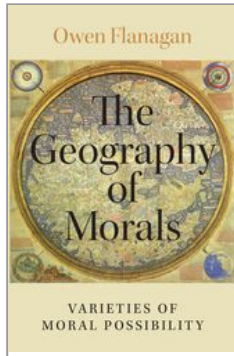


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**The Geography of Morals: Varieties of Moral Possibility**

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## On Being “Imprisoned by One’s Upbringing”

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### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores how we might do ethics in a more culturally attuned way, and find resources in other traditions for moral, social, and political improvement. It is good for ethicists to know more about people who are not from the North Atlantic (or its outposts). Or even if they are from the North Atlantic are not from elites or are not from “around here.” It matters how members of original displaced communities, or people who were brought here or came here as chattel slaves or indentured workers or political refugees or for economic opportunity, have thought about virtues, values, moral psychology, normative ethics, and good human lives. The traditions explored include African, Amerindian, Buddhist, Confucian, Jain, and Hindu. These traditions each provide a theory of virtues, and they provide a more realistic picture of moral life than offered by theories that conceive of moral life as involving dilemmas and emergencies.

*Keywords:* African, Amerindian, Confucian, Buddhist, Jain, Hindu

**Ethics and Anthropological Realism**

In 1991 I published *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism*. The aim of *Varieties* was to advance an emerging conversation between philosophers and psychologists by introducing moral philosophers to relevant work from psychology, work on temperament, personality types, different conceptions of the self and identity, moral development, gender and morality, social psychology, and the virtues. The guiding ideas were that there are multiple ways to live good human lives; that morality is fragile, subject to vagaries of temperament, personality, gender, class, culture, economics, and politics; and that moral ideals are typically pictures of what kind of person from among the possibilities one ought to be, where “be” is intended in a deep, existentialist sense. Moral ideals call on one to be a person of a certain kind, not just to act in certain ways.

This book, *The Geography of Morals*, is something of a sequel. To me it is “*Varieties Two*.” It might be subtitled “Ethics and Anthropological Realism” or “Ethics and Historical and Cultural Realism.” The aim is to extend the argument for ethical inquiry that absorbs the insights of the human sciences and contributes to the human sciences, by bringing some of the main recent advances in culturally attuned moral psychology into conversation with cross-cultural or comparative philosophy. There are several reasons that compel me to write this book now: First, we live increasingly in multicultural, multiethnic, cosmopolitan worlds. Depending on one’s perspective these worlds are grand experiments in tolerant living, worlds in which prejudices break down; or they are fractured, wary, tense ethnic and religious cohousing projects; or they are melting pots where differences are thinned out and homogenized over time; or they are admixtures or collages of the best values, norms, and practices, the sociomoral equivalent of fine fusion cuisine or excellent world music that creates flavors or sounds from multiple fine sources; or on the other side, a blend of the worst of incommensurable **(p.4)** value systems and practices, clunky and degenerate. It is good for ethicists to know more about people who are not from the North Atlantic (or its outposts). Or even if they are from the North Atlantic are not from elites or are not from “around here.” It matters how members of original displaced communities, or people who were brought here or came here as chattel slaves or indentured workers or political refugees or for economic opportunity, have thought about virtues, values, moral psychology, normative ethics, and good human lives.

Second, most work in empirical moral psychology has been done on WEIRD people (*Western Educated Industrialized Rich Democratic*) and there is every reason to think WEIRD people are unrepresentative, possibly the most unrepresentative group imaginable, less representative than our ancestors when the ice melted at the end of the Pleistocene (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010).

Third, the methods of genetics, empirical psychology, evolutionary psychology, and neuroscience are getting lots of attention recently in moral psychology, but it would be a mistake to think that these sciences are superior to the wisdom of the ages in gaining deep knowledge about human nature and the human good. The reasons are principled: First, questions about human nature and the human good require sensitive attention to phenotypic traits, such as cooperation, fairness, compassion, altruism, peace, harmony, and flourishing and how these covary with each other across cultured ecologies. Great thinkers like Plato and Aristotle and, in the case of the present study, like Confucius, Mozi, Mencius, Zhuangzi, Xunzi, Buddha, Seneca, and Śāntideva, were sensitive observers of humans in their own times. They make empirical claims, most are testable; some have been tested. They also make normative claims about what one ought to be like and about what is good, good for individuals and good for groups. Some of these normative claims are similar to ethical claims made in North Atlantic traditions, some are not. The second reason why ethicists and social philosophers need to beware of excessive enthusiasm for genetics and neuroscience is because the human good is not a matter of what is just in the genes or in the head. Many of the great goods in human life are goods that are internal to particular practices and traditions, and emerge in particular relations among particular people at a particular place and time. Ethics is part of human ecology, and thus the sciences and disciplines relevant to ethics are not only sciences like evolutionary psychology, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience but also cultural history, sociology, and anthropology. Reading great philosophers from other traditions helps bring into view or helps keep in view the important fact that the particularities of different moral traditions matter. It also makes us aware of the space of possibility, and allows us to imaginatively envision how we might be if everything including ourselves were different, a bit different, or very different.

**(p.5)** Surviving Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy

In a volume celebrating his life and work on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, Alasdair MacIntyre offers this assessment of the overall state of moral philosophy in the twentieth century:

For on the view that I have found myself compelled to take, contemporary academic moral philosophy turns out to be seriously defective as a form of rational inquiry. How so? First, the study of moral philosophy has become divorced from the study of morality or rather of moralities and by so doing has distanced itself from practice. We do not expect serious work in the philosophy of physics from students who have never studied physics or on the philosophy of law from students who have never studied law. But there is not even a hint of a suggestion that courses in social and cultural anthropology and in certain areas of sociology and psychology should be a prerequisite for graduate work in moral philosophy. Yet without such courses no adequate sense of the varieties of moral possibility can be acquired. One remains imprisoned by one’s upbringing. (MacIntyre 2013)

