

## Questions of the right and the good: metaethics and anthropology

James McMurray, Lecturer in Social Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex, UK,  
j.mcmurray@sussex.ac.uk

Matthew Doyle, Research Associate and School Tutor, Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex, UK,  
m.doyle@sussex.ac.uk

Santiago Ripoll, Postdoctoral Researcher, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK,  
s.ripoll@ids.ac.uk

### Introduction

Questions of the right and the good have been variously recognised by anthropologists as key to understanding human action and behaviour since the early days of the discipline, with the influential recent ‘ethical turn’ perhaps the most obvious example (Mattingly and Throop, 2018). Here, the authors – who together founded the Social Science and Ethics Group at the University of Sussex – reflect on how their own fieldwork led them to engage with metaethics, and how doing so advanced their understanding of their ethnographic material, anthropological theory, and their own professional ethics. The three cases draw on fieldwork in Nicaragua, Bolivia, and China.

### Contested morality of labour exchanges in rural Nicaragua (Santiago Ripoll)

I arrived at the field of ethics within anthropology through the study of social justice in food systems. My doctoral research explored the dynamics of values, social relations and exchange in a small peasant community in Nicaragua. I observed how labour exchanges in the subsistence farming community navigated a moral space between ‘help’ and ‘exploitation’, seeking to extract labour from others whilst ‘being good’ (or portraying themselves thus). Labour exchanges offered for free or at below market rate are crucial for the survival of peasant households, even though farming is mostly a household endeavour. It is expected that family and social networks will ‘help’ their peers by providing labour: the closer the social bond, the less commoditised labour exchanges will be. The problem emerges because, in this market economy, the means for solidarity are the same as those for profit and accumulation. Yet, whether it accounts for ‘help’ or ‘exploitation’ is often contested.

When I inquired about examples of solidarity in the village, Isais, a young man, spoke of the use of wage levels – what I termed ‘preferential prices’ – as a form of help to other people beyond their household:

“Sometimes people work for others at a lower price, in order to help them. For example, last year I helped Wilmer planting and he paid me 60 *córdobas* [a day] (£1.6 in 2012). I accepted it because I had the will to help (*tenía la voluntad de apoyar*).”

Yet, preferential pricing as ‘help’ could also disguise occasions in which the wealthier party took advantage of the needs of the employee. Those subsistence farmers who were relatively better off in the community were expected to ‘help’ those in need through offering them employment opportunities, but only as one-off events to bring people out of destitution. Isaias again:

“We don’t cooperate, we work separately, we do our own work, and if you manage to get things done, great and if not, that’s it. [...] One has to serve [others], but only to help people out temporarily, when they are in trouble, but one can’t be ‘manteniendo’ (maintaining) people.”

Ultimately the result of this contestation over what is a fair employment relationship, and under what circumstances, had significant outcomes in terms of redistribution of people’s work. Moral demands, articulated through social relations, channelled labour towards the subsistence economy and the wealthiest commercial producers struggled to mobilise labour, even if they offered higher wages. Only by mimicking those kinship and reciprocal ties through patron-client relations, could they manage.

---

Moral economy, the notion that the internal economies of peasant communities operate according to principles of fairness and reciprocity (Thompson, 1991), is a powerful theoretical tool. However, I use it to emphasise the contested and material nature of the peasant economy: how *within* a peasant community different social groups espoused particular interpretations and articulations of the moral economy and how these contestations translated into ethical demands with material consequences, towards redistribution or decommoditisation.

### **Politics as Ethical Discourse (Matthew Doyle)**

This contribution reflects on how a theorisation of politics as ethics informed fieldwork for research on the political institutions of the Quechua-speaking indigenous community of Kirkiawi in the Bolivian Highlands. Kirkiawi is thought to have been an independent community – or *ayllu* – within the Inca Empire, but has since been integrated gradually within the wider colonial and postcolonial state, resulting in a system of overlapping authorities. These include the traditional *ayllu* authorities (who claim to pre-date the colonisation), the peasant union (a form of local government dating to the national agrarian reform of the 1950s) and a municipal council (established by decentralisation laws in the 1990s). In the 2003 local elections, *ayllu* and union leaders effected an ‘indigenous takeover’ of the council, replacing the traditional parties run by white outsiders – *q’ara runas* – to unite the different institutions of local government into a single system.

Yet, in the period since, tensions have risen between union and *ayllu* figures. I witnessed this during 17 months of tense fieldwork, in which I observed leaders publicly debate their roles and collective identity. Throughout these debates, the meaning of the term *originarios* – one who is native to a place and which approximates to ‘indigenous’ in contemporary Bolivia – was contested. For *ayllu* leaders, they were the ‘true *originarios*’ who represented the values and practices of their ancestors, unlike the ‘European’ peasant union. While the *ayllu* leaders argued that their collective identity as *originarios* is bound up with a connection to their ancestral territory, the union viewed this in terms closer to social class.

