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# INTRODUCTION: WHY THERE SHOULD BE AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF MORALITIES

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Monica Heintz

There is probably no other field of enquiry in which the ‘otherness’ of human beings is as difficult to conceptualise as in the field of morals and values. Sometimes striking and difficult to accept, sometimes resembling our principles to the point that we become blind to their differences, values that underpin the others’ actions are difficult to grasp, understand and explain. Can we, as anthropologists, maintain both the distance required by objective science and the empathy required for the analysis of lived experiences when addressing the issue of morality? Can we preserve in our writings the dignity of other cultures even though we may perhaps – as individuals – disapprove of their values? These delicate questions lurk in postmodernist debates, but have often remained rhetorical. To them we can add an even more problematic question: could we describe and analyse the others’ values as if they were a set of traditional, fixed, unproblematic rules of life, while we at the same time acknowledge the complexity of moral questions in western societies – amply developed in Western art and literature? If the awareness of the historicised and complex nature of

the Other has been with us at least since Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983), the methodological challenge of analysing accordingly the most fundamental aspects that underline social life – values – in non-Western societies has not been met.

The challenge that the authors of this volume are trying to meet is to render possible an anthropology of moralities that enables the recognition of the plurality and creativity of moral discourses and practices all over the world and simultaneously keeps them in dialogue. Our main concern is methodological and epistemological, while our approach remains firmly anchored in the ethnographic method and its intimate connection with local case studies.

Ten years ago it would have been difficult to foresee the popularity that the word moral was to gain in anthropology, maybe as an echo to the terms in which public debates were cast in Western media, and perhaps due to anthropology reaching a maturity level that enabled the development of this new field. The edited book *Ethnographies of Moralities* (Howell 1997b) has become a landmark for a new generation of anthropological enquiries exploring values, morals and ethics while discovering the complexity of a subject that challenged the traditional anthropological methods.<sup>1</sup> Unlike new information technologies or transnational business, moralities are not new cultural phenomena and their long-term neglect by anthropologists is explained by James Laidlaw (2002) as being due to the Durkheimian influence. Emile Durkheim, whose socialist sympathies and strong moral stances are well known, considered morality as a floating mantle over society, pervasive in all of its aspects. The very fact of living together in communion was a sacred and a moral thing; thus morality was just another name for culture, for the very thing that kept humans together. The corollary was that the sociologist, by studying actions and trends of culture, was simultaneously studying values and morals and thus it was both unnecessary and impossible to extract them from their social context in order to make a separate, more abstract, object of study. However, the modernism which grew concomitantly with industrial Taylorism has adopted the method of dividing and extracting an object from the whole in order to better analyse it, and then placing it back. In contrast, Malinowski's organic model of society, in which every social aspect was related to all others to the point that one did not know where to start the analysis from, was far less inspiring to researchers.

This is why in this volume we propose to define an anthropology of moralities as a distinct field of enquiry within anthropology, and we argue for the refinement of research methods on morality as a necessary step in the development of anthropology. As the contributors

to the volume highlight in their chapters, moralities are entangled within social action and as such are difficult to pinpoint and analyse. For grasping the ways in which moralities are created and transmitted, or interpreted, negotiated and resisted, anthropologists have to struggle with several empirical difficulties, such as how to differentiate between a moral/immoral and a morally neutral fact, how to recognise the moral source that underpins a certain behaviour or how to interpret inconsistencies between statements of morality and observed deviant practices. The foundation of a field of study encourages researchers to pull together various methods, methodological approaches and theoretical tools available in anthropology, philosophy and sociology in order to achieve the challenge of describing what is not always spelt out, but often accepted as tacit or hidden knowledge. The first step in reaching this objective is confronting the main issues and difficulties that challenge the research on moralities: the unresolved universalism versus cultural relativism debate, the issue of freedom for ethical choice, the question of creativity (structural and situational) of moral values, the questions posed by changes in values within society and at the meeting point with other cultures, and the problem of collecting relevant data (what, how and why). A second step in defining the field is to enquire into the manner in which moral values are created and transmitted, by addressing themes such as the power of moral models, moral education, the creation of moral obligation and the role of emotions in moral discourse.

### **A Note on Terminology**

'Morality' (in English) designs a set of principles and judgements based on cultural concepts and beliefs by which humans determine whether given actions are right or wrong. Beidelman notes that the world moral derives from the latin *mos*, which defines a way of comporting oneself, a custom or a practice (1993: 2), and he asserts that morality is defined within social interactions. What is right and what is wrong are culturally situated and the terminology that deals with this division varies from one language to another.<sup>2</sup> But we can take as a methodological starting point for field research that observing what is accepted or rejected in social interaction leads the observer as close as possible to the moral values of a community.

