Embedding Moralities.
Ethical Practices of Everyday Life

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Introduction[1]

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A Turn Towards Ethics

Since its emergence as an academic discipline, anthropology has always been concerned with «morality» in the broadest sense. Some of the key figures of modern anthropology, such as Emile Durkheim, Franz Boas, or Bronislaw Malinowski, explicitly explored morality as a set of norms, values, ideals, and perspectives determining social action, shaping possible and acceptable relationships and practices, and defining the horizons in which everyday life is conceivable. Morality as an extension of society – or culture, depending on the language used (Fassin 2014). However, since the end of the 20th century, several voices have spoken critically regarding the approach our discipline has adopted in its interest in morality. James Laidlaw, one of the leading figures of the so-called «ethical turn» in anthropology (Laidlaw 2002) criticises on the one hand an «organicistic» view of morality, rooted in Durkheim's notion of «moral fact», which treats morality as mainly a form of socially defined «duty»; and on the other hand a relativistic perspective that is only interested in the moral dimension as part of the enculturation processes of a specific context – always internally coherent and isolable from the outside world (Laidlaw 2013). Further, a properly anthropological exploration of morality and ethics can only be consolidated, Laidlaw argues, if we recognise that these two domains have their own specificity, and that they cannot be dissolved entirely in the

[1] While this introduction is the product of the collective work of both editors of the issue, Lorenzo Urbano mainly authored the first three paragraphs and Luigigiovanni Quarta mainly authored the final two paragraphs.

social or cultural. Morality and ethics must also be considered as situated and singular responses to the fundamental question «how should I live?».

Thus, the first «turn» of the ethical turn takes us away from the exclusive focus on the collective, social, cultural dimensions of morality and ethics, and recognises a space of autonomy, of *freedom* (Laidlaw 2002) of subjects in their determinations and judgements. A second turning point, connected to the first, leads towards the centrality of experience in the ethical life of subjects. We are no longer just talking about systems of rules and prescriptions, but also about ways of intertwining relationships, of dwelling in everyday life, of being-in-the-world (Zigon 2008). As Veena Das (2015) argues, how morality and ethics manifest themselves within the flow of the ordinary is not just through judgements of right or wrong, good or bad; it is primarily through forms of co-habitation of the ordinary and through the relationships we build in this dwelling. If words we use to narrate our ethical lives and moral rules are meaningful, Das argues, they acquire meaning in the granularity of everyday relationships. What is common to the plurality of perspectives that compose the «ethical turn» is the search for the concrete and situated ways in which moral concepts acquire meaning and are enacted, not as vertically imposed rules but in the immediacy of the ordinary. Our aim in this issue is to contribute to this debate by offering some ethnographic insights into how morality and ethics «come to life» in specific contexts, and how the concepts that allow us to talk about them are re-appropriated and shaped by the social actors who use them in their daily lives.

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Up to now, we have used «ethics» and «morality» with as concepts equivalent meaning – something that many of the authors of the ethical turn do themselves. However, for our purposes, it may make sense to introduce a distinction between these two terms, in conversation with some of the theoretical perspectives that have informed the contributions to this special issue. Where a distinction is introduced, «morality» remains the term for socially shared norms, rules, prescriptions. However, we are not only talking about explicit norms: Jarrett Zigon, for instance, insists on the *embodied* nature of moral dispositions. For Zigon, the more closely individual sphere of morality deals with what is embedded in our everyday practices, in our habits (Zigon 2007; 2008). Borrowing Heideggerian language, he argues that dispositional morality is our ordinary way of being-in-the-world, implicit and unreflective.