MacIntyre’s lament is that traditional academic ethics is defective in how it conceives the nature of lived moralities, and that, partly for this reason, is not up to the task of assisting in the practical, existentially weighty project of moral critique and self and social improvement. Traditional academic moral philosophy operates with an antiseptic and ecologically unrealistic conception of the participants in moral life. There is little sense inside much of moral philosophy that the ‘I’s and ‘thou’s, the ‘we’s and ‘they’s, the ‘us’s and ‘them’s engaged in moral commerce are occupants of worlds defined in part by gender and race, poverty and war, degradation, subjugation, and hierarchy, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Rwanda, Somalia, the Nanking massacre, inflation, deflation, rape, cocaine, refugees, childhood leukemia, apartheid, caste, love gained, love lost, birth, and death as well as the long and weighty force fields of particular histories, languages, and traditions. We are born into worlds among Confucians or Methodists or Buddhists or Catholics, as Navaho, Shuar, Piraha, Hopi, Aztec, Ashanti, Akan, Massai, Dinka, Nuer, Yoruba, Sunni, or Shia, and we learn to speak, think, and judge, at least at first, inside these worlds. It matters that people enter the world or develop early on characteristic temperamental styles and personalities—for example, that people differ along dimensions such as introversion and extroversion, adventurousness, novelty seeking, and so on. It matters that contemporary American children’s books model as an ideal, as an aspirational good, a certain happy face and happy mood—a “happy-happy-joy-joy-kick-your-heels” face and mood, while East Asian children’s books model a face of calm and equanimity (Tsai et al. 2007a; Tsai and Park 2014). It matters, if it is true, that among twentieth-century Arizona Hopi (p.6) deep male friendship is unheard of (Brandt 1954, 28–29). The concept of deep male friendship is understood by the Hopi men, they have a concept for it; it is just that there are none, and it is not clear that Hopi men think that anything is missing or wrong with their lives. It matters that Chinese people have the concept of “sibling,” but that since the one child policy went into effect in 1979, there are fewer and fewer siblings, and consequently that the fabric of family relations has changed. It matters that some Achuar of Ecuador still practice a

form of polygamy in which wives make meals only for their own children despite living in a communal house, and that a wife in labor goes off into the jungle by herself (with a machete to cut the umbilical cord) to give birth (Descola 1996). Although Achuar girls are raised to be nurturers of both their own family’s garden and eventually their own children, sisterhood is not powerful during childbirth. It matters that certain people in the Himalayan region (also to lesser extents in Brazil, Kenya, Tanzania, and China) practice polyandry, where a girl marries several brothers, that they think this practice is fine, even good, nonexploitive, and that it does not in itself engender jealousy or fraught marital or fraternal relations. It matters that the Australian language of the aboriginal Dyribal classifies together women and fire and dangerous things (Lakoff 1987), and that among Gikuyu people of Central Kenya that women are classified with children, goats, and land (Wambui 2013).<sup>1</sup> How exactly it matters to sociomoral and political life at present in Australia or Kenya requires fine-grained multidisciplinary analysis.

How the latter facts or features of traditions, cultures, subcultures, and individuals ought to matter requires descriptive multidisciplinary analyses plus all sorts of critical fine-grained normative analyses, which requires exploration of the possibility space, both internal to the tradition and external to it. What resources are there internal to cultures that practice genital mutilation to see through them, to work around them, to end them? What resources do increasingly oligarchic and nonegalitarian states like the United States have internal to themselves to become (again or for the first time) egalitarian and democratic (Gilens and Page 2014; Piketty 2014)? And if there are no internal resources for sociomoral change inside a tradition, how do novel moral ideas or, what is different, external sources gain a footing—discovery, innovation, commerce, immigration, intermarriage, or revolution?

Virtues that engender widespread agreement when described abstractly can conceal disagreement and regimens of oppression when one gets down to the nitty-gritty details. Colonialist regimes always recommend certain virtues for those they colonialize. Sometimes these virtues are endorsed symmetrically. The colonialist and the colonized are both to be respectful and law abiding. But if one follows the money and the power one will see that these virtues and values disempower and insult the colonized (Fanon 1952, 1963; Lear 2008). Whether respect, humility, and turning the other cheek are virtues or vices, modes of empowerment or opiates depends on the overall quality of a moral **(p.7)** ecology, as well as why and for whom they are endorsed and whether and how the norms of application vary according to gender, status, ethnicity, and so on.

All actual differences across cultures and across individuals make a difference and not just for the descriptive side of ethics. Goods—moral, aesthetic, epistemic—are often internal to practices and traditions and possibly intermixed in unfamiliar ways, for example, in the way that Confucians aestheticize and moralize what some Westerners might think are merely matters of etiquette, or the way some Piraha of the Brazilian Amazon think that good people should believe their parents about how one ought to live and be, but not believe what unknown people or sources—for example, Jesus—say about how to be and to live (Everett 2009). Other Amazonian peoples, Achuar again, believe a good person should take ayahuasca to discover and then plan for the social role that he or she sees that they will occupy while tripping on the psychedelic during a ceremony (separate for boys and girls) around the time of puberty. These beliefs, practices, and intertwinings may not be for us, but almost everyone will think that some practices are good, bad, right, or wrong depending on how they are situated in a complex normative web that is partly up to the people who live inside or abide the normative web in question.

### Moral Particularities

The standard philosophical picture of moral interaction and exchange is historically and ecologically unrealistic because it is transcendently pretentious, conceiving the philosopher’s vocation as identifying what is really good or right independently of history or culture. It is unrealistic in another respect. Persons not only live and evaluate in distinctive force fields of history and culture, which are often different based on sex, gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, different personality types, and so on, but in addition most moral situations are highly particular. The picture of a singleton agent who assesses and judges moral situations alone, one dilemma at a time, is just empirically weird. It doesn’t matter whether the picture is of a singleton rational assessor or a singleton emotional assessor, where the decision is made on the basis of the best reason or the strongest emotion. Neither is the case; the whole picture is wrong. Persons with deep, rich, complex inner lives are fully embodied and embedded in social worlds with long histories. We are conduits of traditions, participants and creators, but not by any means sole authors, of our lives. Moral responsiveness and moral sensitivity involve complex historical habits of the heart and mind, not winner-take-all competitions of reasons or desires in singleton agents. Part of the project is to provide a better picture of moral agents and agency.

