, ways of being, through the guise of ethics. We use our own personal experiences to make this case.

Epistemicide/Onto-Epistemicide

While the concept of Epistemicide is thematically adjacent to notions of decolonization, in this article we choose to use the term (and expand it into onto-epistemicide) for its broader application to capitalism and patriarchy, its less contested meaning and in recognition that we do not specifically focus on Southern Theory or Anti-racism, though these are implied. While we fully acknowledge the specific genealogy of this term and are deeply keen to avoid a blind appropriation of it, we also feel the importance of sensitively plugging it in with other theories, movements and ideas to create new possibilities (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023). We think that working with the concept of epistemicide and onto-epistemicide can be productive for "the many people on the wrong side of humanism's subject/object binaries-male/female, white/black, rich/poor, heterosexual/homosexual, healthy/ill and so on" (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 5). Working with the concept of epistemicide in relation to research ethics boards through broadening its operational field means for us recognizing how De Sousa Santos's term can be useful to those who have been actively challenging the Eurocentric project and share some similar, though not overlapping, concerns with de-colonial theory (de Jong, 2022). To mention a few: feminist, post-structural, race, critical, queer and postcolonial, posthuman theories.

Epistemicide, coined by de Sousa Santos (2018), is "the destruction of an immense variety of ways of knowing" (p. 8) and is linked to capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. According to de Sousa Santos's (2018) theory of absences, a 'western-centric science'[1] has actively created the absences of alternative ways of knowing, in effect erasing them "through the active production of the nonexistent by the dominant ways of knowing" (p. 8). In doing so, Eurocentric epistemology, grounded in the power of an ideal and essentialized universal rationality, put at its center a very specific knowing subject, what Deleuze and Guattari (2018) call the "average European, the subject of enunciation" whom they portray as being "white, male, adult, 'rational'" (p. 292). This universal, idealized subject, as the "natural law" in the order and measure of things (Braidotti, 2013b, p. 23), was in fact the product of very specific geographies, histories, and theoretical traditions, the latter shaped mainly by humanism:

humanism [is] a grand theory with a long and varied history that has described the truth of things for centuries. An amazingly supple philosophy, it has produced diverse range of knowledge projects since man (a specific Western, Enlightened male) first began to believe he, as well as God, could, through the right use of reason, produce truth and knowledge. (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 5)[2]

And so western-centric science brought with it the *ciding* not only of certain epistemologies but also of the subjects of enunciation of those—turned marginal—knowledges. As Mignolo (2009) wonders, "Why did eurocentered epistemology conceal its own geo-historical and bio-graphical locations and succeed in creating the idea of universal knowledge as if the knowing subjects were also universal?" (p. 160).

Onto-Epistemicide and the Academy

The Academy has a long tradition in knowledge production in Western culture and as a traditionally elite institution has long dominated the ways in which we validate and envisage knowledge. Attention remains heavily placed on universities as legitimate sites of knowledge fashioning, reinforcing a dominant "geography of production of knowledge" (Massey, 2005, p. 75). Such a geography, Massey (2005) writes, has two interrelated effects; on one hand, it establishes the domicile of knowledge within specific, institutionalized sites, and on the other, the act of producing knowledge within those specific sites is conceived as an act of distancing, whereby researchers are trained to move apart from their embeddedness in the material world. However, the western academy's performative role isn't geographically restricted to the West, but it is pervasively globalized and this renders our discussion pertinent beyond the Western context. Starting under colonialism, European universities have existed, in different forms, beyond her shores for centuries. As de Sousa Santos (2018) pionts out, subsequent waves of imperialism linked to trade guaranteed their presence beyond the colonies while today the expansion of discourses of capitalism and knowledge economies alongside a global Higher Education market reinforce the hegemonic position of the western academy, so that "today the expansion of university capitalism tends to go along with increasing or more visible university colonialism" (de Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 273). While the western university does not have a monopoly on knowledge production, it has an important and powerful role in it, which makes a discussion of its role in epistemicide, and we will argue in onto-epistemicide, particularly relevant to current decolonization movements (de Jong, 2022).

While we have chosen to focus this article on the research ethics board and their role in mechanisms of onto-epistemicide, we do not intend to suggest that there is a single mechanism of onto-epistemicide. Our focus on the research

ethics board is offered as a contribution to a wider discussion, which sees power as discursive and in circulation among multiple institutions, levels, processes, and instruments (e.g., Foucault, 1980). We have chosen to focus on the research ethics board because of our own experiences of it when trying to work ethically in non-Western contexts and/or with different ways of knowing and in realization of its powerful position and implications in policing what research is permitted, what research is erased and with it, which bodies and subjects are excluded, or rendered invisible. We strongly felt a desire to work with Manning's (2018) provocation: "What is the pact the university demands? What bodies does it need to survive? What knowledges?" (p. 4). We see the research ethics board as a vital cog in the University-machine, one cog among many, which contributes to the functioning of the pact. We posit Manning's point renders explicit how the *cide*, implicit in the pact, works not only epistemologically but also ontologically. Not only are certain knowledges *cided*, but with them bodies, subjects, and their subjectivities are erased or rendered invisible (Rodriguez-Doranz, 2022).

A simple search on Google Scholar or skim through different University's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) plans reveals much attention to facilitate different ways of knowing that come through changes in curriculums and pedagogies, and while it is acknowledged that more systematic changes of governance are needed, it is easier to target the low hanging fruit—so to speak. While recognizing the importance of these changes and in agreement with them, however, we feel there is less focus on the instruments of process and governance, hence this article.