On the other hand, ethics is the moment of reflexivity, of creativity, of the process through which subjects actively seek to answer the question «how should I live?». For Zigon, the ethical moment is explicitly one in which the existential ground of the subject breaks down, dispositions and habits fall apart – and therefore a rethinking and rewriting of these dispositions is necessary (Zigon 2007). Likewise, Laidlaw defines ethics as a «reflexive practice of freedom» (2002): ethnographically investigating the ethical life of subjects means taking seriously their capacity to make choices, their *freedom*, which is historically and contextually shaped. In other words, we could say that if «morality» is how we indicate the dispositions and values embedded in everyday practices and relationships, «ethics» is how we can reflect on the process of embedding such dispositions and values in everyday life. This is a process in which subjects are not entirely determined by outside factors (cultural, social, political, economic), but find interstices of autonomy and creativity (of freedom) in which they are able, at least in part, to self-determine themselves. Laidlaw insists on the necessity of accompanying «ethics» and «freedom» in our reflections: if an anthropology of ethics makes sense, it will only do so if we recognise that subjectivities are not entirely overdetermined, but are also produced by the capacity of subjects *themselves* to act and, above all, to shape the horizons within which they act.

The articles in this issue are in dialogue with these perspectives, and build on a debate started with the panel *The Local Lives of Moral Concepts. Ethnographic Expolorations of the Everyday Shaping of Morality and Ethics*, held as part of the 17th EASA Conference in Belfast and coordinated by the editors of this issue. What these different and in some ways divergent explorations of the local lives of moral concepts and ethical practices have in common is precisely the effort not to treat them as immovable, given once and for all. Instead, they should be shown in their processes of embedding in the everyday life of the subjects they talk about, offering a perspective on the often incoherent and fractal ways in which these concepts come to life in the flow of the ordinary (Das 2015).

Ethics in the Ordinary

A prominent perspective within the field of the ethical turn is specifically concerned with this latter dimension: the so-called *ordinary ethics*, whose primary objective is to reflect not so much on ethics as a separate moment of everyday life, but on the ethical dimension of ordinary action (Lambek

2010; Das 2015). Implicitly or explicitly, our actions always include an ethical and evaluative element, which embodies our perception of what is good and what is right. In different ways, the contributions by Imogen Bayfield, Duska Knezevic and Lorenzo Urbano are indebted to this perspective, and offer us glimpses into possible concrete declinations of the ethics of the ordinary.

Bayfield reflects on a specific community development initiative in England, in the context of which residents of marginal areas are invited to participate collectively in decision-making about the use of public funds available to their neighbourhoods. *A* key concept in Bayfield's argument is that of *organisational habitus* (Shoshan 2018) – the dispositions that subjects bring with them from their experiences of collective organisation and action. The concept usually refers to organisational practices; however, Bayfield articulates it by focusing on the «moral orientations» underpinning such practices. The close link that these orientations have with organisational practices emerges effectively in this reframing: they are fundamentally constitutive of these practices, defining not only the motivations for public participation, but also the concrete ways in which it takes place, the objectives it sets, what it considers a priority. At the same time, Bayfield's contribution highlights the fact that moral concepts and categories do not have sharp boundaries; on the contrary, they are often jagged and in constant flux (Das 2015). Divergences in moral orientation do not necessarily lead to ruptures, and indeed different orientations (and different practices) coexist and attempt to harmonise in the spaces in which subjects strive to dwell together.

Knezevic examines the transformations that have taken place in the agricultural sector in Slovenia since the early 1990s, particularly focusing on the conflicting narratives surrounding policies supporting workers in this domain. The author confronts the criticism of Slovenian farmers against policies that were supposed to compensate for a long period of economic contraction in this sector, and which instead had unexpected and negative consequences, above all on working conditions in the fields and farms, causing discomfort and anxiety in those who work there. Rejecting a psychological reading of this distress, Knezevic highlights the emergence, from farmers' discourses, of a specific «work ethic», which values individual effort and considers welfare state support as an «encouragement not to work». The ordinary ethics perspective allows Knezevic to highlight the collective dimension of anxiety related to the worsening of one's economic

conditions; but it also reveals the ways in which ordinary action is strongly imbued with moral judgements, especially related to discourses of guilt and responsibility (Laidlaw 2010).