Iris Murdoch (1967, 17–18) provides an example commonly discussed by philosophers who wish to emphasize the ubiquity of moral particularity. **(p.8)** A certain Mother in Law ‘M’ feels that her “son has married beneath him,” and thus that the daughter-in-law ‘D’ is not good enough for her son. Over time M comes to think that her view of D is distorted, unfair, and may involve odd cultural expectations, classism, and a certain Oedipal possessiveness. “M tells herself: ‘I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.’” “Looking again” is the start of the process of “careful and just *attention*.” The process of looking again takes time and effort until “gradually her vision of D alters and D is seen in a new way that changes everything.” D is now “not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on.”

The parable presents a complex but familiar kind of problem. An individual with a particular history is in a situation, which that individual sees from a particular cultural and historical perspective, as well as from a particular class, race, gender, and economic position. She is put off by her daughter-in-law. She thinks that her son has made a mistake and that D really is objectively unrefined. The problem is not a dilemma, not an emergency. But whether and how it is resolved, or not, matters greatly to the set of relations, the relational ecology it is embedded in, effects, even transforms.

Here is another example that has similar features: My father was born in 1925. He was shanty, not lace curtain Irish. He was an only child, lost his father as a little boy, was raised by his mother, a Catholic nurse, in a Jewish orphanage where she and my dad lived as housemother and housemate among the Jewish orphans. My father was a lieutenant in Patton’s Third Army, won a Silver Star for killing six Germans with his machine gun when his unit was pinned down in battle, went to college on the GI bill, became a successful accountant, and the father of six children. He was a good man, but he suffered anti-black racism, a common enough version of that American disease that continues to affect almost all white people. But my father—I saw this all the time and knew it from conversations with him about civil rights during the 1960s—hated this about himself and judged it wrong. He also understood that it was almost impossible for him to purge his soul of all his prejudices and racial suspicions in his lifetime. What he did, and what I admire greatly, was that he tried never to convey his prejudice to his children, and I never heard him encourage or reinforce any racist comment. He saw that he could work for generational change even if not for complete change in himself in his lifetime. This was a noble and realistic response to the particularities of his predicament.

I’ve said that many, probably most, moral problems are particular, intertwined with history and culture, and not dilemmas or emergencies. Consider a situation I faced today in my hometown:

*The Schizophrenic and the Professor.* For a decade I begin most days writing at a local coffee shop. I sit at the end of a couch. I am an elder and my **(p.9)** spot is something like an endowed chair at the shop. There are usually regulars to greet, a bit of chitchat, and then some work to do. There are also homeless people on 9th Street. I know most of them. Today, one fellow K., who is paranoid schizophrenic, came in, sat next to me and started to chant (imagine “Hava Nagila” in Gregorian chant) and bounce on the couch we shared. I hemmed and hawed mentally about whether to ask Keith to stop, and about how to ask if I did. In the cacophony, there was the coffee shop’s music and K.’s music, which were not harmonious, and there were feelings of annoyance cross-checked by feelings of sympathy and concern, thoughts about the cold weather, walking the dogs later, picking up laundry at the cleaners, and a hundred other things all inside spans of seconds.

What I will feel, think, and do in the coffee shop today depends on my states of mind, on the particular ways my mental and bodily states interact with the particulars of what K. does, the multifarious features of the surround, and so on. As for what I should do, even if I am committed to a general moral conception that says maximize well-being or do what God would do, I need to be paying attention, picking up on as many particularities of what is going on as possible, to have a chance of doing what is best, of doing what the divine or a sage or a saint would do. And doing this requires perceptual skills, skills at reading other minds, and various virtues, a sense of compassion and justice, and so on.

Here are two other examples that occurred this week and that are of a familiar sort to me:



*Ego Flattery.* The beautiful woman who runs an artist collective, the Carrack Gallery in downtown Durham, suggested that I become a sponsor of the gallery. She mentioned that my name would be posted, en-plaqué, as a sponsor, a special patron. I immediately wanted to do this, to be that guy, “Owen de’ Medici.” Then I instantaneously thought that the amount that my beautiful acquaintance asked for, which I now wanted to give with pomp and ceremony, black tie, this beauty in her slinky red dress on my arm, and that I could easily afford, I had not thought of giving to any one or any cause, and that furthermore it could obviously do much greater good if given to the local Durham homeless shelter. It was not a close call in my mind even though I could hide behind the fact that Aristotle said magnanimity is a virtue. I felt bad that I had not thought about giving my money to any worthy cause, and bad that I leaned strongly for reasons I recognized as egoistic (my name engraved on a plaque, a lovely woman as well as many imagined anonymous others admiring me) to give the money to support the optional pleasures of rich white people like myself, and not the necessities of the motherless and fatherless, the unlucky, the drunks, the addicts, and the mentally ill souls who live in the shelter just blocks away. As I write these **(p.10)** words I have done nothing about the situation, other than entered the space of self-work where my reasons and desires sit uncomfortably with my values, wanting and working some to be a better version of myself. (Update: I made a \$5 monthly pledge to the Carrack, not exactly the kind of magnanimity that enabled the Italian Renaissance.)

*The Annoying Colleagues.* A friend has talked to me a lot over the past year, including this week over lunch, about her difficulties with two colleagues, x and y. She judges x to be thoughtless, rude, and a bully. She judges y to be a narcissist. She harbors resentment toward x and y. But she is confused about whether her feelings toward x are due to the fact that x is a jerk or to the fact that she thinks x is a jerk based on occasional jerky behavior. Upon reflection she tells me that x is not always thoughtless, rude, and a bully. As for y, she tries to judge the egomania as a disorder, a result of a difficult childhood or as overcompensation for low self-esteem or both, and not as willful, or a matter of reckless disregard for others or the common good. And she admits to having seen, once or twice, y behave as if y cares about some other individuals or a common project, independently of y’s narrow self-interest. So she has some behavioral evidence from x and y against her negative global assessments of x and y as a bully and a narcissist, respectively. Furthermore, she thinks—I have encouraged this thought—that her possibly mistaken global assessments of x and y ought not to be so global, making her unable to receive x’s and y’s perceptions, thoughts, and observations from a neutral open pose. My friend is a good and conscientious person. She is working at loving attention. It is a difficult, ongoing project.<sup>2</sup>

The moral problems of life vary with age and circumstance, but they are mostly like these—matters of tender mercies, love, attention, honesty, conscientiousness, guarding against projection, taming reactive emotions, deflating ego, and self-cultivation.