The Academy has multifarious mechanisms, or cogs, of onto-epistemicide, and, as St. Pierre (2006) writes referring to academic practices: "strategies of exclusion abound, and I believe exclusion is unethical" (p. 258). We consider these strategies to fall into three categories, whereby we see the epistemicide as always being imbricated with and in the ontocide. 1. Mechanisms of knowledge production > 2. Mechanisms of validations > 3. Mechanisms of dissemination. For mechanisms of knowledge production, we think about how preferences for different ways of knowing are built into our research funding award bodies and criteria and judgments of the worthiness of research in our research ethics boards. Without funding or the permission to proceed research that does not match the hegemonic discourses of quality, validity, worthiness, and which isn't inscribed within specific methodological traditions (and obviously theories!) fails to even get started. This carries very strong ontological implications, which we will touch on more thoroughly later in the article, through a series of specific examples. Suffice to say, at the moment that through this mechanism "we are not just rejecting another epistemology to shut out critique and keep our own intact, we are also rejecting the people who live that epistemology" (St. Pierre,

2006, p. 257) and denying the possibilities of their own worlds. Mechanisms of validation are concerned with the legitimacy of alternative knowledges, and in the academy, we can think of the editing and publishing processes of journals or the policing of disciplinary norms in examinations. Completed research may still be judged as not worthy of accreditation or publication by a myriad of barriers policed through instruments such as peer reviewers, editors, publishers, and PhD examiners. Mechanisms of dissemination include what university lecturers teach on their courses, but also much wider instruments of dissemination including the wide variety of activity under the heading of knowledge exchange and impact measures. What we see as impact is telling, with policy change often perceived as the gold-standard of research impact, whereas the impact of "being a good witness" to your participants' stories is rarely considered impact at all. These mechanisms are inter-reliant, one cannot represent alternative knowledge on a course reading list if it hasn't been validated (published), and it is questionable to introduce a student to different ways of knowing if these ways are invalid for the purposes of knowledge production in the formal grants system—the student has been set up to fail in attaining funding for their research or permission to proceed. We, therefore, proceed aware that it is dangerous to silo these mechanisms and atomize the inter-relatedness, yet with the conviction that the role of the research ethics board is significant and complex enough to deserve focused attention.

Our Argument

In developing our case, through showing and exampling (Gale, 2018) research ethics boards' mutilating practices, we make use of Barad's (2007) "ethico-onto-epistemology." Starting with the assumption that ethics, ontology, and epistemology are inseparable, the ethico-onto-epistemological view demands a radical, relational, and uncertain ethics that accounts for our being implicated in the world and in its unfolding (Barad, 2007), whereby "knowledge production finds itself in a situation of radical entanglement" (Geerts & Carstens, 2019, p. 920) with the mattering of the world. As Barad (2007) famously put, "we don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world" (p. 185). Bringing the theoretical resource of ethics (from a poststructuralist stance) back to the research ethics board, in this article we argue that without acknowledging and making rooms for these, the research ethics board is not only not-fit-for-purpose but also implicated in the onto-epistemicide.

In what follows, we explore how the theoretical resource of Barad and Derrida can help us to respond to the demands of ethic-onto-epistemology. Both Barad and Derrida uphold an inherent obligation to the Other yet firmly set this in context, thus demanding the resistance of technologies they

urge us to instead embrace an ethics of entanglement. From this approach, ethics ceases to become something you ascertain or review, but is something you engage with. While we recognize that bringing these scholars together is not without its issues—Barad's ontology being materialist and Derrida's discursive—we too appreciate the overlap between Barad's and Derrida's work as significant in its call to rethink ethics outside of an a priori technology but instead embrace its relational and productive ontoepistemic contingency (Geerts & van der Tuin, 2016). To their scholarship, we add the significant work around ethics of Caputo (1993) and Anker (2009), who both build on Derridean and poststructural theory. Having set out our proposition, we now move in the next section to discuss how these scholars can help us to think about research ethics, challenging: (1) unrelational ethics approaches; (2) ethics as a technology; and (3) ethics as a Fetish. In each section, we will draw on the theoretical tools of philosophy to explore our own vignettes of personal experiences conducting research in the Western academic tradition with a particular attention to a troubled notion of reflexivity and dilemma.

Vignettes—A Prologue

In the vignettes presented after this prologue, we abandon writing in the plural: the *we*, which co-wrote and co-thought this article even before it was actually written. We leave behind the *we*, which we became one evening after a reading group, in the noise of a pub, where we came up, by chance with the title of this article, before the paper existed: Together we felt what the title meant. That evening we imagined the writing; a few months ago, in that pub, this text began to write *us*, as *we* wrote it (Gale & Wyatt, 2009; Lather, 2007).

In the three vignettes presented below, each of us wishes to offer a rendering of a specific scene and moment (Gale, 2018) which we consider to be particularly insightful in relation to the Western academy's ethics committee mechanisms of onto-epistemicide. We both contributed to the second vignette but in it, we differentiated our individual perspectives, by specifying who the author of each section is. We reunite in the plural *we* in discussing each vignette.

As we briefly detach from the "we" in the next three subsections perhaps now is a good time to introduce ourselves.

Carozzi (Giulia) is a third year PhD student looking at how the concept of cosmopolitanism can be revisited through a Deleuzian lens, making it an event of "worlding," which unfolds in the ordinary and the mundane. She sees postqualitative inquiry, and the theories underpinning this (non)methodological approach, as enabling and rendering visible such possibility. In particular, Carozzi is focusing on how conceptual figurations become more than memories fixed in a concluded past but material and palpable presences guiding the creation of her inquiry.

At the time of Carozzi's ethics application, the focus of her field research was one of open and unstructured returns (in a Baradian understanding) to those domestic and mundane spaces that had enabled a first sensing of cosmopolitanism as a gestured and relational event of becoming world (Braidotti, 2013a). For Carozzi, this meant physically returning to familiar places and to people with whom she had established a close friendship prior to the beginning of her research (St. Pierre, 2017). At the time of her application, she was planning to let theory guide her returns and see which new spaces and lines of inquiries would emerge at the convergence between ordinary bodies, Deleuzian philosophy and domestic spaces. She trusted the gesture writing to account for the unforeseeable and unpredictable richness that emergence brings (Wyatt, 2018).

