

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white spiral design on the left side of a dark blue header bar.

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Ethics, Value, and Interaction: Bridging Natural and Social Histories in a Semiotic Framework

Review by Joseph J.Z. Weiss

Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories

by Webb Keane

Princeton University Press, 2015

Webb Keane opens *Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories* with a fundamental and familiar dilemma for those concerned with the origins of ethical impulses, systems, and worlds: Is a sense of ethics, or, as Keane frames it, “the propensity for taking an ethical stance” (Keane 2015:3) an innate element of human nature? Or do ethical systems arrive from without, mandated, for instance, from divine laws, the tenants of universalist reason, or already-extant cultural orders that constitute the individual, ethical subject? Glossing these two positions as falling broadly within the traditions of “natural or social history,” Keane suggests it is a mistake to insist that these two positions are inherently “incompatible and that we must choose between them.” Instead, even though “the differences matter,” Keane writes, “we are all talking about the same world” (3).

It is this shared analytical world that Keane sets out to specify in *Ethical Life* by means of a synthetic review of approaches to ethics and morality from both natural and social historical perspectives. His goals are two-fold. The first is to offer a “satisfactory account of ethics,” by bringing together “key findings from psychology, the ethnography of everyday social life, and social histories of ethical reform” (5). In bringing together these different approaches from natural and social history, in turn, Keane aims to demonstrate that these differing, sometimes contentious fields can be brought together. Our analyses are stronger, Keane asserts, when scholars are persuaded to “climb out of their respective silos and look around” (5). Ethics for Keane, then, is both object of and model for a particular kind of interdisciplinary analysis.

In order to make a synthesis of this breadth of work, Keane requires a definition of ethics that is at once general enough so as not to appear already pre-determined by the positions of one camp or the other, but still specified to a point that it is recognizable as a definition of ethical life as such. While his initial definition of ethical life - “those aspects of people’s actions, as well as their senses of themselves and of other people (and sometimes entities such as gods and animals), that are oriented with reference to values and ends that are not in turn defined as a means to some further ends” (4) – might suggest the text will concern itself with (or tie itself into heuristic knots over) the task of distinguishing categories of action, Keane quickly makes it clear that he is not concerned with developing his own proscriptive typologies. The social and psychological resources that humans draw on in order to label a particular action or person in an “ethical” manner, as good or evil, viable or vile, Keane reiterates throughout the text, are heterogeneous (25-26), and it would be impossible to arrive at a normative definition of ethics that could extend to all the different situations in which different human communities understand themselves to be engaged in ethical life. Instead, Keane’s key premise is that “humans are the kind of creatures that are prone to evaluate themselves, others, and their circumstances” (6). That tendency towards evaluation, rather than any particular product of said evaluations, is at the heart of how Keane understands “ethics.” In evaluating “how one should live and what kind of person one should be,” we are engaging with “ethics,” even though the content and context of such evaluations can vary extremely widely (20).

In making these evaluations, Keane further argues, we draw on “ethical affordances,” all those “aspects of people’s experiences and perceptions that they might draw on in the process of making ethical evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not” (27). Affordances operate at different scales and can be of entirely diverse orders, from evolutionary propensities to moral dogmas. This concept of an “ethical affordance” is critical to the text, as it represents the analytical means through which Keane can bridge perspectives from natural and social histories. Effectively, any field of study concerned with human cognitive and/or social life can be understood as demonstrating the existence, and often detailing the operation, of particular varieties of ethical affordances. At the same time, Keane’s argument pushes back against the notion that any of these disciplines could, in and of themselves, provide a comprehensive account of ethical behavior, as no single discipline could conceivably sketch out the entire field of possible ethical affordances.

This does not mean, however, that Keane’s text gives equal priority to every different discipline it

discusses. Keane is quite clear that, whatever ethical affordances go into a given moment of ethical evaluation, what makes such moments take on significance in the world is that they take place in the context of social interaction. “For social interactions are the natural home of justifications, excuses, accusations, reasons, praise, blame, and all the other ways in which ethics come to be made explicit” (26). Social interaction, for Keane, is the focal point around which every scale of ethical affordance can converge, including “both those psychological processes that work beneath people’s normal awareness and the historical ones that may range beyond it” (26). His text is structured accordingly. Only a single full chapter, albeit a long one, is given to perspectives from natural histories, largely studies in developmental psychology, while three chapters in the middle of the text are devoted to elaborating how ethical evaluation operates through social interaction, and a further three in demonstrating how such evaluations can “scale up” through a process of presupposition and entailment into broader and seemingly objective moral orders. The social, in short, outweighs the natural here, a fact which could potentially discourage readers with natural science backgrounds.