There are still other points to be made about realism that attention to such moralities of everyday life reveal. What are the major practical moral problems? One might think reading philosophy that they are abortion, euthanasia, genetic and neural enhancement, and what to do when there is a runaway trolley and you control switches that determine how many people are killed by it. These problems are very important when they come up, and it is good to think about them. But they have two characteristics worth noting. First, they are not everyday or regular problems faced by most people; second, they have clear social, political, public policy, and legal dimensions, which is one reason it is wise to discuss them in groups, in seminars, and such. But there is a class of problems, such as the coffee shop problem, that do not have nearly so much of the social, political, public policy aspects, and that occur many times **(p.11)** on a daily basis for most everyone. There is being kind to the barista or the bus driver, greeting people in a generous spirit, giving the dogs the exercise they need rather than giving them short shrift because one has so much to do, doing one’s job the way it really ought to be done, being honest and present and loving.

This matters because by and large across cultures the meaning and significance of a good human life depends more on one’s character, one’s virtue, one’s being in the intimate worlds of love and work and community than it does on one’s views about what to do when there is a runaway trolley or a terrorist with secrets, or whether rich people should get designer drugs that make them even more gifted and talented than they already are. To be sure, issues like whether to have an abortion or to help a loved one to die are monumental when they come up. But when they need to be decided, what matters most besides what social mores and the law allow, which will, for better or worse, figure in whether one will feel confident or not, self-respecting or not with one’s decision, are the sensitivities or lack thereof of all the individuals involved. These sensitivities are built over time in everyday ecologies where specific beliefs, emotions, norms, and ideals of decency, goodness, and excellence are practiced or not, encouraged or discouraged.

There is a further disadvantage to the level of grain at which practical ethics speaks: it allows philosophers to focus on, and then lament and fret about what others, rarely oneself, don’t do or don’t think about, about what public policy blokes and corrupt legislators and politicians have or have not done that should be done. There is little discussion in contemporary practical ethics of changing oneself, the one part of the universe that one has some actual control over. The last and best on that topic by philosophers was written by Stoics, Confucians, and Buddhists over one thousand years ago. To be fair, self-improvement, the therapy of desire, *techniques du soi*, are discussed in synagogues, churches, and mosques, and increasingly among neoliberals from the narcissistic pose of gaining calm and equanimity for oneself between bouts of living one’s Type A life in self-help groups and zazen parlors, where one sits on cushions with other frazzled secular souls seeking to feel as one deserves, happy and self-satisfied.

MacIntyre’s remarks come with a constructive suggestion. Ethicists ought to pay attention to what evolutionary biology, primatology (also the study of cetaceans), psychology, and neuroscience can teach us about the kinds of animals we are and the possibility space of human morality. And we should also pay attention to literature, history, sociology, anthropology, and philosophical work from and about other traditions. Otherwise, one is not aware of the full range of moral sources, not sensitive to the “varieties of moral possibility,” and in danger of being “imprisoned by one’s upbringing.” Often we don’t see the possibilities for becoming better than we are or the possibilities for better ways of achieving our ends. The space of possibilities divides into real **(p.12)** and notional possibilities, changes that I could actually make in myself or my world, and changes that are practically or conceptually impossible for me or for people like us. But if I see no possibilities, then effectively there are none. And if I don’t see that how I conceive the kind of person I am—a man, a white man, an American white man, an Irish American Catholic white man—is itself a space with dynamic shape, porous boundaries, and various points of leverage, then it fixes me and limits my capacities for change and growth in ways that might seem necessary, but that are not.

### Ethics and Human Ecology

Are things better now than when MacIntyre voiced his concern about the failure of ethics to engage with everyday practice and with the disciplines that provide thick description and ecologically attuned explanations of the mores and ethos of the peoples of the earth? Do moral philosophers in the early twenty-first century pay more attention to work in literature, history, sociology, anthropology, and the other human sciences than they did last century?

In some ways, with respect to some of the human sciences—especially the theory of evolution, psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience—the situation is improved. Ever since Darwin, attention to the evolutionary sources of morality has brought a plausible theoretical grounding to claims about ultimate sources of some moral foundations and sensibilities in natural history. Modern humans are approximately 250,000 years old, and many aspects of our social natures are ancient, selected for, and then maintained in lineages that include much older ancestors among nonhuman and hominid primates. Furthermore, for over 99 percent of our species’ existence, until agriculture and animal husbandry coemerged only 12,000 years ago, we lived in groups composed of bands of 20–30; almost never before farming and domestication of animals did communities get larger than 130–150. One strong possibility is that most contemporary humans live in entirely new worlds in bodies and minds designed mostly for very different ones, the worlds for which the original equipment evolved, sometimes in nonhominid ancestors. Meanwhile, psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience provide some knowledge about local generalizations and proximate causes. In such areas as social and political philosophy, which are continuous with ethics, attention to practice has always been the norm. Social and political philosophers work on such topics as disagreement, incomparability, incommensurability, identity, nationalism, inequality, race, gender, alternative conceptions of rights, justice, and desert, so they have typically kept their ears to the ground. But moral philosophy as an academic subdiscipline, especially in the precincts that are considered most rigorous, still favors and selects for Rubik’s Cube-type minds over the sorts of historical and anthropological curiosity and critical political sensibility that **(p.13)** are valued across most of the humanities, in many sectors in the human sciences, and in the adjacent territories of social and political philosophy (e.g., in critical race theory and feminist philosophy). If Anglophone philosophical ethics is increasingly attuned to speaking in evolutionary terms about ultimate sources (e.g., family loyalty is explained by kin selection), and also to the cognitive sciences in tracking local patterns (e.g., seminarians at Princeton Theological Seminary are prone to moral indifference if they are rushed), and proximate neural causes (e.g., oxytocin enhances trusting and caring), they are weak in paying attention to the force fields of history and culture.<sup>3</sup>