To understand this process, I use the term ‘ethical-political discourse’, borrowed from the philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1991): a reflexive form of communication in which the values and notions of identity germane to the tradition of a sociocultural group are made salient and contested. This phenomenon can take place during periods of social change and the breakdown of moral orders. In Kirkiawi, changes to the economy, law and national politics have encouraged the formation of different understandings of the social life of their community, while encouraging the use of indigeneity as a form of collective identification. This theoretical perspective allows for an analysis of how cultural and symbolic dimensions of human thought and practice are constitutive of politics; of the way narratives of society and personhood become the basis for political action and conflict. I believe that understanding much of political conflict as a form of reflexive discourse about collective morality, conceived of in the broad sense detailed above, could allow social anthropology to fruitfully apply its methodology to political analysis. It is well equipped to investigate how values, collective symbols, narratives and idealised conceptions of society and personhood serve to mobilise individuals, establish legitimacy and become the basis for conflict and contention between persons, factions and groups. This can be applied not only to understanding the politics of indigeneity in Bolivia, but much of contemporary politics throughout world.

### **Narrative, implicit virtues, and reflexivity (James McMurray)**

Weeks into my time in Xinjiang, China, it was clear that approaches to explaining relations between the Muslim Uyghur and Han Chinese populations that relied on a generalised concept of ‘resistance’, were unviable. I was undertaking almost two years of fieldwork to support my research into education choices amongst the Uyghurs. Whilst the mass incarcerations and forced labour of the past two years (McMurray, 2020) were not yet underway, some Uyghur people did, of course, resist the imposition of Chinese state power in various ways. Many of my informants, however, had no intention of resisting. Instead, their desire to be ‘good’ people – good parents, good students, good neighbours, good Uyghurs – guided their decisions and motivated various behaviours, some of which may have been read by the state as resistance.

Being good, for my participants, was only rarely and loosely understood in terms of adherence to explicit norms. Instead, I found that various communally maintained conceptions of virtues – *inter alia* respectfulness, hospitality, loyalty, and alterity from Chinese influences – provided shared blueprints for ethical living. These virtues, however, were only meaningful with reference to a particular conception of Uyghur history and much

---

of my fieldwork was spent documenting ethical disagreements that emerged in interactions between those Uyghurs who were fully part of an ethnic community and those (such as some Uyghurs educated in Chinese schools) who were exterior to such communities and who had different conceptions of history.

In interpreting these conditions, I drew on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), who argues that virtues can only be meaningful within particular narratives. This aided me both in making sense of the role of local conceptions of history in the ethics of my Uyghur participants and in understanding the disagreements between those who interpreted them differently. But it also provoked reflexive consideration of what implicit virtues guide the practice of anthropology, which – in my experience – is similarly rarely constrained by adherence to explicit norms.

Adhering to the professional ethical principles expected of anthropologists would introduce the risk of arrest to participants in fieldwork in Xinjiang. The familiar restrictions of formal codes of ethics would thus lead to unethical behaviour. It is impossible to conduct meaningful anthropological research in the region without a degree of deception: the securing of formal informed consent is precluded by local minorities' quite justified fear of signing anything. Intuitively, however, the idea of *not* conducting research amongst the Uyghurs – particularly when the Chinese state is endeavouring to preclude exactly that – risks complicity in much greater harms than any such violations are likely to produce.

Like my research participants, we (as anthropologists) are guided less by specific norms than by the desire to embody often implicit virtues. These virtues emerge from what MacIntyre would describe as the 'internal' good of the discipline: the production of the particular kind of heavily contextualised knowledge that only anthropology produces. By turning the analytical eye back to our own practice, I am convinced that to navigate ethical issues well, we must act in the conscious awareness of how our own ethics intertwine with those of whom we study.

## Conclusion

The persistent re-emergence of the explicit study of ethics in anthropology speaks to its capacity to make meaningful elements of social relations that are otherwise obscure. As the above examples demonstrate, this is particularly the case as regards conflict – political, economic, or otherwise. In each case, our attempts to make sense of our participant's values, and the contexts that gave them meaning, was informed by theoretical approaches that incorporate an ethical viewpoint. The domain of the ethical is pervasive; it is central to decision-making in all spheres of human life. As such (and as these cases show) research into values has a propensity to produce insights relevant to many contexts, including that of our own discipline.

## References

Habermas, J. (1991) *Justification and Application*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

MacIntyre, A. (1981) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. London: Duckworth.

Mattingly, C., and Throop, J. (2018) The anthropology of ethics and morality, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 47, 475-492.

McMurray, J. (2020) Britain has no ethical option but to keep up the pressure on China over the Uighurs, *The Guardian*, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/21/britain-china-uighurs-beijing-muslim> (01 September 2020).

Thompson, E.P. (1991). *Customs in Common*. London: Penguin.