Horner (Lindsey) finished her PhD in 2011, having conducted ethnographic fieldwork collecting stories of peace and practices for its translation in Mindanao, the Philippines. The distance between research ethics culture then and now has significantly changed. Horner faced a much less procedural and legalistic approach and instead enjoyed a more dialogical, ethically reflexive take on research ethics. A whole chapter on Research Ethics was included in her upgrade viva, and extensive discussion for examination in her final thesis. While similar issues surfaced, such as informed consent, she was able to discuss the reasons why a form wouldn't be appropriate in a dialogic process. While the processes were, therefore, more reflexive, she maintains the positivist assumptions that have been discussed so far were still present; it was more the case that with sympathetic reviewers attuned to her methodology and an ability to converse in a less procedural process made the process more amenable to her research needs.

We would like to also stress at this point that as we consider power as discursive and in circulation among multiple institutions, levels, processes, and instruments that the following is not about assigning blame to any single person, ethics board on institution. As academics and researchers we are all implicated through the pact we make with the academy and have all played a role in this. What follows, while situated in particular spaces, are indicative examples of what is happening across the university sector. Horner has worked across several universities in the United Kingdom and approaches this article as starting constructive dialogues about a sector-wide discursive practice where no single person is to blame.

Un-Relational Ethics Approaches: Vignette and Discussion

Carozzi's Vignette

I am standing in an expansive city-center park; it is cold and windy. I have taken the children to play tennis and I am

waiting for them to end their lesson on a bench. I know I shouldn't check my emails, my day at the University is finished, but I do it, anyway.

I look at my phone, and see in my inbox another email from the reviewers (a line, a succession of people; different people that succeeded each other in anonymity). My heart beats uncontrollably fast; skimming through the usual pleasantries of "thank you for your detailed response," I reach the "BUT." The "but" seems to challenge the legitimacy of my returns as a way of being-with in emerging relationalities which refuse to be contained in a neat and tidy plan that I sense will otherwise govern those encounters, their spontaneity and the warmth which comes with reunitings. My plan to go back to familiar spaces, sit around a kitchen table, or wander through a market and simply let the affirmative energy of life do its poietic job, isn't deemed as appropriate. While the notion of researching with a person known previously is given some acceptability, the open and unstructured approach within which I present the re-encounter seems to be met with a sense of distant cautiousness, which feels invalidating. The lack of a strict frame within which to move during the field research, is far from the familiar image found in more traditional research approaches. The notion of an ongoing and processural consent is challenged.

I hopscotch through the document attached, divided in a "reviewer 1" section and "reviewer 2" section. The word-document is the yellow steamroller, which is now slowly crossing the road. It flattens what is complex and irregular. My mind goes to those friends and colleagues who are too undergoing, or have just undergone, the ethics approval in different academic institutions; we have often discussed together the difficulties of those unemphatic "buts." I know that somehow we all make it on the other side of the ethics approval, and our researches make it beyond it too, but I wonder in which shape we reach the other side of this threshold?

I stand up, I walk, yet I am stuck in a process that doesn't feel relational; With each new exchange with the anonymous reviewers, my project appears to move away from its original inception. The ethics process seems to be turning my inquiry into something I can't recognize, into a cold field of boundering procedures; it is dispossessing and confiscating my inquiry, and in the process the people who populate it run the risk of being turned homeless. We lack a legitimate space.

Discussion

In this section, we explore the concept of "un-relational ethics" as an authoritative system functioning through rules, valid regardless of the project's specific context and genealogy, grounded in the superior value of detachment.

We look at its effects, through one of the key objections that Carozzi faced during the reviewing process of her ethics application: the one of carrying out research within existing relationships of friendship. The fact that at the center of Carozzi's project there were people, with whom she had a relationship prior to the official beginning of her study program was seen as ethically problematic (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014). Distance and detachment tend to be in many research ethics boards, unquestionable and privileged qualities supposedly guaranteeing not only the epistemological validity of the research itself but also its ethical course (Massey, 2005). While we understand that particular care should be placed toward not transforming a friendship in a means to generate data, we also remain fully committed to the belief that *together* we perform and produce and that research can be the affective tracing of this creative endeavor (Braidotti, 2010).

Despite the numerous examples around the ethical possibilities of doing research with familiar people and within existing relationships of friendship (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014; Taylor, 2011; Tillmann-Healy, 2003), Carozzi was reminded of the importance of drawing neat boundaries between the research field and the friendship field, as if it was possible for her to take up a new identity (the one of researcher) and bracket the old one (of friend). Worryingly, despite ethics committees' alleged attention to the notion of "harm" (see third vignette), there didn't seem to be any acknowledgment on the part of the reviewers of how the suggested bracketing of the friendship during the field-research might have an impact and even harm the people with whom Carozzi had a relationship with. Furthermore, throughout the reviewing process there wasn't any appreciation of the fact that Carozzi's project was born out of what was described to the reviewers as a sense of indebtedness toward what, the now called "research participants," offered her over the years spent together which pre-dated the beginning of the official research (St. Pierre, 2017). Carozzi's project stemmed out of a promise given to her friends, as their lives took different paths, of "not forgetting." It was an inquiry, she had to keep underlying, based on a notion of re-turn (Barad, 2014). Such a concept destabilizes linear notions of time, and it enables instead practices of working and re-working over "the entangled relationalities of inheritance that we are" (Barad, 2010, p. 264; see also Barad, 2014; Murris & Zhao, 2021).