It is worth reflecting on the fact that in the twentieth century metaethics became the highest status area inside ethics the discipline, where the subject matter of metaethics is at two levels removed from ordinary moral life. The subject matter of metaethics is ethical discourse, language, and texts. The normative ethicist asks about right and wrong; they try to answer Socrates’s question: How ought I—one, we—to live? The metaethicist, often motivated by the thought that the normative project is sweet, dear, old-fashioned, and premised on a fantasy that there is something sensible to say about what is good and right, asks instead: What (really) are Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Mill doing when they speak in favor of a particular normative conception? What does ordinary moral discourse assume about the existence of moral facts or moral objectivity, where ‘ordinary’ means what is spoken in Bloomsbury or Oxbridge or Sydney by people like ourselves, well-heeled white, mostly male, folk.

On the other side, it is a disgrace of twentieth-century Western moral philosophy that it claimed a principled pretense, based on a misreading of Hume on “demonstration” in ethics, to treat the human sciences as concerned with the merely descriptive, the empirical, and the genealogical. The philosopher is the only one authorized to speak about the normative, the universal, and the transcendental. Philosophers enjoy the pretense of assigning to scientists the underlaborer role of describing and explaining morality, and themselves the role formerly assigned to the priestly castes (now exposed by the philosophers as charlatans) of prescribing, of being fully in charge of the departments of oughts (if, that is, there is anything sensible to say about oughts, which we—the philosophers—will decide in due course). This separation, this preposterous intellectual division of labor—as if it isn’t everyone’s most important task to figure out how one, I, or we ought to live—leaves even the best philosophers open to the charge that they operate in bad faith. They operate only or mainly with the resources of their own traditions, but claim to speak transcendently. On this view, Anglophone moral philosophy sings the praises of the moral attitudes of the dominant educated classes, serving mostly as both cover and mental hygiene for people who judge themselves already as nice-enough to actually believe that they are nice-enough, and to conceive themselves as open to becoming even nicer, akin to learning to stretch a bit more in yoga, in some nearby world for people of their color and class. It leaves moral philosophy (p. 14) open to exactly the charge that postmodernism heaped on the discipline at the end of the twentieth century: Eurocentric, white, male, and elitist. This was not, and is not, false.

MacIntyre’s own hermeneutic strategy has been to read moral theories as reflective of the culture from which they emerge (see his *Short History of Ethics*, 1966). Thus, he understands “the project of the Enlightenment,” the project of grounding normative life in secular reason rather than in religion, cultural history, or political pedigree, as the latest poseur in the attempt to find the universal deep structure of morality, and to justify the morality it endorses, the morality of Enlightenment liberalism under the cover of that which is not contingent.

It wasn’t as if twentieth-century ethics took an official stand against being psychologically, sociologically, and anthropologically sensitive and displayed no self-consciousness of its own historicity. But there was, and still is, a view that philosophy, real philosophy—“deep throat”—is distinct from history, including its own. And, of course, there is the view that normative ethics is autonomous and distinct from the human sciences, which merely describe and explain human behavior.

Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor, and Martha Nussbaum are important philosophers who, like MacIntyre, accept the historicity and contingency of the liberal moral philosophical project. Unlike MacIntyre, they endorse liberal morality as their tradition, the one they admire, and wish to advance and improve, each in their own original way, Rorty with an ironist’s attitude, Taylor with communitarian convictions, and Nussbaum with a liberalism that attends to the role of luck and love in politics. John Rawls, in the decade after his monumental *A Theory of Justice* (1971) was published, took to emphasizing increasingly in conversation and in public talks that his theory of justice as fairness was not meant (or perhaps it was that it did not succeed) as a theory of justice that any rational person at any time and place would accept or endorse, but rather it was the one, possibly “just one,” that people who were antecedently committed to forms of life such as those dominant in North America and Scandinavia would accept or endorse. That is, it would work for people who have already accepted that people were or ought to be “free and equal.” Rawls was explicit about this point in *Political Liberalism* (1993).

Thus, it wasn’t as if the points about historical and cultural conditioning were lost on the best philosophers of the late twentieth century, especially those working in Continental philosophy. But as philosophers like Rorty changed the subject and started a different conversation, orthogonal to mainstream analytic philosophy, and as MacIntyre and Taylor explored the deep and multifarious communitarian, not only liberal, philosophical sources of North Atlantic philosophies, and as Nussbaum and Amartya Sen did noble anthropologically, economically, and philosophically sophisticated normative ethical and political work, much of ethics continued in the voice of an **(p.15)** unreflective ahistorical impartial observer who was authorized to speak about the way we think and the way morality is. But why believe in the first century after the human sciences were born that we knew enough about the history, psychology, sociology, economics, and anthropology of morality, that we know enough about the actual phenomena, to be able to speak about it, what we think about it, or to assume that there is an “it” there, or if there is that we know its shape and contours and function, its role in the larger ecologies of human life? Why think that those licensed to practice in the academic discipline of “philosophy” in the Anglophone world—a discipline with clear Foucauldian structure that literally disciplines reading, thought, imagination, and speech—know how to think and speak about what we think, where “we” invites the thought of being representative, or universal, or perhaps what a fully rational person would think or see in our practices or in morality as such.