Among three concurrent English terms for defining the field of our research, we have chosen 'morality' for its extended popular use in English – in comparison, the term 'ethics' is too abstract, the term 'values' is polythetic.<sup>3</sup> These three terms are certainly not synonymous

and they each emphasise different aspects of a common topic. 'Morality' often refers in common English language to evaluations and judgements that are obvious and unproblematic, while 'ethics' – 'the science of morals' according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary – refers to more codified and elaborated judgements. In academe 'morality' evokes the general discourse on what is good and has deterministic normative overtones; 'ethics' evokes the individual choice of virtues and way of living. (Quite typically, a Durkheimian approach would focus on moralities, a Weberian approach on ethics, as the titles of these authors' main works show.) In this volume our choice of the term 'morality' to define the field does not have this academic connotation. Operating a choice based on the holist/individualist dichotomy at this early stage would have meant presupposing how morality/ethics/moral values are experienced in various cultures – as determined by society or by an individual choice – while we need first to question the relevance of 'freedom' and 'choice' and even of the existence of a society/individual dichotomy in every cultural context.

We wish to avoid introducing here a pure terminological divide that might be artificially created by differing receptivity to the English language of individual anthropologists (whose mother tongue may not necessarily be English). Thus, while we certainly nuance the use of these three terms in our studies, we consider the research on ethics, moral values and moralities as belonging to the same field, which we have labelled the anthropology of moralities, in order to echo the most widespread term used in anthropology today.

When referring to values, 'norms' is the complementary term that comes to our minds. Indeed, values lead to the elaboration of social norms and norms in return shape values. But they are two separate categories, at least for analytical purposes. Norms are rules that are socially enforced and sanctioned; they are 'implemented' values. This 'implementation' makes them amenable to resistance in the name of new or different values. The existence of a norm is not the proof of the existence and endorsement of the value that has initially generated it; an action that is thus 'formatted' might be in dissonance with the actor's values: there is no need for values if there are enough whips. Thus, the study of norms by legal anthropologists and the study of beliefs by anthropologists of religion are constant sources of methodological inspiration and information for the anthropologist who studies values.

Though this is beyond the question of terminology, we would like to mention here that this volume is not primarily concerned with the ethics of the anthropologist. However this concern remains present, which is inevitable when the anthropologist encounters the ethics of

others and chooses the way in which to engage with it and later write about it.

## **Universalism versus Cultural Relativism**

How can we study the Other's morality without resorting to our own normative judgements? How can we account for intercultural clashes of values and the radical cultural changes that may result? The plurality of moralities has not received an explicit and focused attention until recently, when accelerated globalisation forced different value systems into a more or less successful dialogue, for instance around the issue of human rights. The part played by anthropologists in these societal debates has been modest.<sup>4</sup>

The scientific debate between supporters of universalism and supporters of cultural relativism is much older, and in the 1960s–1970s it was crystallised in a dialogue between philosophers and anthropologists over the question of rationality (Wilson 1970; Hollis and Lukes 1982; Geertz 1984). Universalism presupposes the existence of a common core of rationality/morality from which diversity emerges in response to different natural contexts and as a result of different historical developments. This assumption provides an easy methodological support for the anthropologist, who has the comfort of exploring differences through a rational lens (or measuring them against the same basic moral standard), which is supposed to be to some degree universal. Cultural relativism asserts that what we hold to be true/good in one culture can be held to be false/wrong in another culture without any possibility of deciding whether one or the other culture is mistaken in asserting it: each culture has its own rationality. In its strong form, cultural relativism implies that the rationality/morality can only be judged from within a culture and through its own criteria, thus rendering cross-cultural comparison impossible. In its weak form of 'methodological relativism', cultural relativism avoids ethnocentrism by recommending a 'thick description' of beliefs or values that would enable them to appear meaningful in their cultural context: the other is rational (or moral), but he sees the world differently and understands it differently.

Presented under the heading of 'rationality', questions asked within the universalism versus cultural relativism debate were mostly prompted by moral concerns.<sup>5</sup> Why, among the Dayak of Borneo, did a man have to offer the head of his enemy as a gift of marriage? Why did women undergo excision in several African societies, going through suffering towards a sexual life without pleasure? How to account for this suffering, which hurts our Western sensitivity, while preserving the

reasons for ancestral customs? Under the threat of being accused of ethnocentrism, several interpretations emerged trying to delicately save the 'other' from the accusations of savagery, infantilism (Frazer, Taylor) or illogical thought (Levy-Bruhl 1951[1911]). The 'intellectualists' who believed in the universality of reason looked for common points between 'us' and 'them' that would diminish the contrast; the intellectualists who believed in the particularity of each culture comprehensively described each phenomenon so as to show its 'rationality in context'. Symbolists (such as Beattie 1964) considered that some actions that seemed irrational were purely metaphorical: thus the Hopi's dance for bringing the rain was pure poetry. Fideists (a position expressed by Wittgenstein in his criticism of Frazer's *Golden Bough*) presented controversial phenomena as being sacred, mystically beautiful, thus bound to stay out of the reach of scientific judgement.