The reviewers seemed to ignore the above points, which Carozzi kept arguing for. In their responses, there was lack of acknowledgment for the unique richness brought by difference: "change this people for someone else," seemed to be at times the implicit, rational fix suggested by them, in order to overcome the sticky problem of navigating friendship in research. But the people in question were not replaceable, nor was the fact that they had become a

"qualitative duration" (Deleuze, 2005, p. 25), a style which permeated what Carozzi was studying, how she saw things, and how she thought. How ethical, we wonder, would it have been not to account for the intensity of these people's presence? How ethical was it that Carozzi was compelled to (re)present her friends as "research participants" when the people exceeded that definition?

This kind of reviewing process, based on un-relational ethics approaches, had several ontological effects. As Manning writes, the university imposes "forms of knowledge that do violence to the bodies they purport to address" (Manning, 2018, p. 2). In this case, bodies of friendships were questioned in the legitimacy of what they had to offer in their experience of togetherness. Proximity and intimacy were seen as inherently dubious qualities, qualities to be corrected, bracketed, and bounded.

It is not only the pre-occupation with objectivity or the inability to see the singularity of each person—as if one can be swapped in and out at will—that is specific to this case, but we also question more generally an un-relational approach to ethics for much research. While the research ethics board may uphold a postpositivist notion of researcher objectivity and detachment, this assumed universal ethical stance is not matched throughout all Philosophical branches of ethics. Instead, we find for Lévinas (1969/2012) that obligation with the Other, which is ethics, is in the world and "face to face"; while for Barad the ethical is a crisscross of obligation, "entanglements are relations of obligation" (Barad, 2010, p. 265). Furthermore, Barad goes on to double-up the relational lens through not only citing the ethical obligation to the Other, but also the construction of the Other as also relational, from our own interactions (see Barad, 2007, 2014).

Firmly located in obligation and responsibility to the Other, ethics, therefore, is relational; it is about how we relate to others. This puts ethics clearly in our relationships and responsibilities toward others, and these others are singular. As Barad (2007) and Lévinas (1969/2012) and Derrida (1992) (see next section) understand, all too well ethics is about how we respond to particular situations and circumstances in the-here-and-now, and not abstractions. The creation of the obligation and Otherness is relational, not abstract; it is singular and particular, not universal or standard.

We are with Khon and Shore (2017) when they ask, "how ethical are these research ethics committees?" (p. 230). How ethical is the violence they perpetrate? How coercive is their institutional power? How ethical is their un-relationality?—whether taking form through an undialogical objectionism, which crushes the subjectivity of the researcher, and/or through a mistrust toward the possibilities offered by proximity, affect, and unpayable debts (Harney & Moten, 2013)?

Ethics as a Technology—Vignette and Discussion

Carozzi and Horner's (True Fiction[3]) Vignette

Pre-Tutorial

> *(Carozzi) As I wait outside Horner's office, holding off knocking at her door for a few instants, I try to persuade myself that I am a decent enough student, I am a diligent student. I have been attending all the PhD tutorials that my school has offered; I have been constantly concerned with doing something wrong, something that might cost me this PhD which I wanted more than anything for a long time. I have been trying hard to keep track of what I was expected to do, I noted down <u>when</u> I was expected to do <u>what.</u>*

> *But since I attended the online tutorial dedicated to the ethics approval process something broke: At that point, I knew I wouldn't be on track anymore. As much as I wished to do the right thing, I came out of the tutorial with the certainty that I was not going to be ethical in the way my school expected me to be. A few weeks after it, I sat in front of a screen, familiarizing with the online-ethics form, a system designed to produce relevant questions according to the latest ticked box: This was just the beginning of the ethics approval process, a long, painful endeavor that nearly dispossessed me from my research.*

The Tutorial Experience

> *(Horner) We both stare at the screen to try and decipher the latest objections raised by the research ethical review board. We are staring at a flowchart. A literal technology. A nicely colored diagram with simple "yes" and "no" branches to make the navigating the ethical impacts of Covid simple and straightforward. For not the first time, I am embarrassed. I'm embarrassed that approaches to ethical review are so rigidly faithful to an outdated and not uniquely or infrequently questioned set of assumptions. The embarrassment is mixed with apologetic tones to the scholars that have come before us who have been erased, their arguments, papers and research and the invalidation of methods, ontologies, and epistemologies.*

> *(Carozzi) I am in shock, and in disbelief: Another form, in this case in the shape of a flowchart, has landed on my screen. The entire ethic process seems to be a slalom across boxes to be ticked, diagrams to be navigated, enticing colors to be followed: a merry-go-round built on technologies of simplification. This time, a flowchart is supposed to guide my responses for the COVID Risk assessment form. I*

receive it together with the suggestion to consider the benefits of carrying out an online data collection. The response from my supervisors is warm, present to the troubles I am experiencing. I start to feel their frustration and disappointment emerging too: I guess the suggestion to carry out an online data collection and the request to fill a risk assessment on the basis of a flowchart undermines their work as much as mine. Their disappointment isn't a consolation, but I feel we are together in this painful endeavor.

Discussion

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) have stressed the limitations of what they define as "procedural ethics which usually involves seeking approval from a relevant ethics committee" (p. 263). They elaborate on this by stating that

> For many researchers, the completion of the research ethics committee's application form is a formality, a hurdle to surmount to get on and do the research. Like many of our qualitative research colleagues, we diligently answer the questions on the ethics application form, even though they may be irrelevant to our research. We have learned to write our responses to the questions in "ethics-committee speak." This involves using language that the committee will understand, is free of jargon, but will nonetheless reassure the committee that we are competent and experienced researchers who can be trusted. (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 263)

We here wish to stress the implications that such a process can have, and we argue that what Guillemin and Gillam call "procedural ethics" is more than a "hurdle." We see the process of squeezing one's own research in a preexistent ethics forms and charts, which don't speak to the theoretical nature of one's own project nor to its context, as a one-sided, technology-led process. As largely discussed in literature, this bears not only epistemological consequences (see, for instance, Bell & Wynn, 2021; Lederman, 2016; Simpson, 2011), but also ontological ones.