This would be a pity, however, as Keane’s attempts to integrate the findings of evolutionary biology and developmental psychology into a social interaction-oriented perspective are compelling. In said chapter concerned with natural history (39-73), Keane explores childhood acquisition of the capacity to evaluate actions and people and, more fundamentally, of the sense of both of their own selfhood and of the existence of distinct others upon which all such evaluation relies. Keane is careful to take this research seriously, avoiding straw-man accusations of “biological determinism” or other means of delegitimizing the premises upon which these studies are founded, but he is also emphatic on two points: First, that childhood development is a social process, with each developmental “step” requiring extensive participation from children and their communicative partners; and, second, that the various tendencies, trends and propensities that these studies detail are only made legible as ethical when they are brought into interactional contexts and thereby reflected upon and responded to as particular kinds of “ethical” behavior (71-72). Ethics, in other words, is social all the way down - both in the childhood acquisition of the basic pre-conditions for ethical impulses and their actualization as ethical in social interaction - but the findings of natural science play a critical role in understanding these processes and the particular affordances that are generated through basic elements of human biology and psychology.

The next three chapters concern themselves directly with the dynamics of social interaction, representing both the literal and figurative center of Keane’s argument. “People’s self-understanding as

ethical beings,” Keane writes, “is most often instigated by the very dynamics of interaction” (78). By “dynamics of interaction,” Keane does not simply mean explicit statements to others, nor even ideas and feelings about which we are fully conscious. Those moments in which we are aware of “being ethical” are emergent, for Keane, out of a much broader and more complex system of signs, verbal and non-verbal, through which people make sense of their interactions with each other and, indeed, of the people with whom they are interacting. Keane: “People are not exactly mind-readers; rather, they are sign readers” (83).

Keane is on familiar territory here, demonstrating the dynamics of interaction through readings that intertwine his own ethnographic research as a semiotic anthropologist (e.g. Keane 1997; 2003) with a strong review of contemporary and seminal studies in cultural and linguistic anthropology (e.g. Bourgois 2003; Carr 2011; Hill 1995; Hirschkind 2006), philosophy of language (e.g. Bakhtin 1981) and sociology (e.g. Goffman 1959; 1963; 1967). None of this material represents newly published research, nor is Keane challenging the basic premises of most of these studies. What is most productive in Keane’s engagement with these texts, rather, is the way in which he is able to read new unities into their disparate data-sets, demonstrating over and over again how acts and processes of evaluation, conscious and unconscious, saturate human interactions across otherwise dramatically different cultural worlds, and how deeply necessary such evaluations are for participants in order to feel that they are participating in coherent and essentially comprehensible social worlds. Keane’s lengthy engagement with Goffman is particularly compelling in this regard, as Keane highlights the extent to which Goffman’s classic theory of “facework,” the ways in which individuals perform (and are expected to perform) their social roles for real and imagined audiences, is grounded in the notion of a fundamentally vulnerable self. Whether we are attempting to perform the role of “doctor,” “scholar,” “parent,” or “anthropologist,” we are always subject to the evaluation of others as to whether or not we truly are what we claim to be, and such role performances can fail for reasons as seemingly minor as body language or lexical choices, a wrong gesture here or a poorly chosen word there (Keane 2015:97).

Any of these moments of evaluation could serve as an ethical affordance, in Keane’s sense. Equally importantly, when such evaluations are actualized interactionally, e.g., when an accusation is made that someone is “faking” a particular social role, a set of different impulses, instincts, suppositions, claims and responses are woven together into an explicitly ethical claim, a judgment on how a person should live or the kind of person they should be. Note how deeply embedded such judgments must be within

larger social and cultural orders. To accuse someone of being a “fake” doctor, for instance, requires a set of already-present understandings of what it means to be “a” doctor, how such a person should present themselves and behave towards others. But it is equally important for Keane that we understand that such cultural orders are not unchanging unities that always already pre-determine the terms of a given interaction; quite the opposite, normative systems too are “vulnerable,” subject not just to reinscription in interaction, but also to shift, transformation, and reconfiguration. Echoes here of Sahlins’ classic characterization of culture as being made and remade through a dialectic of presupposition and entailment through social practice (Sahlins 1981), and of the equally crucial role that entailment and presupposition play in the constitution of orders of meaning in metapragmatics (cf: Silverstein 2003).