While many arguments could be brought for and against the basic assumptions of both cultural relativism and universalism, today anthropologists tend to ignore the question altogether and even to switch unintentionally from one position to the other under the influence of the events observed. As long as they adopt an 'intellectualist' position, which requires the comprehensive description of a phenomenon within its cultural context, their readers can work around the universalist or relativist assumptions of the author to reach their own conclusions. The fideist position will retain our attention for a little longer, as it is understandably the position we oppose, by arguing for an anthropology of the moral world and by not surrendering the field of moral descriptions to the philosopher. As an example, let us consider the fideist position of Richard Shweder (1991) when he recounts how the Roop Kanwar case divided the Indian public in the late 1980s. In 1987 in the Sikar district in Rajasthan, an eighteen-year-old educated Rajput woman, Roop Kanwar, immolated herself with the corpse of her dead husband in front of a large audience, thus practising the traditional suttee. The act was considered one of unspeakable beauty and sacredness by the traditionalists, and the place where she immolated herself became a place of pilgrimage. On the contrary, Indian modernist opponents described it as a narrow-minded archaic obedience and asserted that her relatives and the public supporters of suttee had pushed the young woman to death.<sup>6</sup> Who was right and who was wrong? Was the belief which inspired this woman, her belief in love and reincarnation, irrational? Was this really her personal belief? Were the 'modern' thinkers in India entitled to judge a time-honoured tradition and maybe even a personal choice to fulfil a strong belief? Faced with these strikingly different attitudes, Shweder, who declares his admiration for the woman's self-abnegation, decides

that her action could not be judged. 'For which world or counterworld should we speak? For they are different and inconsistently so.' (Schweder 1991) The only respectful attitude is silence. While we can accept that the artist surrenders in front of the 'beauty' of the gesture and the moral philosopher takes on judging its moral value, the social scientist has to take on a more positivistic position. Confronted with an event that has triggered a debate cast in terms of right and wrong in the society observed, the anthropologist has to confront facts and discourses, search for reasons behind the actors' positions (be they 'traditional' or 'modern' and 'Westernised'), measure their engagement in the debate and see how opinions are polarised within society. He cannot surrender to his own emotional and/or moral position, but has to account for the complexity of a phenomenon that reveals which beliefs, values and meanings underpin action in another society.

## **Methodological Choices 1: the Question of Freedom**

In the Roop Kanwar case the notion of agency and freedom of choice is central to the debate, for the case divided Indian society into those who considered the woman a victim of her family's traditional beliefs and those who considered her the artisan of her own fate (and compared it to the suicides for love in the Western world). In judging this case, both holist and individualist positions were adopted by members of Indian society, whom we have been accustomed to think of as forming a holist society (Dumont 1985). In his Malinowski Memorial Lecture of 2001, James Laidlaw (2002) has argued for an anthropology of ethics and freedom by showing that we cannot pursue the study of morality and ethics without first analysing the freedom of the individual to choose or not his way of life in a given society (Laidlaw 2002). Freedom is not quantifiable. If absolute freedom is the absence of all constraints, then absolute freedom is already a chimera: physical constraints limit our freedom to fly, to disappear and reappear, etc. Symmetrically, total lack of freedom is unimaginable as well; the individual could be seen as retaining, even under the strongest constraints, a certain degree of freedom to think, hope or breathe. Between these two extremes, where does the individual stand with respect to collective constraints – be they laws or just the collective imaginary? For instance, how much freedom did individuals living in a totalitarian society have? The question was poignantly asked of intellectuals of the ex-Soviet bloc, who were accused of having collaborated with the regime despite their post-1989 claims that they did not approve of its abuses. The existence of a few dissidents brings testimony against the claim that there was no choice



endorsing individual moral positions (opposed to that of the regime). Nonetheless, as Yurchak (1997) asserts in the case of the USSR, these dissidents were considered abnormal, somehow outside society – an outsidership which, in a Durkheimian sense, could also mean immorality.