MacIntyre’s concern is that twentieth-century moral philosophy was disciplinarily narrow, unreflectively culture-bound, and psychologically, sociologically, and anthropologically unrealistic. His positive suggestion is for moral philosophers to be less parochial, to explore the resources of other traditions, other ways of being human, to study history, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. One reason is this: If normative ethics is to be helpful in the project of living well, of flourishing, of finding meaning and purpose, of leaving the world a better place, it ought to help us to be attentive, sensitive, and open to value, not cocky, overconfident, and closed to other ways of thinking and being. Many philosophers behave as if their job is to win arguments, leaving one’s opponent defeated, maimed, and breathless. A better idea recommended by Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch among others, a decided minority, is loving attention, listening with openness to others, seeking connection, and discovery. Knowing where to go from here, how to go on, what to do next requires knowing what the possibilities are. But a tradition—liberalism or Confucianism or Buddhism or orthodox Islam, say, or a sect inside a tradition—often functions most efficiently by reducing the space of what is noticed as a possibility or an option. Read some literature, history, anthropology, or sociology and “the varieties of moral possibility” open up. Sometimes, perhaps especially in times of personal crisis, or a crisis in one’s tradition, this is what is needed, knowing what others have done, tried, or thought in similar situations either in one’s own tradition or elsewhere. How different would philosophy be if it worked as hard to hone patient, loving attention and respectful listening, really hearing the other, trying first and foremost to get the other as he or she is, as it does to hone the skills that barely conceal the cruelty and meanness of the modern verbal warrior? It is not optional for the philosopher even in times of “normal philosophy” to speak about morality without marking which conception he or she is speaking about and why. It is just not acceptable on any conception of honest speech that one gets to speak for a discipline or community or tradition, even for a person other than oneself, without explicitly saying that one is **(p.16)** doing so. It is one variety of coercive speech to say that “we” think such and so, when my people and I don’t. It marginalizes and silences the other.

### A Real Revolution in Ethics?

MacIntyre’s diagnosis of the state of play in twentieth-century moral philosophy is not idiosyncratic. In an important paper, “Toward *Fin de Siècle* Ethics: Some Trends,” Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton conclude their comprehensive survey of Anglophone moral philosophy, mostly metaethics, over the previous century with these words:

In the effervescent discussion of the desirability of moral theory, various camps express agreement that more careful and empirically informed work on the nature or history or function of morality is needed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, very little such work has been done even by some of those who recommend it most firmly. Too many moral philosophers and commentators on moral philosophy—we do not exempt ourselves—have been content to invent their psychology or anthropology from scratch and do their history on the strength of selective readings of texts rather than more comprehensive research into contexts. Change is underway in this regard, especially, perhaps, in the emergence of less ahistorical approaches to the history of philosophy. But any real revolution in ethics stemming from the infusion of a more empirically informed understanding of psychology, anthropology, or history must hurry if it is to arrive in time to be part of *fin de siècle* ethics. (1992, 188–89)

Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton mention work, including my own, that was, at that time, the early 1990s, atypical in being empirically informed and that does not just “invent their psychology and anthropology.” And they say that topics like “the role of personality, emotions, identity, and self-concept in deliberation have also begun to receive increasing attention” (189). True.

There have been a variety of good signs since the *fin de siècle* paper. First, the trend toward psychological realism has continued and many philosophers, some empirically informed, and a few who actually do experiments, bring the resources of economics, biology, psychology, cognitive science, and even cognitive neuroscience to ethics. Meanwhile, many excellent biologists, primatologists, cetacean experts, developmental psychologists, game theorists, cognitive scientists, and cognitive neuroscientists claim plausibly that what they learn about the origins of morality in children, or about strategy in economic games, or the effects of certain neurochemicals on the emotions, is relevant to ethics. This is the naturalistic turn in ethics. Second, there are beginnings, really renewal, of a different but related trend. This is ethics that attends to the historical, anthropological, and sociological—to culture. This **(p.17)** is the cross-cultural or anthropological turn. It is starting to take hold.<sup>4</sup> Such work aims to bring deep knowledge of resources inside the dominant culture, as well as resources of other cultural traditions, to bear on how we think about the questions and the answers of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

But here’s the rub: The trend toward psychological, sociological, and anthropological realism in ethics accompanied by increasingly sophisticated and thick descriptions of how different peoples ask, intend, and answer Socrates’s question about what makes for a good human life, comes recently with a certain lean toward the view that substantive moral criticism and positive individual moral change are weak forces, and relatedly toward the view that the distinction between the descriptive and the normative is a thin and uninteresting one, that people pretty much are as they ought to be, given that the sum of causal forces is as it is. The idea that the values people hold, the virtues they admire and aspire to, and the moral psychology they have is explained by the human sciences is thought in certain quarters to undermine the possibility that we can remake and improve ourselves. Max Weber anticipated this. He worried—well, really, he predicted—that the advances in the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) would take the wind out of the sails of “spirit,” naturalize it, and thereby “disenchant” the world by undermining the view of ourselves as creatures specially graced to detect what is good and to self-orchestrate movement individually and collectively toward what is good.

Two major themes inside the moral psychology of the last century and a half are that many of the key forces that produce moral life are hidden in evolutionarily old equipment and in the taken-for-granted structures of social life that support fitness-enhancing strategies, the game to outscore others in the competition to get more of one’s genes into future generations, and that, at the limit, the view that morality really has to do with the search for what is right and good is a cover, a fantasy, possibly among those in the know, a lie. Some read the evidence as support for a view of ethics as a strategic cover for fitness, self-aggrandizement, and the will to power, a view defended in Plato’s dialogues by Thrasymachus and Callicles, and floated, if not endorsed, by Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault.

Two common but unwarranted and unfortunate tendencies in recent work in scientifically inspired reflection on ethics push toward nihilism, skepticism, and irrationalism, toward believing that ethics is just emotional noise, lacking in all cognitive significance, and over which reason has no power.

On one side, there is a strange assembly of evolutionists who are nihilists and think that we evolved to be on average nice-enough (Rosenberg 2011). Q: Nice-enough for what? A: Nice-enough to get by long enough to (maybe) get a mate, reproduce, and thus to maintain some proportion of one’s nice-enough genes in the gene pool. Morality consists of strategies to get oneself, one’s genes that far. You worry: But some not very nice people succeed at dating and mating, and their genes stay in the pool. For this there is therapy: There **(p.18)** are fewer of these not-nice souls than there are nice souls, so relax, you are likely to be relatively safe. For the moral nihilist a statement like “killing innocents is wrong” is not about anything. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche writes (whether he is endorsing the view as opposed to channeling it, is always an open question in Nietzsche scholarship): “There are absolutely no moral facts. What moral and religious judgments have in common is the belief in things that are not real. Morality is just an interpretation of certain phenomena or (more accurately) a misinterpretation ([1889, 8.1]; 2005, 182).”