Heavily reliant on neo-positivist approaches, the online system and the chart described in the vignettes assumed the linearity of research, a faith in prediction, a trust in representation (St. Pierre, 2019). The online ethics platform posed a great emphasis on the verbal (whether oral or written) dimension of research and presupposed the researcher to be a bounded, independent individual-self, detached from what she was inquiring into. The system designed to produce relevant questions according to the latest ticked boxed, nearly re-designed Carozzi's project. Lacking a dialogical space in which the theory (as well as the methodology deriving from it) underpinning Carozzi's project could be properly explained and discussed (Tolich & Fitzgerald, 2006),

Carozzi found herself in front of an imposing and unresponsive screen, which guided her toward what it wanted to generate. She needed to literally squeeze her research project in pre-set boxes, which were completely irrelevant to what she had to say.

Furthermore, not only are these ethical technologies restrictive; they may in fact be contrary to ethics. To revisit our previous section, where we argue that ethics is relational and singular, not abstractive or universal, we need to question how a set of rules and technologies can sufficiently address the contingency found within the ethical dilemma. Ethics is about how we respond to particular situations and circumstances in the here and now, and not abstractions. In this sense, there is no way of providing sure and fast rules for ethics or ethical codes and procedures. Aristotle understood this when he warned us that ethics was not a precise science, but that "the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion" (Nicomachean Ethics, cited in Buckingham, 2009, p. 3). The ethical decision is always made in particular situations, and not in abstract. In addition, the absence of any exact science or formula for ethics, that there is no law governing ethics, also means that any apparent regularities governing ethics are merely "illusions of discursiveness" Caputo (1993). If ethics do not work in the abstract and there is no law governing ethics, then this poses a problem for anyone who approaches ethics looking for the "right" way to relate to the other, some kind of code of ethics to apply or some certainty about how to act ethically. But this is sometimes what is mistakenly assumed in university ethical guidelines and the ethical review process, something we would argue is more of a response to legal concerns (which do have a law to follow) than ethical concerns (which are not subject to any governing law). The reduction of ethics to the development of discourses, abstract codes and procedures, or the abstraction of ethics, is what Caputo might call the metaphysics of morals, that is, "a metaphysics charged with making obligation safe" (Caputo, 1993, p. 73).

However, there is no way of "making obligation safe." Ethics are about particular choices in particular situations. We have no obligation to an abstraction; I have no obligation to the other in general, to participants in general. And this is where the metaphysics of morals runs into difficulty. Because to be concerned with the science of ethics is to address singular events, but a scientific discourse finds its limit in the individual, which by its very nature is not repeatable, generalizable, or able to be reduced to a discourse. Regarding the metaphysics of morals,

> to understand metaphysics, which takes itself to be the science of what is real, one must understand that the only thing that is real, the individual –Sola individual existent—is the one thing of which it cannot speak. (Caputo, 1993, p. 72)

Here, we find an irresolvable internal contradiction, the ambition to "make obligation safe" requires developing a generalized discourse about a singular event, in short the impossible. The impossibility of a metaphysics of morals to make obligation safe then introduces the idea that we must make ethical decisions in uncertainty, rewiring ethical reflexivity. This requires the acceptance that in the end there is no generalizable rule of thumb or ethical code that can "make obligation safe"; there are no guaranteed answers to ethical choices, but instead "moral choices are indeed choices and moral dilemmas are indeed dilemmas" (Bauman, 1993, p. 32).

However, while this may appear bad news for anyone searching for certainty, a discourse of ethics finds in its limit its very possibility, where the impossibility of ethics bubbles with deconstructability, as its own propensity to unravel situated in its impossibility opens the opportunity for reconstruction. While they may be impossible, ethical decisions should not be mistaken as not possible, after all they happen all of the time, if only temporary, faint and elusive. Instead, it is the impossibility that enables their very possibility, as it opens up the excess "to come" (Derrida). The impossibility of ethical decisions, the irreducible nature of ethics, opens up a temporal and spatial difference, *différance*, where new deconstruction and reconstruction evoke the promise to come:

> Deconstruction is the relentless pursuit of the impossible, which means, of things whose possibility is sustained by their impossibility, of things which, instead of being wiped out by their impossibility, are actually nourished and fed by it. (Caputo, in Derrida & Caputo, 1997, p. 32)

The ideas of impossibility, the irreducible and deconstruction, which collectively pass as uncertainty, and their inscription on ethics, inform an ethics of uncertainty. An uncertainty that will evoke has the potential to move meaning forward, to open up the future to unforeseen opportunities, to anticipate an (uncertain) ethical space to-come. This means that rather than uncertainty being the defeat of ethics, it is that which enables it. The "to come" which is (un) contained in the ethical decision longs for a future which will shock and exhilarate, one which is beyond the calculable, an ethics we have not yet even dreamed of. As Anker (2009) explains the ethical decision,

> This decision without measure, this decision structured around undecidability, is a decision thus in excess or outside of being in general. It opens up, in its excess, the possibility of a world beyond calculation and totalization. The excess of decision beyond in undecidability does not end once a decision is made, for as soon as a decision is made, it folds back into the aporia of future decisions. These decisions to come, decisions within undecidability and thus in excess of calculability, continue to give us a sense of space beyond totalization and absolutization.

In other words, the decision to come gives us an elsewhere, an elsewhere outside the here and now, an elsewhere not reached or closed down by totalization. (p. 45)

So, while for the metaphysician the uncertainty inherent in the ethical decision is an impasse and the inability to "make obligation safe" may seem like bad news, instead it can be viewed as the very thing that enables ethical decisions. A certain future offers little hope beyond the foreseeable future for which we can reasonably anticipate, the future present, "with only certainty and knowledge as our guide, very little in this world would change" (Anker, 2009, p. 61); however, "where certainties come apart there too gathers the strength that no certainty can match" (Nancy, 2001, p. 457).