For Laidlaw (2002), Emile Durkheim's wish to found a science of 'moral facts' based on empirical research (as opposed to Kant's science of the moral based on the intellectual speculation of 'practical reason') has been handicapped by his assimilation of the 'collective' with the 'good' (Durkheim 1953[1906]). Society is for Durkheim a moral being qualitatively different from each individual and represents the source of goodness – the individual recognises this superiority and respects societal norms and values, if the latter are coherent and if society manages to integrate most of its members. Laidlaw challenges this simple deterministic Durkheimian relation between society and the individual, in which society dictates the best possible norms and the individual respects them by conviction. He invokes Nietzsche's remark that morality is unnatural to the human being, as it frustrates basic desires: hunger, thirst, sexual appetite. Thus the individual is often exposed to a dilemma about following societal norms or surrendering to his own desires, and his action depends as much on his reasoning as on the freedom he enjoys for reasoning and acting according to it. (The individual could also be in a straightforward opposition to societal norms and values, in pursuit of his own moral model or to satisfy his basic desires.)

This potential individual conflict opens up a whole sphere of investigation for the anthropologist. Its analysis could show how deeply society's values are enshrined within the individual. It could show how individuals with different social positions and from different societies have their own ways of defining their personal values, working through societal constraints, and adopt their own ways of translating beliefs and personal values into action. It could show how the harmonisation of values between individuals takes place, by the confrontation with the others' solutions to moral dilemmas, and how this evolves towards a collective elaboration of values and norms. If this methodological individualism presupposes a certain degree of freedom of choice, if we consider that absolute lack of freedom has no more reality than absolute freedom, it is an assumption that could be easily granted. Being methodological, this individualism does not presuppose the existence of an individualist society; it only requires starting from the individual level in order to understand behaviour. Johan Rasanayagam's chapter in this volume describes the moral reasoning leading an Uzbek intellectual to choose his way of life according to a selection and mixture of several

moral models he consciously examines; Helle Rydstrom's chapter shows how North Vietnamese female teenagers choose how to behave according to the strong ideological moral models present in their society. Obviously, the two categories of individuals did not enjoy the same freedom of choice, due to their differences in age, education, gender and social position; they cannot be agents of their own lives to the same degree. However taking into account their ways of thinking, and in parallel their actions, rather than simply interpreting the ideological moral frame of the countries in which they live, even if this context has obviously shaped their 'personal' convictions, allows the anthropologist to capture the way in which (societal) values are actually embodied.

This methodological choice is clearly reflected in the biographical method proposed by Jarrett Zigon in this volume. Calling his method 'autobiographical' could be considered an improper term, given the dialogic character of the encounter with the anthropologist who triggers and catalyses the biographical narration, being perceived as an audience or even as an external judge. Zigon's chapter is an illustration of the richness of ethical dilemmas, multiple exposures to moral models and influences, strenuous rereading of one's life and reinterpretation of one's actions during lifetime as revealed in a dialogue around the life course of a Russian adult. Accounting for this richness is an important testimony of respect towards the Other and the Other's culture, as his life unfolds in a dimension proper to the social and historical particularities of this culture.

This method emphasises the importance of personal experience in shaping individual values. Indeed, the way in which different 'models' of moral life and public virtues are adopted or rejected by the individual depends on his life experience, with its lived moral dilemmas and personal encounters. The biographical account delivered by the individual feeds in simultaneously at multiple levels of interrogation. First, the way in which the individual presents himself in front of the 'public' (internal or external to his culture) informs us about the real and imagined constraints that the existence of a witnessing public places on individual discourse. The individual reinterprets his past choices and actions so that they can be accepted by the society in which he lives or by the anthropologist to whom he talks (for satisfying this last's expectations, he appeals to his imagination of the Other). Secondly, the way in which the individual presents his past actions reflects his views of a meaningful life. These views are a cultural as much as an individual product and the interplay between the two is not easy to disentangle. Thirdly, the biographical account is also – at times – a true account of the moral choices faced by the individual during his life, but seen through the prism of his present-day values. What can be daunting in the case of

biographical narrations is that these multiple levels they inform are not easily separable, which leads us to wonder whether the values phrased are an exercise in rhetoric, a pledge towards society's values or truly endorsed beliefs; a true account of past actions, choices and constraint or a *post facto* justification in line with individual or social expectations. This is why only a parallel and open dialogical confrontation with observed individual actions during social interactions could inform us about the actual values an individual nourishes at the moment of the collection of the autobiographical account.<sup>7</sup>