For the nihilist, Hitler wasn’t bad, just different, and I (we) don’t like the way he was. There is no such thing as bad, good, right, or wrong. Some nihilists think that all moral statements that have the form of declarative sentences—“killing innocents is wrong”—are literally much ado about nothing. They are either empty like sentences about ghosts, phlogiston, the heavenly orbs, or the tooth fairy—fantastical—or they are globally false like the sentences of a physics that assumes the Ptolemaic view of planetary motion. “Look at the sunset” (“The sun doesn’t set, you idiot; the earth moves into position so you can see the sun where it is!”). Or like sentences about the tooth fairy. The kids think the tooth fairy comes whenever a tooth is lost. But this is always and everywhere false. There is no tooth fairy. Thinking or saying he does or did come and leave money for a lost tooth is not empty. It is meaningful. It is just false. The sentence “The tooth fairy came!” might be interpreted to mean “I am happy that there is money under my pillow!” and “Hitler is evil” might be understood as “I hate Hitler!” but those glosses just prove the nihilist’s or fictionalist’s point that there is nothing objective about the tooth fairy or evil.

Another prominent view, and it is related, is that reason is impotent in ethics. Even if, contrary to the nihilist or fictionalist, it is true that “killing innocents is wrong” and true that “one ought not to kill innocents,” these truths (true facts, rational truths) will not deter people from killing innocents if doing so pays well enough.<sup>5</sup> Q: How might it pay well enough? A: You might have really messed with me and my people in such a way that I want to crush you like a bug or you might have resources I really want. So revenge or gaining access to your highly desirable resources will typically override even the best moral reasons. Jonathan Haidt, a leading voice in empirical moral psychology who defends a view called “social intuitionism,” declares that there is a widespread mistake in the way philosophers conceive the moral project. Reason “evolved not to help us find truth but to help us engage in argument, persuasion, and manipulation in the context of discussions with other people” (2012, 89). He writes that “worship of reason is ... one of the most long-lived delusions in Western history... . The rationalist delusion ... is not just a claim about human nature. It is also a claim that the rational caste (philosophers and scientists) should have more power, and it usually comes with utopian programs for raising more rational children (88).

**(p.19)** Nihilism and skepticism about reason both overreach and rest on several shared mistakes. First, so long as there are reasons (of fitness, prudence, flourishing, well-being, goodness, badness, rightness, wrongness, etc.) that can be given for moral beliefs and norms, for why we favor certain values and virtues over others, then moral statements are given a defensible place inside a form of life and can be understood as both about something, and as true or false, minimally inside that form of life. Second, the disparagement of reason, the charge that belief in the power of thought, reason, and imagination is delusional, is most charitably understood as a mistaken reading of recent work on the power of a host of morally irrelevant features of the world, specifically irrelevant situations (situationism) or of certain fast-acting intuitive and ancient brain systems (intuitionism) on moral response.

The consensus is that irrelevant situations can affect moral response—a generally kind person will be less so if there is an annoying noise in the background. There is also widespread – but possible premature -- agreement that there are in the mind two systems, an evolutionarily old, fast-acting system that delivers quick (and what were at least once upon a time) fitness-enhancing responses (“grab your stuff and run”), and a slower system that comes in handy in waging war, doing algebra, and retirement planning. This dual process model is all the rage (Kahneman 2011). Sometimes the rational system, System 2, tries to get into the morality game, for example, you are a utilitarian and compute that you should push a single innocent onto the tracks in front of the runaway train to save the five darling children who are picnicking on the tracks. But you can’t actually push the innocent (in time)—it creeps you out. You fail to do what you believe in, what you are rationally committed to doing, what your utilitarian secular faith demands. The darlings—future Mother Teresas and Nelson Mandelas—die. Ergo, Voilà, QED: All those years of philosophical training are for naught, impotent against the system inside you that evolved among ancestral species and just says “no” to putting your hands on conspecifics to force them into harm’s way. System 1 defeats System 2. Gut 1; Reason 0. Game over.

There are several quick points. First, such situations are both extremely rare and ecologically unrealistic. Second, the case is cherry picked. Sometimes, reason overrides powerful gut-wrenching distaste. Most everyone will also hate pulling a switch that causes any death, but the overwhelming majority of North Americans think they should (and would) pull the switch if required to save a larger number of innocents than are “sacrificed.” Third, the dichotomy between the two systems is simplistic since they are normally interpenetrative—my situation at the coffee shop involves a schizophrenic who bugs me (System 1), but whom I see as human, worthy of respect (System 2), and to whom I try to respond accordingly. Indeed, Kahneman himself says the two systems are a fiction. They mark a practically useful picture, but do not mark a real distinction in the nervous system, and thus not in the mind either. Fourth, there is **(p.20)** no amazing new discovery here, indeed no real discovery at all. The picture of a mind that sometimes fights itself is ancient. Plato writes about it, Buddha and Confucius speak about it. Stoicism is almost entirely about it, and every Christian treatise—from St. Paul’s brilliant letters to early Christian communities to Augustine’s *Confessions* that deal with temptation—explores its insidious recesses, contours, and resiliency. Śāntideva, the great Indian Mahayana Buddhist, writes a treatise in the eighth century filled with practical tips for working one’s way around what one is naturally inclined to want and to do, but which isn’t worth wanting or doing all things considered. Fifth, the claim that reason is powerful is not a claim about the reason of singleton agents deciding momentous events by themselves, moral Robinson Crusoes. Reasoning is social and historical, something we do with others, and with the resources of human history and culture.