If uncertainly is what enables ethical decisions, then certainty is what obstructs them:

> What disrupts the totality is the condition for the relation to the other. The privilege granted to unity, to totality, to organic ensembles, to community as a homogenized whole—this is a danger for responsibility, for decision, for ethics, for politics. (Derrida, in Derrida & Caputo, 1997, p. 13)

Where uncertainty provides an opening, certainty a violence of closure. Allowing a technology to decide for you is not deciding at all, and there is no technology that can reduce ethics; instead, the ethical decision can only be made in uncertainty, which is not determined or programmed, where no technology abides, and is therefore a free decision:

> I will even venture to say that ethics, politics, and responsibility, if there are any, will only ever have begun with the experience of aporia. When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said there is no decision to make: irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program. . . It makes ethics and politics a technology. (Derrida, 1992, pp. 41 and 43)

In the type of review processes experienced by Carozzi, we see an absence of any reflexive space, a dialogic process or exploration of contingence, but instead a plethora of technologies that are not up to the job of seriously engaging in an ethics to-come. The 6-months-long to and fro felt a fundamentally un-collaborative endeavor (see Bell & Wynn, 2021; McMurphy et al., 2013). The reviewing process lacked a genuine dialogical space, a space able to host listening and understanding which was instead replaced by a technology of simplification, which operated through charts, forms, and anonymous word documents. Carozzi could have decided to firmly challenge the questions posed by the reviewers and could have refused to work with the flowchart which was forwarded to her, and this was

something that both her supervisors would have supported. However, she was also concerned about the consequences that this could have had: in short, the ethics board had an institutional power over her, which locked her capacity to question, to the extent she truly wished, the reviewers' objections to her project. As Bell and Wynn underline writing about institutional ethics review, "there are potential material consequences to non-compliance: charges of academic misconduct, failure to be awarded a degree, losing one's job. The threat is distant, but real" (Bell & Wynn, 2021, p. 14).

Ethics as a Fetish—Vignette and Discussion

Horner's Vignette

I am sitting in the preschool, a basic structure of breeze blocks and large palm leaf weaved mats as walls, lined inside with plywood. There are large colorful letters cut out and stuck on the plywood walls reading: 'Learn, listen, speak' in English and a collection of toys in baskets along a row of shelves. The single rotating fan does little to cool the room, heated up by the sun on the corrugated tin roof.

As people come in, they leave their shoes at the door, but this does little to stop the poured concrete floor getting dusty with the light white sand on which the village resides. The early arrivals perch in the preschool chairs that are far too small to sit on comfortably, around the low tables pushed together to make one large table with the obligatory sweet bread and jugs of ice-tea that symbolize the presence of an important guest, regardless that I paid for them. I feel self-conscious with this status that has been bestowed upon me, but the value for this customary tradition and the regard my hosts show in extending their hospitality means I do not object.

When everyone is present Kalib, the lead community organizer, stands up to address them. Kalib had given me a rigorous interrogation before agreeing to host me—he was direct and bold in ascertaining my motivations and values, and reserved trust in me until I had earned it. I had seen Kalib rebuke and refuse others for trying "to colonise" him and his village. Kalib was a strong character and he speaks with the same poise here, but there is somehow a softer tone too. Kalib has earned his respect in his community; he has no need to impose it. Instead, his fondness and care for the group leaks through his mannerisms and softer voice. In a mix of English and Maguindanaon, with his wife Fatima translating for me when necessary, he introduces me, my research, what I will be doing and that I am living with him. He then instructs everyone present to co-operate with me and do what I ask, and that they must allow me to record any interviews. I gulp and shift in my chair, so much for free "consent."

Discussion

There is no getting away that without any technologies, in the relational entanglement of the real world, the squeaky clean admonishments of the research ethics class are not so clear cut, that there is no guarantee that we can "make obligation safe" (Caputo, 1993). In the situation above a myriad of ethical dilemmas, openings and possibilities need a response in the moment, a moment filled by emerging, often unpredictable, embedded in the context, dynamics (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Kohn & Shore, 2017): the complex position of the power of the researcher (vulnerable to the hosts on whose favor they rely on yet simultaneously an honored guest), the incompatibility of an individualist Western notion of consent with the communal consent of the non-Western context and the negotiations of power in a collectivist approach where the individual is submerged for the good of the group/whole, and a tendency for the ethics board to over-vulnerablize "participants" (especially if they are from the global south, disabled or young) and erase their agency and strength, in this case the imagined vulnerability of Kalib. In these examples the practiced phrase of choice for research ethics committees, "first do no harm," is problematic. There are a myriad of ways to do harm in qualitative research, and no clear answers on how to avoid it. This is largely due to the fact that qualitative research, in the form of ethnographic or post-ethnographic studies, involves practices where the potential harms to participants aren't usually clearly identifiable in themselves, but are instead "often quite subtle and stem from the nature of the interaction between researcher and participant" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 272). The potential harms, in short, usually reside in the unfolding of the dynamics of the relationship between participants and researcher and are hosted in the specificity and particularity of the moment. Dealing with those moments whereby ethics is tensioned through relations, and not resolvable with pre-sets and rules, is difficult and can have far-reaching implications. Untangling these dilemmas is going to be difficult and it is not possible to continue with any guarantee of how it will unfold in the entanglement of trajectories and far reaching implications it will have.