## **Methodological Choices 2: the Creativity of Social Interactions**

Does methodological individualism with its emphasis on freedom and choice and its implicit presupposition of a clear-cut society/individual dichotomy suit the ethnography of non-individualist societies? Analyses of personhood in non-Western societies have generated a typology that divides societies into three types: individualist, holist and relationist. Clifford Geertz's study of the Balinese and Moroccan societies (1985), Louis Dumont (1985) or Richard Shweder's study of the Indian (1991) and M. Leenhardt's study of the Melanesian society (1947) are just a few classic examples of anthropologists whose ethnographies have led to the establishment of this typology. The lack of awareness of the dichotomy individual/society encountered in holist and relationist societies might be incompatible with the neat and clear dialogue based on negotiation, adoption or resistance between individual and society sketched above. Indeed, if moral values were spontaneously and collectively created in a situated context by members of a community, how could we differentiate between individual and collective values? And should we differentiate them, even given the methodological purpose of describing their 'negotiation'? The individual can be said to act according to his own interpretation/exegesis of social values only if these values are somehow distant from him, have been elaborated prior to his arrival. If these values were constantly elaborated 'with him' and 'for him', his relation to them could hardly be described in terms of negotiation, resistance or acceptance.

In their quest for the origin of moral values, cognitive scientists have paid attention to the results of behavioural economists' experiments on cooperation/collaboration. The experiments provoke situated negotiations of values that show the role of creativity and spontaneity and the importance of context for the establishment of a cooperation

that anthropologists often take for granted. Cooperation finally succeeds and is for us the norm, meaning conformity, but at the price of confrontations of contradictory views, negotiations, exchanges. In the course of these complex social interactions, individuals adapt, change their minds, get influenced, assert, transform and get transformed by the others. Individuals are not the blunt supporters of moral principles that could enter in harmony or in contradiction with their 'society'.

'Social life is both rewarding and constricting, our benefits secured at the price of accepting, even embracing limitations and some pain and frustration. These rewards and punishments are epitomised by choices, and in our concomitant expectations that others will make similar choices. These choices of action in turn derive from others, from judgments about what the world is and should be.' (Beidelman 1993: 2)

How could anthropologists ethnographically explore this complex interplay of subjectivities that leads to what we term 'morality' in a given cultural context?

The method of moral dilemma elicitation proposed by Thomas Widlok in this volume focuses on the very moment when moral judgement is elaborated. The method consists in proposing several scenarios of moral (and morally neutral) dilemmas and collecting visual and audio material that documents the ways in which the individuals deal with a potential dilemma. Thomas Widlok applies it to the Bushmen of southern Africa, but its universalism goes far beyond the cultural particularities of Bushmen. Inspired by the field methods elaborated in Max Planck Institute to study Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, the method of moral dilemma elicitation gets round the universalist/relativist debate (a Western moral dilemma might or might not belong to the moral realm of another society according to the holders of one position or the other) by opening the way to the thick description of the moral elicitation. Thus it overcomes a frequent bias (essentially a translation bias) in the study of morality, which is that of presupposing what is subjected to a right/wrong judgement in another society and thus what falls into the moral realm (on the centrality of this question, see also Baumard and Sperber 2007: 6).

The method overcomes another bias in the study of morality, which is that of limiting the field of the moral to explicit moral statements and moral justifications, the so-called 'encoded morality'. While Zigon's method allows us to dig into the outspoken personal interpretations of the moral frames available in one society, Widlok's method allows the capturing of personal unspoken and unconscious moral values, the

“spontaneous ethical demands”. Widlok refers to Løgstrup’s theory of ‘ethical demand’ (1997), which deals with universal aspects of the human condition and human interactions. ‘Ethical demands’ are silent demands, such as the demand placed on another individual through some basic interactions: asking a question, greeting, turning towards another individual. The person initiating this interaction trusts that he will get a response; the contrary will be a denial of his humanity. The ethical demands of an individual, the spoken as well as the unspoken, should be recognised as his moral values. By triggering spontaneous responses to a (morally problematic) scenario, the method of dilemma elicitation helps to reveal those ethical demands (ethical expectations) that would remain unspoken in the case of a typical post facto interview focused on a morally problematic act.

The analysis based on a corpus of data on dilemma elicitation has another important strength. As the site of the debate around a moral (or morally neutral) issue is the public space and not the private one-to-one dialogue between the anthropologist and the member of another society, we witness in fact an elaboration of collective values, the very elaboration and sharing of community norms. The way in which this is realised informs us about the power relations in a community, the modalities of dialogue, the forms of verbalised reasoning and the response to this reasoning by the audience. It brings us to the core of what it means to share a common value or to apply a certain value to a particular case (the scenario is always phrased in particularistic and not generalising terms).

This method has been designed for cross-cultural comparison and has the advantages of an experimental method – it gives the advantage of triggering and leading to a coherent corpus of data that can be used for comparison. In addition, it has enough flexibility to be adapted to different societies and different research interests, by adjusting translations and scenarios. The information obtained through audio and video recording captures the richness and creativity of moral reasoning ‘in action’.

