



Institute on Culture, Religion & World Affairs



Key Issues in Religion  
and World Affairs



## On the Immanence of Ethics

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October 10, 2013



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Ethics is a complex topic on which it would be impossible to construct a theory that was at once fully comprehensive, systematic, and true to life. Indeed, that very inability itself serves as a subject of some ethical thought. I take that as a warning and invite you to read this paper as just one among many possible ways to think about the ethical in human life.

My argument is quite abstract. As the title says, it concerns the immanence of ethics. Without ignoring the compelling questions about whether politics governs ethics or how ethics should govern politics or where matters of ethics should transcend those of religious practice or indeed who can and should decide where the boundaries among ethics, law, and religion should lie, I am after something deeper and perhaps prior. I attend to the relatively pre-objectified ethical dimensions of everyday life and ordinary action. I argue that ethics is immanent to the social; that we cannot and do not live without it. It is ordinary before it is extraordinary. My approach strives to escape or transcend issues raised by cultural difference and relativism without resorting to a universalism grounded in either abstract

reason or human biology. Instead I ground ethics in human sociality and language.

The talk unfolds in two movements, with an ethnographic interlude drawing on material that could be described as religion, and a coda on irony. The first movement elaborates an Aristotelian conception of judgment. The second draws from the philosophy of language. By 'immanent' I mean simply that the ethical is prevalent and intrinsic, a constituent feature of social life, neither transcendent of it nor a detachable part of it. Indeed, I think it is as much a category mistake to attempt to distinguish ethics from action as it is mind from body.

This is to say that ethics, from my perspective, is not in the first instance a discrete place, quality, institution, or object. Durkheim had somewhat the same idea when he talked of the moral, but where Durkheim saw morality as a function of rules and linked it to the obligatory, I see it as a function of action and link it rather to obligation. Ethics is less static, less deterministic, and less mechanical than a simplistic picture of Durkheim would have it, but it is no less immanent. The problem is how to grasp this immanence without destroying it through acts of rationalization or objectification.

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Phrased this way it becomes impossible to talk in the abstract about the relationship between ethics and religion as though these were discrete objects. I take ethics first not as an object for anthropological investigation but as a place-holder where some of the most challenging and obstinate questions that characterize anthropology as a project can be addressed. One of these questions, of course, is relativism. Another concerns the theoretical weight given to interest. A sentence in my introduction to *Ordinary Ethics* (Lambek 2010a) that is rapidly becoming infamous says that anthropological theory needs to recognize that people everywhere generally try to do what is right and good. That sentence was quite deliberate. I was not quite so naïve as to say that people always do what is right and good. But I think it is important to recognize that they usually want to, or think that they are. No different from anthropologists in this respect. Recognizing this brings us one step closer to understanding our subjects, not only in the sense of respecting them or being able to empathize with them but also to gain a better sense of the practices and projects in which they are engaged.

This is of course not the end of the matter because we can then go on to examine how people rationalize what they do and don't do as ethical, as categorically right or good, as virtuous, necessary, most effective or efficient, etc., and how they struggle between these various criteria for action, much as virtue ethicists argue with Kantians or consequentialists. And of course people

also frequently regret their actions and worry about their failings, feel guilt, shame, or conflict, and sometimes, to follow Freud, somatise their feelings and failings or project them in unfortunate ways on others. We need to take into account excuses, recriminations, and all the various ways people are able to 'refuse' the ethical or exclude certain categories of people or acts from its province. Didier Fassin's recent essay on *ressentiment* (2013) is a beautiful case in point.

My talk draws from a body of ethnographic fieldwork, conducted largely in the western Indian Ocean: on the island of Mayotte since 1975; in the city of Majunga in northwest Madagascar since the early 1990's; and sporadically in an entirely different part of the world, namely Switzerland, in the first decade of this century. Spirit possession, in which mediums speak periodically as the others who possess them and live more or less easily in close relation to those spirit others the rest of the time, is prevalent in the first two locations. Spirit possession—as Malagasy speakers practice it—has impressed and provoked me and a number of my vignettes come from observations of spirit mediums. I take spirit possession to have a privileged place in thinking about questions of voice and action, that is, of ethics, first, because it is itself a kind of meta-commentary, at once serious and ironic, about personhood and ethical life; second, because it is an intensified form of living with others; and third, because it sets up the challenge of showing how even speech and action conducted in a state of dissociation and as someone other than oneself is nonetheless deeply ethically informed. For one thing, it heightens questions of the relationship of action to passion that I take to be central to ethics.