As an ethical researcher how should one respond to the above situation which, in type, was by no means an isolated incident? How does the research ethics review process equip a researcher for this type of scenario? If, as we argue, there is no guaranteed way to make one's "obligation safe" in this situation, do we then abandon our research—if judged by the very specific technologies of the research ethics boards as unethical? To extend these questions, do we abandon all research where an a priori set of "universal" principles are inapplicable, where there is no "God Trick"? What is the cost involved in compromising one's own research to the ethics committees' general guidelines? And,

what are the ethics of not doing the intended research? These are questions that, while periodically asked, are still largely ignored by academic research ethics committees (Bell & Wynn, 2021; Kohn & Shore, 2017; McMurphy et al., 2013); as Kohn and Shore (2017) stress, "Clearly action points and shifts in process and understanding are not being implemented. People listen, nod and then move on; and the committee is ever reformulated as tenures lapse" (p. 241). While the above considerations remain neglected and ethics committees don't engage in reviewing and questioning the assumptions which govern their policing practices, there is a very serious risk of the erasure of all complex and difficult research and by proxy of the people, experience, and knowledges we claim to be protecting. We see the ethics committees' general lack of critical commitment toward shifting practices and attitudes, as a telling example of what Manning (2018) defines as "a troubling asymmetry" (p. 2) within Academic spaces. She writes,

> I turn to the university because there is a troubling asymmetry at the heart of teaching and learning practices, on the one hand creating a path for new ways of thinking and making while on the other imposing forms of knowledge that do violence to the bodies they purport to address. (Manning, 2018, p. 2)

We argue that one troubling asymmetry within ethics committees' practices resides in the "do no harm" imperative expressed in the fetishization of consent forms. We go on to infer that there is a potential to harm participants in blindly following the committees' guidelines and that for those who do not agree with the committees' faith in the fetish of forms, the price to pay is a silencing of their own research and of the people involved in it.

The phrase, "first do no harm" is an obvious reference to the famous ancient admonition of Hippocrates, recognized for his contribution to clinical medicine and particularly his part in medical ethics. It is, of course, a very commendable aspiration, however as we have already explored the impossibility of providing any guarantees or certainties around ethical decision making poses a problem. Furthermore, the field of social sciences is very different from the highly controlled environment of a hospital theater. We would argue that medical ethics are by no-means a simple and straightforward affair, as testified to by the ethics committees that occupy our hospitals and health services, but add human behavior in a social, political, economical, and cultural context and the uncontrollable nature of what we do is magnified. Hindsight has shown us that throughout history what we do has unanticipated consequences, and that it is quite probable that we will "do harm," whether inadvertently or by design. In this situation, we would argue that when applied in a blanket fashion, ethical research codes are at risk of becoming a fetish. If a researcher simply relies on rules and formulas as a technology for decision-making, the

ethical choices faced at best will be impossibly simplified, at worst take away any need to interact with the question of ethics at all.

Take the informed consent issue explored in the vignette and imagine applying a form to the situation, and think what it might mean collecting signatures from each individual. This was entirely possible but, we argue, it would not constitute consent. The use of an informed consent form in this scenario would either simplify consent to the idea that it is free from all power dynamics, or it can reassure the researcher that they have met all the ethical requirements needed so that they can continue without having to worry about them, in effect acting as a waiver for ethical responsibility. Here, the consent form and the ethical codes from which it was derived have become a fetish, or as Wynn and Bell (2021) write, a "doctrine" (p. 9); that is a replacement to cover a lack. Žižek (2001) describes the fetish as "The embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth" (p. 13). For Žižek (1989), the fetish is not only the replacement, but the fantasy itself, so that "The mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence'" (p. 28). It is not actually the ethical code itself that is the fetish, but the fantasy that it is truly possible to "do no harm," to "make obligation safe." There is the possibility that Ethics either becomes a fetish that enables researchers to carry on in the belief that they can "do no harm," or that in the absence of any guarantees the only way to "do no harm" would be to do nothing, which for us does not represent an ethical response.

To return to the question of what an ethical researcher might do, we consider an ethics of uncertainty not to be about negating ethics but demanding that we make decisions, in all their undecidability, to evoke an ethical space to-come. Our aim here is not to negate ethics, but to delimit ethics from some kind of narrow and artificially constructed set of codes and rules. Do not mistake an ethics of uncertainty as nihilistic, by orienting uncertainty toward an uncontained promise in the future rather than nihilism (negative) it becomes potential (positive). Our case is that research ethics must be engaged beyond ethical codes, which are inadequate in addressing them.

One needs to know the Philippine context to know that poor Filipinos are asked to sign forms all the time, but they mean nothing to them. The worthlessness of such a form in authentically gaining consent in the Filipino context makes these forms a pointless exercise. Furthermore, an appreciation of the rich cultural heritage of the communities allows the researcher to respect the collectivist approach to consent, and question the act of cultural arrogance/violence in undermining your host culture as a guest afforded so much generosity. However, this knowledge doesn't erase the ethical dilemmas and a Western researcher in a non-Western context will find themselves in the difficult situation of having to account to both their Western colleagues and

institutions and their research context, often an impossible task. In response to the vignette above, Horner did still pursue the Western understanding of informed consent from individuals, even though she did not use a form to do it. Instead, she employed a range of approaches in an attempt to overcome these problems. In every community visited, their researcher role was made transparent, always introduced as a researcher, always connected to the host nongovernmental organization (NGO), but never as a member of their team. Transparency about the research was important as well as what would be done with the stories being collected. Ongoing consent was vigilantly perused; individuals constantly reminded that of their position as researcher. In an attempt to redress the consent of the individual in those communities where participation was expected arising for a collectivist culture, leads were not chased too forcefully, reading an individual's in/ability to make an appointment as a consent issue, not a time/re-scheduling concern. This gave the individual the chance to opt out of the process while giving the community the appearance that they were partaking. However, this was not simple and again requires an embedded (uncomfortable) reflexivity (Pillow, 2003). Filipinos say they like to be pursued, and they may think that an initial invitation is not genuine if not pressed home and chased. This cultural knowledge required a delicate balancing act between communicating to the participants their value and opinions but not insisting so strongly as to make them participate when they do not really want to but cannot say "no." How does one explain the intuitive judgment based on time in the field and close relationships to a process bound and technology-led research ethics board?