## **Clashes and Changes of Moral Frames**

If the two methods detailed above allowed for a coherent record of moral stances and reasoning, they would remain far from the real actions of an individual if not complemented by the ethnographic observation of contextualised real behaviour. As such, these methods correspond to a set of provoked and punctual instances of moral reasoning, shaped by individuals’ life experiences, the moral frames

existing in the community and the challenge posed by the particular context of enunciation. But the analysis of moral values underpinning observed behaviour is more difficult, as the anthropologist can not easily determine (nor can the actor accurately express) what are the moral frames within which the actor is evaluating a situation and acting according to this evaluation. This issue is more pronounced at places and times of conflict between several moral frames or of change in moral frames (where the change is often, but not exclusively, the result of a confrontation between several existing moral frames). The chapters by Joel Robbins and Signe Howell invite us to understand moral frames during such encounters. At the same time, these places and times offer more insight into the moral phenomena, the saliency of the 'moral' being enhanced by the conflicting nature of the encounter.

Joel Robbins's account portrays the transformation of moral values following the Christianisation of the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea and shows how the moral system is struck by the radicalism and the complexity of a process that forces (in the long run) the passage from a traditional relationist type of society to a Christian individualistic society. To better understand such a profound change, Robbins elaborates a theory of values that is inspired by Dumont's structuralism but also adopts Weber's awareness of change and conflicts. Louis Dumont's theory of values establishes a hierarchy of values starting from a paramount value that dictates and subsumes 'lesser' values, each of which corresponds to a different domain of social life. While Dumont insists on the rational coherence of values in every domain – a coherence needed to allow non-conflicting actions to take place – Max Weber insists on the insurmountable conflicts existing between different value spheres (1949); these conflicts are typically the 'bread and butter' of the Western moral philosopher. This theoretical frame allows Robbins to analyse the whole chain of conflicts triggered by the Christianisation of the Urapmin. These are dramatic conflicts because they leave the Urapmin with the feeling of being in a permanent situation of sin: unable to act according to their newly found Christian values due to traditional cultural commitments towards another and discordant set of values.

Robbins observes both the discourses (moral enunciations and moral justifications) and practices, which allows him to understand the painful dissonance existing between the two. If practices dictated by the traditional culture were not taken into account, this dissonance would go unobserved and other central practices of the Urapmin (millenarianism, purification trance dances) would not be explained.

The Urapmin's new context is the result of increased globalisation. Globalisation, remarks Signe Howell in her chapter on transnational

adoption, has simultaneously produced a need for common values and provoked conflicts of values. The process of local values readjusting in order to meet the requirements of dialogue between cultures, indispensable in global phenomena such as transnational adoption, is slow and is often preceded by the imposition of norms (in the form of governmental laws boosted by international agreements). In the field of childhood (as in many others), the imposed laws are Western laws that follow the evolution of Western values (for instance, the increased emphasis on the 'psy' factor in relation to personhood and citizenship). Signe Howell's chapter shows the way in which several countries, India, Ethiopia, China and Romania, respond to the Western demand for recognition of the special needs of the child. By doing this, she reveals the unequal balance of power between the Western tradition and the others, which depends on each country's availability and need for a dialogue with the West. Howell's chapter also reveals the interplay between norms and values at several levels: international agencies, local governments, Western and local families. The chapter portrays the way in which Western values are reflected in international laws, which lead in turn to local (governments') laws, which will probably end up changing local values – all transformations for the sake of international exchange and dialogue. In an increasingly global world, this mechanism, which is more the result of a certain balance of power rather than a genuine dialogue between different value systems, is frequently reproduced in different domains of social life. Social anthropologists' analyses of moral frames are expected to make an important contribution to understanding this transformation process.

In order to define the field of anthropology of moralities, we show in the first part of this volume the debates, questions and biases that shape the field and propose ways to face or overcome them. Concerning the concrete problems encountered when doing field research on moralities, we underline the difficulty of proceeding to the field with an underdetermined terminology – a consequence of the will to prevent the imposition of the observer's moral prejudices on the observed; the need to observe conflicting or deviant rather than harmonious phenomena – for, in the latter, moral reasoning is more salient; and the need to use methods that elicit moral stances rather than simply waiting for their occurrence – for circumventing the invisibility of the moral. In the second part of this volume, we define the field not by its specific problems and controversies, but by its specific themes: the transmission of moralities, moral obligation and moral responsibility, and the relation between morality and normativity more generally.