The notion of responsibility is also the focus of Urbano's contribution, which investigates the ways in which the idea of «responsible research and innovation» is re-appropriated and reformulated within two patient organisations active in Italy. The author highlights how the concept of responsibility in regards to scientific research and technological innovation is articulated in the practices of these organisations. Within these contexts, discourses related to responsibility talk about the struggles that subjects undertake to imagine different forms of care, which are based on the immediate, everyday and embedded experiences of caregivers – and on the knowledge acquired through these experiences. In the texture of the ordinary, the re-appropriation of the idea of «responsible research» represents, Urbano argues, not only a way for the situated knowledge of patients and caregivers to gain legitimacy, but also a more general argument in favour of a different way of managing everyday care for chronic conditions. Moral judgements and forms of knowledge production intertwine and influence each other, in an effort to «attune» (Zigon 2017) to the care needs expressed by patients.

Making up people

A key notion that has been explored in anthropology (e.g. Carrithers, Lukes & Collins 1985) and that has gained relevance in the ethical turn is the notion – or rather the plural notions – of «person». Authors such as James Laidlaw (2013) and Veena Das (2020) have, in different ways, intertwined reflections on the notion of person with the themes and perspectives of the ethical turn. Corinna Guerzoni and Luigigiovanni Quarta both present contributions that explore the limits of the idea of personhood, and how these limits are redefined through ethical practices, in a process of – using the words of Ian Hacking (2002) – «making up» people in relation to categorisations in the sciences (biomedical, in this case), and to the moral horizons they shape.

Guerzoni presents some results from his ethnographic work on the «donation» of embryos. We write «donation» in brackets because part of her paper focuses precisely on how the semantics connected to the terms chosen to indicate this reproductive technology is associated with the manifes-

tation of a complex imaginary, of an entire horizon of meaning. Choosing to refer to this social fact in terms of donation or adoption implies a significant difference in the way of conceiving notions that are fundamental to the construction of a community: in particular, the notions of life and person. What is at stake around the ontological definition of the embryo is articulated in a multiplicity of discourses, produces forms of *civic epistemology* (Jasanoff 2007), establishes boundaries between what is considered life and what is not, what can be considered human life and what is not. Furthermore, it creates systems of practices that properly depend on these definitions and question our sense of legitimacy or illegitimacy (Fassin 2018). It is in this sense that the possibility of a careful evaluation of the ethical relationship that individual subjects forge with their practices arises, also in terms of a profound reflexivity. Their belonging to certain horizons of meaning, which also transpires in the lexical choices of social actors, shows up even more in the motivations of their actions. These are complex discursive and ethical systems being mobilised, which, as Guerzoni illustrates well, reveal articulated forms of adherence to specific moral worlds. These systems allow social actors to formulate their own decisions regarding right and wrong, correct and incorrect, referring not only to epistemic regimes, but also to practical, affective and emotional ones. Epistemology and ontology meet here under the umbrella of morality.

Quarta reflects on similar issues, in particular by bringing epistemic and ontological constructions into dialogue, questioning how the moral dimension is, at the same time, their product and producer. His article is rooted in an ethnography of organ donation, but develops in a twofold direction: on the one hand, it questions the experiences – collected in a hospital context – of social actors who, at one stage of their life path (Bessin 2009), found themselves in the position of having to choose whether to accept or refuse organ donation for a deceased loved one; on the other hand, it analyses the expressive and interlocutive modes of social actors who meet and discuss within closed Facebook groups created around the theme of organ donation. Starting from these ethnographic experiences, Quarta argues for a perspective shift in the notion of person. He recognises how social actors – depending on their placement in the social field, their worldview, we might say their *Weltanschauung* – mobilise different notions of person, distant and distinct, which the author conceptualises under the definition of *Cartesian person* and *diffuse person*. Two notions of person, two different images of the world (Wittgenstein 1969), two different mor-

al constructions. To show these different ways of learning and building meanings of one's social world, the author dwells on how, through caring relationships and thus the practical way of translating embedded models, different ways of being-in-the world are shown (De Martino 2023).