Horner also attempted to address the demand from the community elder that participants must be recorded during interviews, must co-operate with her—the recorder was always kept in the center of the table. The prominent location of the recorder acted as a reminder that they were being recorded. Sometimes participants would ask to remove the recorder, explaining that it should keep recording, but if the recorder is out of sight, they find it easier to talk freely. This was a good opportunity to revisit the issue of consent, to discuss how comfortable they really felt about being recorded. If consent was judged to be genuine the recorder always remained visible along with an explanation that given the nature and sensitivity of what they were talking about, it was better that they had a constant visual reminder to guard what they say.

Despite all of these practices, it is impossible to know whether all of the research participants consented individually. Instead of pretending to have "made obligation safe" through following a procedure, the signing of an informed consent form, Horner acknowledged the complexities and uncertainties of the situation while simultaneously making decisions and acting on them in an attempt to seek informed consent. Such an approach is hard and it would have been easier to just ask the participants to sign a form, freeing the researcher of such deliberation and using it as a waiver form. It is a daunting prospect to enter the field without an "ethical tool box" (Bauman, 1993), but instead with the often-uncomfortable realization of always having an ongoing responsibility with no guarantees.

Conclusion

In these final lines, we wish to recapitulate how, for projects similar in their philosophical nature to the ones presented here, the researcher's ethical conduct might be ultimately lying in the attention given to dilemma and uncertainty. Especially within social science, relations of obligations toward the other can't be defined, specified, and predicted prior to the event of encounter taking place; however, theoretical, geographical, historical, and cultural forces are always at play in the moment of the encounter. Reflexive practices can be used both in preparation for the encounter to take place and after it occurs, always remembering that we can only embrace tentativeness as a preparation for the encounter and hesitation in reflecting a posteriori upon it (Lather, 2007). We consider practices of what Pillow (2003) calls uncomfortable reflexivity, "a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous" (p. 188), as a necessary ethical endeavor. Uncomfortable reflexivity in our views has a potential to work both in the immediacy of the encounter and in retrospect of it: On one hand, uncomfortable reflexivity prompts us to look at how our presence has an impact on things, disturbing, shaking, and reshaping the fields we are immersed in, and on the other hand, it demands an ethical textualization of how we should always pay attention to issues of representation (Lather, 2007). We consider such reflexive practices not as self-examinations or confessions (Pillow, 2003), but rather as a means of understanding the effect our language and bodies have upon the spaces of our research (Gannon & Davies, 2012; Pillow, 2003). In doing this, we appreciate the potentials that various types of reflexivities have according to the different theoretical standpoints embraced by the researcher (Serra Undurraga, 2022, 2023). Our sympathy toward uncomfortable reflexivity is only one viable option among many.

We argue that staying and living with, remaining attentive to, and returning after the moment to episodes of tension, indecision, and uncertainty are in itself an ethical practice. Time spent in the field, and time dedicated to reflecting upon it, may be one of the most important and fruitful lessons to enable ethical conduct. As underlined by Khon and Shore (2017),

> the core of ethicality in field-based research is inevitably embedded in the practice itself, in feeling responsible to do the right thing, in working towards protecting others from harm, in altering one's expectations about what is needed or right, based on what the field itself teaches us. (p. 245)

And yet the hard-learned lessons are largely ignored in the postpositivist research ethics board as well as the relational ethics that comes from prolonged connections—seen in the earlier vignette the problem of friendship and particularity. Without the closeness to our fields (both theoretical and physical) and our participants, how can we navigate ethical dilemmas?

Before a final conclusion, we wish to acknowledge that none of the topics touched above are easy to resolve. As is the nature of power in discourse, the diffused practices and legitimations elude a single solution or policy tweak. The circulated, profuse, and intricately linked work of discourse not only reveals a constructed notion of research ethics as a proper noun, that opens up the possibility of deconstruction, but also makes the reconstruction a difficult and complex task. What we hope from this article is to contribute to dialogues that asks us all to consider our implications and positionality in the pact we have made, where we are all implicated, and shaped by the spaces in which we produce knowledge. To this end, we are advocating a more reflexive approach to an ethics of uncertainty that enables an ethics to-come. The academy is well placed to explore what this might mean and therefore our critique should not be confused as mere criticism of the academy, but a friendly provocation to utilize our theoretical-resource in addressing these difficult issues—something the academy is well positioned to do. We are happy to be part of this as this article has already opened-up opportunities for academic debate and discussion for us.

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Notes

1. By which he infers a particular constellation of self-referential ideas developed in Europe from the 17th century onward, rather than a more generalized idea of science that the West has no monopoly on.
2. For a detailed analysis of humanism's key themes, see also Flax (1990) and Braidotti (2013b, 2019)
3. This story is truthful and everything in it happened; however, it has crafted into a single incident when this was not strictly the case.

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Giulia Carozzi (MA) is a tentative researcher, now undertaking her third year of a PhD at the University of Edinburgh. She is committed to practices of writing, which, entangled with affect and new-materialist theory, attend to the richness of the everyday. She often returns to people, places, and atmospheres to anarchive their forces and tendencies through wonder, coupled with the gesture of writing. She has two children who energize her work, and who, occasionally, make her commitment to study tricky enough.

Lindsey K. Horner (PhD) is a researcher and educator specializing in critical peace education, peacebuilding education, and participatory research. She is particularly interested in the interactions of a multifarious understanding of peace and practices to facilitate moving these understandings forward (the work of translating peace) and co-designed/constructed/produced research. She is a lecturer in education and international development at the University of Edinburgh.