In any case, knowledge is power. Knowledge of human nature reveals strengths and weaknesses, foibles, and cognitive blind spots. It also provides, so I claim, a better picture of what reason, imagination, and various practices of self-cultivation and social criticism can do to make our ourselves, our lives, and our worlds better. There are no findings in the human sciences that should undermine confidence in the force of critical rationality to identify moral strengths and weaknesses, to plumb the depths of moral psychology, and to honestly explore the genealogy of morals. Nor is there any basis for skepticism about the power of imaginative exploration of the varieties of moral possibility. Some of the varieties of moral possibility have been tried and tested, but perhaps not in our time. Most possibilities are unexplored, not yet conceived, and thus are terra incognita.

Thick description and charitable explanation of diverse moral worlds might make us more tolerant of the varieties of moral personality by helping us see why different people are as they are. There is also the matter of criticism and improvement. Persons in complex social worlds possess, develop, discover, and pass on powers and skills that can serve us to criticize forms of life we live inside of and to improve them. Powers of criticism and imagination are enhanced by seeing that others live in ways we might think are impossible. For example, it is a commonplace that anger is a natural emotion, that it is impossible to eliminate it, and that, in any case, some forms of it, for example, the righteous forms—against Nazis or racists—are good, even required (M. Bell 2013). Stoics and Buddhists deny all of this. If one doesn’t know that much, that there exist actual communities that claim to have found ways around what we take to be necessary, one is in a certain sense imprisoned by one’s upbringing.

So one aim is to defend critical reason, imagination, and creativity in moral life from the nihilists, skeptics, and those who claim that thinking is impotent against human first nature. Since I do not think there is a distinctive faculty of reason, or imagination, or creativity, I could just say that my aim is to defend thinking and reason-giving, the roles of thought, imagination, reflection, **(p.21)** social exchange, and cultural critique in both justifying aspects of moral life and creating conditions for moral change, sometimes moral improvement. At the same time, I aim to provide an up-to-date evaluation of what we can learn from work in the rich vein of empirical moral psychology that is attuned to historical and anthropological differences, both intracultural ones that can be hidden by a dominant ideology, and cross-cultural ones to which we pay little or no attention, and to indicate some of the ways it opens up the resources of new varieties of moral possibility, resources for reflecting on the quality of how we are living and about possibilities for being better.

Three central themes that emerge from cross-cultural work and that frame the project are these: First, the right unit of attention for ethics is the whole person-in-communal relations, not person parts, say genes, or the emotional centers of the brain, or the rational parts of brains, not brains, period, but persons who seek to live well in relations with other persons in particular natural and social ecologies with histories. Second, shared human nature is insufficient for flourishing and vastly underdetermines the possibility space for human lives. Third, expanding inquiry beyond the resources of one’s own tradition and upbringing is confidence undermining in a worrisome way only if one has been encouraged to believe that “we” have things more-or-less nailed down and other cultures are in various ways primitive, confused, immature, lost. A more ecologically sensitive and realistic ethical inquiry might help us understand why and how things among a people, a tradition, a group, a subgroup, are as they are, how they might be improved, and how insights and resources of other people and traditions might be for us, not just for them.

### Notes:

(1.) One doesn’t need linguistic categories to do the work of organizing thought; economic practices and other social practices can do so by themselves. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) W. E. B. Du Bois explains how the virtues of the Negro slave, open-heartedness, faithfulness, sincerity, submission, and humility, are also those of a good ox or dog.

(2.) Śāntideva (1997), the great eighth-century Indian Mahayana Buddhist poet and sage, recommends gratitude to those who provide opportunities to practice compassion and patience:

Those who wish to cause me suffering  
Are like Buddhas bestowing waves of blessing.  
As they open the door for my not going to an  
unfortunate realm,  
Why should I be angry with them? (6.101)

In America, one hears this sort of idea expressed in a somewhat degraded way: “That asshole teaches me patience.” There is work to be done.



(3.) Experimental philosophy has started to get into the study of cross-cultural differences. This is good. There are many such differences, and once we have an inventory at a certain time and place—for example, learning that Koreans rank respect for elders more highly than Americans do—we will want explanations for these differences. That will require excavation of historical and cultural resources. There is some cross-cultural work in experimental philosophy that looks, for example, at differences in moral judgments between cultures on trolley problems or even in differences in bilingual peoples’ judgments on such problems when they are framed in the different languages they know. People seem to be more utilitarian when dilemmas are framed in their second language, especially when that language is English. I am interested in such work *if* it is supported by, and embedded in, deep understanding of the traditions it claims to compare; otherwise not. The reason is that moral differences are normally deep, embedded in complex forms of life, not superficial. *Parable*: Richard Shweder did important work in psychological anthropology in the 1990s. Teenagers in Orissa, India, think that a son getting a haircut and eating a chicken on the day his father died is very bad. Teenagers in Hyde Park, Chicago, think it is OK. So far we have a difference, but no understanding of the difference. Cultural understanding shows the difference to be complex but not a difference at a deep existential level. In both cultures there are webs of moral belief and significance that designate a parental death as monumentally important and that deem certain practices as impious and disrespectful. *Lesson*: It takes a hermeneutic, a theory of interpretation to frame and then understand local moral judgments and actions. And that requires some comprehension of a tradition, a form of life.

(4.) Some proponents inside moral and political philosophy of the cross-cultural or anthropological turn include Kwame Anthony Appiah, Kwasi Wiredu, Michele Moody-Adams, Elizabeth Anderson, Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Philip J. Ivanhoe, David B. Wong, Kwong Loi-Shun, Lawrence Becker, Judith Butler, Charles Mills, Carol Pateman, Chike Jeffers, Naomi Zack, James Maffie, Jonathan Lear, Tamler Sommers, and Justin E. H. Smith.

(5.) Consider: “Building bridges out of papier-mâché is wrong” and “One ought not build bridges out of papier-mâché.” Both sentences are true inside the normal practice of engineering. Given that bridges are built to allow heavy objects (people, animals, carts, automobiles, etc.) to get across expanses of water, land, etc., they ought to be made of the right materials. Similarly, one might think insofar as morality is a system of hypothetical imperatives, where the antecedents are expressions of some facts about persons or the world, that the sentence “It is wrong to kill innocents” is true insofar as normally people like to feel safe, being murdered can be painful, loss of loved ones makes people sad, etc., and that therefore it is best to abide rules of not killing innocents.