Morality and reflexivity

Finally, another relevant reframing that authors in the ethical turn propose is the one around a longstanding issue of anthropological research and writing: that of the researcher's positioning in the field. Didier Fassin, discussing the multiple ways in which this «turn» has been called – anthropology of ethics, anthropology of morality, anthropology of moralities – argues for a specific nomenclature: *moral anthropology* (Fassin 2012). In this way, he aims to underscore that the shift in our perspective on morality and ethics shouldn't simply involve the other, the subjects of our research, but also our own disposition and practices. The ethical turn proposes a reframing of the problems of ethics and morality of the anthropologist as well – pushing us to reflect on ourselves as moral actors in the field. This is an issue that both Agnieszka Pasieka and Giacomo Nerici discuss in their contributions.

Pasieka's article is based on extensive fieldwork within groups belonging to so-called far-right movements. On the one hand, Pasieka draws on a recent vein of research (see, for example, Fassin 2008; Stockowski 2008) that we would like to call «reflexive». Starting from the assumption that anthropological research can lead the anthropologist to meet and reason with and about subjects who are inscribed in morally distant worlds – thus, possibly, generating on a personal level repugnance, discomfort, reprobation, condemnation – the question to be asked is how the researcher can (or should) situate herself in this field. How, that is to say, can she produce knowledge if her moral judgement is – more or less consciously – strongly mobilised. This question is tricky and cannot be resolved in a few introductory lines, necessitating a renewed debate on the public role of the social sciences, the problem of the subjectivity of the researcher, the quest for objectivity, the claim of a purely descriptive anthropology or an *engagée*. Pasieka, for her part, as a reflexive preliminary step, endorses the direction indicated by Fassin (2008), among others, recognising the need for a knowledge able to read the grammars of morality without assuming a moralising stance. A social science, in short,

that is constructed immediately outside the perimeter of moral judgement. This stance allows the researcher to develop her reflections under the sign of a consideration of the modalities – moral and ethical – through which the militants of far-right groups are educated, recognise themselves, establish forms of identity and belonging. Morality thus becomes a privileged lens for understanding the values embedded in the practices that go to make up the ultimate sense of a community.

On the other hand, Nerici's article, concluding this issue, addresses a more «classical» perspective, resuming and updating debates that have been fruitfully developed since the 1960s. The research context is that of the Marquesas Islands and in particular of healing practices. The researcher roots his analysis in the extraordinary experiences he had during his research, questioning precisely the meaning of the prefix extra-. The text is entirely constructed in a self-reflexive fashion, shedding light on the ontological dissonances between researcher and research context, dissonances that can provoke, in cascade, interpretative and epistemological dissonances. If what is extraordinary for the researcher is ordinary for the interlocutor, it becomes necessary to return to the former's positioning within his dual fields of belonging: that of research and that of the academic community to which he is obliged to render his work in terms of reflections and interpretations. This dual belonging, however, threatens to produce misleading translations and conceptual over-interpretations. It is precisely for this reason that Nerici considers it necessary to set out again from a lucid analysis of the modalities of construction of the anthropological gaze, modalities that are not only linked to purely cognitive or epistemological postures but that entirely revolve around ethical practices and perspectives embedded in the research. Especially when today's historical sensibility obliges us to be cautious regarding issues such as those, raised by the author, of epistemic extractivism (Grosfoguel 2019) or potentially neo-colonial stance.

What we aim to accomplish with this special issue is to remain faithful to the diversity of approaches that characterise the ethical turn in anthropology, flourishingly inaugurated in the last twenty years. It is a prism of resolutely ethnographic studies, which in various ways fit into this debate, enriching it through specific case studies and ways of reinterpreting the conceptual categories and methodological attitudes produced by anthropologists in recent decades.

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