## Main Themes

The transmission of moral values is the first object of research on morality, in the same way in which socialisation/enculturation remains the first object of research for anthropology: for Geertz, anthropology is primarily concerned with the way in which an individual acquires his cultural specificity (1973). While the question of the origin of the 'moral' interests is addressed by evolutionary anthropologists, social anthropologists are more concerned with the way in which moral values pass from one generation to the other within the same culture, or are borrowed from other cultures in the context of encounters, influences and imposition of values by other cultures. In other words, Geertz is more concerned with the subjectivisation and recreation of moral frames by the individual than with the origin of moral frames at the society level.

This is Johan Rasanayagam's approach to individual morality in this volume. He emphasises the way in which the individual evaluates, selects, adopts or rejects the moral frames available in society instead of simply surrendering to them. Asserting that the individual simply obeys or conforms to the moral frame enforced by the state would have been an easy temptation when referring to contemporary Uzbekistan under the dictatorship of Islam Karimov. But the long-term field observation of the discourses and practices of an experienced *mahalla* leader, Abdumajid-aka, showed how the individual recreates the moral frame of what a virtuous society should be from his own life experience, and acts accordingly. His definition of a moral person and of a moral community is inspired not only by traditional Uzbek values, imposed by Islam Karimov's ideology, but also by socialist values and individualist capitalist values. Abdumajid-aka's position as a leader of the local community entails his ideas of a virtuous society getting translated into local practices, influencing *mahalla* inhabitants' values and moving them away from the moral values imposed by the state. Thus Rasanayagam shows how a (locally influential) elaboration and recreation of values by the individual could spread among community members and succeed in subverting state-imposed ideologies and their influence on ordinary people.

If the *mahalla* leader's freedom of thought allows him to elaborate his own moral model of a virtuous life, the same cannot be so easily asserted about the female teenagers of rural Northern Vietnam observed by Helle Rydstrøm. The social context in Northern Vietnam is comparable to that of Uzbekistan, being characterised by a similar enforcement of moral values during dictatorship and by a similar appeal to traditional (but not overtly religious) values in a socialist/post-



socialist context. What make female teenagers more vulnerable to the state ideology regarding sexuality (the field tackled by Helle Rydstrom) are their gender, age and social position, which traditionally place them also in a situation of obedience towards their families. Girls' discourses betray a weak endorsement of traditional (and state) values but a strong will to behave as if these values were really endorsed, which proves that they do not have the social position that would allow the individual to assert a different view on the matter. Behaving as if these values were endorsed equates the girls with 'good' persons, while a deviant behaviour would mean they are 'bad' persons. The values they really hold appear less important in this context – their self-descriptions point to the importance of their image to be perceived as sensitive persons in relation to their bodies, not their inner beliefs. But in the northern Vietnamese case, as in the Uzbek case, it is not state ideology that dictates the 'good' (i.e. 'conforming') behaviour of the girls, but their concern about not hurting the feelings of their parents and making them lose face in the community.

Rydstrom contributes with empirical evidence to Nietzsche's earlier-mentioned stance that morality is not natural to the human being. In the field of sexuality, the individual could be torn between moral models and bodily desires. While girls fear that inappropriate sexual behaviour would reflect on them and their families as being 'bad' and even declare their conviction that engaging in premarital sexual relations is not appropriate, they nonetheless happen to become pregnant and thus prejudice their image and their life prospects. In an 'all cultural' model, their behaviour would be considered to be the result of the confrontation between several moral models in which the model 'love before everything' prevails. This model does not seem to be available to Northern Vietnamese girls (no more than the model of protest against communities' values); thus, by freely engaging in sexual behaviour, they violate the models to which they adhere. The 'all cultural' model of explaining moral decisions fails and 'nature' overcomes (Elster 1999, Pharo 2004). The analysis of discourses and practices in fields such as sexuality and addiction forces us to take the bodily dimension into account.

Another bodily dimension that has a role in the successful transmission of moral values is constituted by emotions – complex reactions triggered by an external event that have physiological, neurophysiological, cognitive and motivational aspects. The strength of these reactions and their capacity to induce behavioural change make them a favourite tool in the discursive transmission of moral values. A father might appeal to his son's emotions in order to convince him of the rightfulness or wrongness of his actions. A dictator might use fear

to induce certain beliefs. A painter may use his art to deliver a certain message through the emotional solicitation of his viewers.

Patrice Ladwig's case study of the emotional power of the Vessantara-Jataka recitation shows how emotions can be used in a much less didactic way, but with more subtly powerful effects. The story and performance of the Vessantara-Jataka by Lao Buddhist monks testify to certain aesthetic conceptions of sermon making and performances of narratives. Listening to these sermons is another method for lay people to gain merit, wisdom and virtue. The excessive character of the story could be thought to transmit, as in Jesus Christ's story, a hyperbolic model of behaviour. Ladwig's examination of the performance of the Vessantara-Jataka story, which complements the simple consideration of the story's content, leads him to hypothesise that what is actually transmitted in the context of the performance is not a moral model but an ethical ambivalence. This ethical ambivalence, which is a state of painfully awoken moral feelings, forces lay people into moral reasoning and not simply obedience to moral precepts, and, as such, its efficiency is increased. Vessantara's behaviour as recounted in the story provokes awe and admiration and leaves the listeners mystified, unsure about which path to follow, but deeply concerned about what counts as virtuous and what does not.