Some thinkers distinguish between ethics and morality, according to whether people conceive of the good as a matter of following convention or as having the freedom, courage, and imagination to break free of it. This is not the path I take, for at least two reasons. First, there is no consistent application of the distinction, some writers applying the words in directly opposite senses from other writers. Second, such distinctions objectify from the start what must be part of the ongoing work of ethics and evade some of the most challenging questions. I think

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that one of the lessons of social theory (in contrast to abstract or passionate philosophy) has been that the distinction between convention and freedom is a false or limited opposition. Existential freedom of the kind idealized by Sartre is rarely encountered in ordinary life. There is an inextricable connection, or productive tension, between freedom and obligation in practice, a relationship that is easier to see when we approach the subject ethnographically than by means of reified abstractions in theory. Hence, while sceptical of any idealization of absolute freedom I do not see human action as absolutely

determined, or as an unthinking following of rules either.

The relation between freedom and rule or convention is evident also in the mundane fact that people are regularly faced with deciding which of several commitments or obligations to give priority to. As a trivial example, we may feel relatively obligated to spend holidays with family but relatively free to decide whether to spend Christmas with our own parents or those of our partner, and free also to rationalize the fact that we've decided to stay at home this year, go to Mexico, or convert to Islam instead. This entails practical judgment, which for me is a more useful and realistic concept than either freedom or rule, especially when the latter are understood as mutually exclusive alternatives or distinct provinces of social life or moments of social history. In other words, we are not free to live outside any rules or obligations, but we are both free and obliged to distinguish among them. Rather than speak of rules that we follow or break, I think it is more precise to talk about criteria, commitments, and incommensurable values. And rather than speaking of choosing between them I think it is clearer to say that we exercise some kind of judgment among and with respect to them.

In making practical judgment the central feature of ethical action I follow Aristotle. By judgment I refer not primarily to the acts of courts of law or divine beings, nor to what is always explicit, handed down as a judgment. Judgment in my usage is practical and continuous rather than performative and discrete. Another word might be discernment. The concept of practical reason or judgment (Aristotelian *phronesis*) begins with the idea that the good or right thing to do in a given set of circumstances, or how to do it, is not always obvious. We may learn to exercise judgment such that it goes smoothly, almost without saying, as a matter of virtuous character, but that does not make it simple. For Aristotle it is a matter of finding the right balance to fit the circumstances.

Perhaps the major limitation of focusing exclusively on practical judgment is that it does not address the question of how judgment is possible in the first place. Whence come the criteria on the basis of which to exercise judgement or render justifications or to authorize the judgments and justifications made? Whence come the criteria appropriate for a given situation, including the criteria that define a situation as such in the first place? I argue that the source of criteria lies in the act of speaking itself. If judgement is the defining feature of the ethical dimension of practice, so acknowledgement is the quintessential ethical act, a point developed in the work of Stanley Cavell.

Ethics depends on the availability of criteria. One way that criteria emerge is through illocutionary action. Once I perform the act of marriage the criteria that apply to me and to my subsequent behaviour change. My behaviour itself may not change but it is subject to different evaluation. Marriage is an obvious example but the effects are equivalent for any rite de passage and indeed any ritual, or even such ostensibly trivial matters as making an appointment. Among Azande both the accusation of witchcraft and the apology put the protagonists

and their relationships under particular descriptions and with respect to new or renewed criteria. Performativity establishes who we are in relation to one another, to ourselves and the world, that is to say, it establishes the criteria by which our practice – as a marital partner, a citizen, a Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jew, or Azande, but also as a parent or child, a friend, a man or woman, or simple human being ought to be carried out and can be evaluated. It does not determine practice, but it establishes the relevance of specific criteria to practice and the nature of our commitments to persons and projects.