It is appropriate, then, that Keane’s final chapters focus on how large-scale, relatively coherent and identifiable orders of ethical norms and values - “morality systems,” as Keane refers to them - are made and remade in the crucible of social interaction. Drawing on examples of feminist consciousness raising projects, religious piety movements, and Marxist revolutionary ideologies, Keane demonstrates how large-scale and relatively stable ethical orders are constituted by and reconstituted within intersubjective interactions. Crucial here are processes of “objectification,” by which interactional elements are taken up as particular instances of broader categories (160). The dynamic nature of objectification is illustrated particularly effectively by Keane through the example of “feminist anger,” a category that emerged out of feminist conscious raising efforts in the mid-20th century. Feminist anger explicitly resignified a set of formerly unselfconscious habits and affects of daily life, associating them with “the feminist,” a new social subjectivity, and orienting them against “the patriarchy,” a newly articulated (though not new) structure of oppression (197). Feminist anger could not be made real as an ethical category without social interaction, as that is the space where feminist anger is both actually experienced and later reflected upon as having been experienced. At the same, it exists as a seemingly objective category that transcends any individual interaction, much like God’s laws or the will of the Party. But that seeming transcendence is itself an interactional achievement, the work of many social participants who constitute and are in turn constituted by the morality systems that form integral parts of their ethical worlds. Thus historical processes which may range beyond people’s awareness can, just like unconscious psychological processes, be understood as ethical affordances rather than fully deterministic forces.

It is worth emphasizing, in closing, just how successful Keane's text is in explicating this continuum of ethical affordances and demonstrating how they become recognizable precisely as "ethical" through the vicissitudes and complexities of intersubjective interaction. In this sense he decisively meets his first objective of presenting an interdisciplinary account of ethics that is far richer for its interdisciplinarity. Given that Keane anchors this interdisciplinarity in a firmly semiotic approach, however, one wonders to what extent there is a hierarchy of disciplinary explanatory power embedded within his particular approach to bridging the natural and social sciences. It is through social interaction, mediated by signs, that ethical affordances are made socially meaningful, "real," in a crucial sense. While other disciplines can give insight into said affordances, it is largely the realm of semiotic anthropology to explain how they are made to matter in the world. We might ask, then, to what extent has Keane left his own "silo" in order to assemble his arguments? And does this tacitly position a semiotic approach as a necessary pre-condition for a coherent interdisciplinary analysis for other, significant shared topics across the natural and social historical disciplines?

In this regard, we might detect in the text a second, distinctly ethical project undergirding Keane's efforts to construct a semiotic bridge across disciplines, one aimed at shifting broader disciplinary foci from the intentions and internal states of individual subjects towards their manifestation in social interaction (e.g. 182). After all, disciplinary positions on the nature of the individual and their relationship to society are themselves, in Keane's terms, "ethical" positions, ones that speak to how one should live and the particular kind of person one should be. In emphasizing social interaction as the critical lynchpin around which the universe of ethical affordance unfolds, Keane subtly but sharply intervenes in this conversation. To be ethical, indeed, to be human in any meaningful sense, is social in its very essence.

References:

- Bahktin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Michael Holquist, ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Bourgois, Phillip. *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003.
- Carr, E. Summerson *Scripting Addiction: The Politics of Therapeutic Talk and American Sobriety*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Goffman, Erving *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1959.

—*Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963.

—*Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face to Face Behavior*. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967.

Hill, Jane. "The Voices of Don Gabriel: Responsibility and Self in a Modern Mexicano Narrative". In *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, Dennis Tedlock and B. Mannheim, eds. Pp. 97-147. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

Hirschkind, Charles. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Keane, Webb. *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

—"Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things". *Language and Communication* 23(3):409-425, 2003.

Sahlins, Marshall. *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Island Kingdoms*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1981.

Silverstein, Michael. "Indexical Order and the Dialectics of Sociolinguistic Life". *Language and Communication*. 23(3):193-229, 2003.

Joseph Weiss is Curator of Western Ethnology at the Canadian Museum of History. His research explores indigenous political life, Indigenous-settler relations, ethics, and the power of time, with a particular focus on the Indigenous Haida First Nation. He also maintains abiding interests in Truth and Reconciliation in Canada and research ethics in the social sciences. Dr. Weiss holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Chicago. His doctoral thesis, funded in part by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, examined how the members of the Haida community of Old Massett conceived of and built futures for themselves and for their settler neighbors. He is currently preparing a monograph based on this work for the University of British Columbia Press. Dr. Weiss has also collaborated with the University of Chicago and the Field Museum of Natural History on the "Open Fields Project," examining museum-Indigenous relationships, and published with the International Journal of Canadian Studies.



© 2017 Joseph J.Z. Weiss