Karen Sykes's contribution to this volume shows how the transmission of moral values is not unidirectional, but goes along a complex bidirectional path from the keepers of moral virtues to their followers. Her account of the means by which New Irelanders induce moral obligation to the Papua New Guinea government is an example of collective action that uses the invocation of the moral to persuade the government to take upon itself the responsibility of providing social services for Bougainvillean children. They do so by engaging themselves in the virtuous but economically difficult task of adopting Bougainvillean children in order to give them access to social services. The reasoning behind adoption cannot be reduced to an act of persuasion of the Papua New Guinea government and in that respect Karen Sykes's chapter is a clear example of the extended case method and situational analysis in the Manchester tradition. Her chapter fully reveals the complexity of a trade-off, which is played out in moral discursive terms and is actually accompanied by moral actions.

In the last chapter of this volume, Mark Goodale asserts his belief that a different anthropological orientation for the normative can be pursued that combines the peculiar knowledge produced by the ethnographic encounter with normative practices and with knowledge that transcends the empirical data. These two dimensions, which he subsumes under the term 'ethical practice', are mutually and

inseparably constitutive: a mere ethnographic understanding of normative practices is necessary but not sufficient, while the theorisation of normativity in such a way as not to be grounded in actual normative practices is merely an intellectual game. His illustration of the conversion of Bolivian moral imagination into concrete political action is the perfect example of the necessary intertwining of facts and theory for indigenous people. By opening up the reflection towards the impact of the moral imagination, Goodale touches on a sensitive point in anthropology: the need to reform the discipline in the context of globalisation of theories and ideas of the 'social' across the world.

## Conclusion

Observing, describing and assessing values cross-culturally have given rise to strong methodological concerns, to which the anthropologists contributing to the present volume are giving voice. They are searching for ways in which to objectively identify and describe moral values, to analyse the compliance between discourses on values and practices and to explain the likely inconsistencies between discourse and practice. Contributors to this volume advance new ways of enquiring into the social construction of vices and virtues, the moral construction of sexuality, moral models and public rhetoric, local custom and transnational legislation. Their analyses are based on long-term field research in societies spreading from Europe to Melanesia and from South-east Asia to South America. Moreover, their analyses reflect a thorough engagement with the theoretical foundations of anthropology.

Is legislation the codification of morality? Is radical moral change possible? Is morality always a plural code of conduct? While addressing such questions with evidence provided by diverse and rich ethnography, the contributors to the volume elaborate the concept of moralities, employ new tools of investigation and propose solutions to issues and challenges that we hope will guide future research on the topic.

## Notes

1. This edited volume has gradually replaced the only older explicit anthropological reference to the field of morality, Edel and Edel's *Anthropology and Ethics* (1968[1959]).
2. The fact that in Mongol there is no term that could be translated by 'morality' does not prevent Humphrey from identifying in Mongolian culture the field of moral

discourses by looking at 'the evaluation of conduct in relation to esteemed or despised human qualities' (1997: 25).

3. A word that has several meanings is polythetic. Each pair, but not all meanings, has something in common: if meanings A and B are close, and meanings B and C are close, it is not necessarily true that A and C are close too. We can follow the analysis and difficulties encountered with a polythetic word in *Belief, Language and Experience* (Needham, 1972), where the author explores the various meanings of the word 'belief' and decides that, in order to understand various forms of 'belief', one has to content oneself with the different phenomena introduced by the utterance 'I believe (that/in etc.)'.
4. Hauschild (2005) analyses how the American Anthropological Association was at first heavily engaged in the elaboration of the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1946 and later abandoned this endeavour as not falling into their area of expertise – the rights defended by the declaration being individual and not collective/cultural.
5. In the philosophical/anthropological debate, rationality was intentionally discussed as much as possible off the field of *Homo economicus*, which had been amply investigated by economists and sociologists.
6. The case triggered the adoption by the central government of the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act in 1987 and the prosecution of a dozen people, finally acquitted in 2004. The elaboration of a new legal act and the pursuit of suspects in court shows how moral values and social norms determine each other in society..
7. As Russia is a country that has undergone radical social and cultural changes in recent years, the historical moment when the interview was collected should also be taken into account.