Whereas Rappaport saw religious ritual as redressing certain effects of language and hence as a necessary complement to language as a constitutive element of human society or the human condition, it is more precise and truer to his source in J. L. Austin to say that if language in its semantic or locutionary dimensions generates uncertainty, in the senses Rappaport explicates, *language simultaneously generates certainty or at least commitment* in its pragmatic or illocutionary dimensions.<sup>1</sup> This is more in line with the reading of Austin offered by Cavell in which every utterance may carry the illocutionary entailment of meaning what we say (1976) and equally imposes the requirement of an acknowledgement on the part of the addressee. At its most basic, even to say “yes,” or ‘I know’ are performative acts. As Cavell himself says, they are “*similar to ‘I promise’ in a specific respect... namely, that you give others your word.*” As Cavell continues, “*this connection (this inner connection...) between claiming to know and making a promise... reveals human speech to be radically, in each uttered word, ethical...*” (2010: 320-21). Conversely, Cavell does not attend to religion or ritual and hence misses its role in grounding such utterances in certainty.

In sum, my argument for the immanence of ethics rests on the relationship between practice and performative acts. Practice and performance in my usage are not discrete phenomena but different modalities of action and different analytic lenses on it. A main difference is that while practice is conceptualized as relatively open, performance in the sense I use it here refers to acts that can be conceptualized as discrete and finite, and as completed in the doing (though this does not preclude their repetition).<sup>2</sup> Muslim practice is constituted through performative utterances like the *b’ismillah*, which confer criteria on the segments of practice they initiate, whether starting a prayer, journey, or meal. To borrow for one sentence from the language of cybernetics, performance is practice divided and marked digitally, practice is performance extended analogically. Hence the relationship of practice to performance is one of the continuous to the discontinuous, the open to the finite, the free to the determined, the uncertain to the certain, or the ambiguous to the definitive. By means of the performativity

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<sup>1</sup> I leave aside the perlocutionary, however, the opposition or tension might be compared with Plato’s conflict between philosophy and poetry (locutionary and perlocutionary).

<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere I speak of taboos as ‘continuous performatives’ and such a usage might be closer to Butler on gender or Goffman on everyday life. These usages are still closer to my depiction of performance than of practice in the current essay. In Lear’s terms (2011) they are all ‘pretending.’

found in proclamations, people like uncertain bridegrooms or Azande accused of witchcraft no longer need to wonder about their actions but receive conclusive attribution and hence also a relatively clear framework with which to guide or interpret their subsequent practice.

I have been articulating practice, especially practical judgment, from the Aristotelian tradition, with a concept of performance, or rather performativeness, in Austin's sense. Performative acts provide the means or criteria according to which practical judgment is executed and distinct intentions or commitments are specified and clarified (Lambek 2010b). The utterance of a promise, say to show up for an event, is different from vague hopes that one will, and it can be further strengthened by swearing an oath. Promise and oath set up new relations between the parties involved, casting forward a moral space such that the relations between the parties are constituted by expectations and criteria by which subsequent practice will be articulated and evaluated, both by themselves and by others. It doesn't mean that the promise will be kept but it does mean that not keeping it will be judged as a more or less spectacular failure of a particular kind. Discrete performances emerge from and are marked within the stream of practice; simultaneously, they articulate the practice that follows from them (and sometimes retroactively what led up to them), putting people and relationships under a particular description and providing their practice with the criteria through which it may be ascertained or defined, appreciated, and evaluated.

The final reason I speak of the immanence of the ethical is the human recognition of the limits to, or the limitations of, what I have just said about the conjunction of performance and practice. If the subject of ethics must first account for the possibility and necessity in the human situation for discriminating what to do, it must also explore the void or tragedy of the exhaustion or absence of criteria with which to make judgments, and less tragically, our scepticism concerning them. Making criteria available is part of the work of culture and a feature of action. Conversely and concomitantly, recognition of the limits of criteria and of the impossibility of ever being completely or consistently ethical (and, paradoxically, sometimes failing in its own recognition of impossibility) is part of the work of philosophy, that is, of ethical reflection. In both making criteria available, unquestionable and authoritative and in reflecting on their limits religion – or the kinds of practices and reflections we place under the name of religion -- has played a central role.