The hermeneutics of ethical encounters

Between traditions and practice

Michael Lambek, *University of Toronto*

What Jonathan Mair and Nicholas Evans (this collection) describe is the scene of hermeneutics. To put it another way, encounters between traditions can be ethical only when they are approached hermeneutically. The hermeneutic approach lies beyond a choice between rationalism and relativism (a border of its own), not to mention doctrinaire assurance that one's own tradition is right. Hermeneutics sits quite well with Aristotelian virtue ethics, especially as taken up by Gadamer. Moreover, "traditions" and borders occur within multiple levels of inclusion; speaking across them is a part of ordinary practice, hence must be a part of any account of ethical life. By way of illustration, I revisit the local interplay of three traditions described in *Knowledge and practice in Mayotte* (Lambek 1993) through the lens of ethics.

Keywords: ethics, hermeneutics, Gadamer, incommensurability, tradition, irony

The question of speaking ethically across borders is a large one. I approach it along two paths. Speaking in a relatively philosophical mode, I offer an abstract picture of what is at stake. In doing so I open for question what we mean by a tradition, by borders, by conversations across them, and indeed by virtue or virtue ethics. Speaking in a relatively ethnographic mode, I describe the encounter between traditions in the everyday practice of Malagasy-speaking villagers on the island of Mayotte (Western Indian Ocean) as I observed them during the last quarter of the past century. The abstract question I ask concerns the relationship between traditions and practice.

In effect, the subject returns me to pieces of writing completed in the early 1990s. The first is an essay in which I argue for the relevance of hermeneutics, and especially the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, for anthropological fieldwork, conversation,

and comparison (1991). The second is an ethnographic monograph, *Knowledge and practice in Mayotte* (1993), which describes the articulation of three traditions in daily practice. These traditions—Islam, astrology, and spirit possession—you might want to protest, are not ethics or distinctively or substantively ethical. I would reply that, in my understanding, "ethics" is not a substance or distinct thing. Sometimes it is objectified into an argument, code, or rulebook (or even discipline), but mostly it appears simply (immanently) as the ongoing orientation, enactment, and evaluation of human activity and character as constituted in and through what I have called the articulation of performance and practice (Lambek 2010a, 2015[forthcoming]). The three traditions I mention each offer or establish distinctive criteria for placing kinds of acts, persons, and immediate and long-term practice under description. Hence they provide different means to enable or account for such things as accountability, freedom, and the pursuit of valued goals. I consider these different acts, criteria, and accounts to be, for the most part, incommensurable to one other. By incommensurable, I mean that they cannot be placed under a common neutral measure, or under "a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached" (Rorty 1980: 316). Hence they are not explicitly contradictory and do not require making an exclusive choice; on the contrary, they preclude a simple rational choice between them (Bernstein 1983; Lambek 2008b). Further, I take incommensurability to be an inevitable feature of human understanding of the world, intrinsic to culture rather than a preventable pathology of culture or thought, hence both a feature of any ethical system or tradition as it plays out, and part of what it is—the world, the circumstances of life—that ethics addresses.

It follows that the incommensurability faced by confronting a different ethical tradition from one's own is not necessarily of a radically different order from the incommensurability that many ethical dilemmas face us with, even within a single tradition: for example, between showing compassion toward or punishing an undergraduate student guilty of temporary academic misconduct. It is a matter of exercising judgment and finding the right balance where there is no objective, external measure. Often the bureaucrat can produce rules to follow in such cases—that is the point of rules—but rules rarely fit the particular circumstances or the moods and dispositions of the characters involved. Bureaucratic rules are premised on a kind of nonexistent commensurability, having a disregard for complexity or context. Rules do not obviate judgment: concerning, for example, whether to offer the student, as we say, a second chance. Of course, if you belong to an ethical tradition that says simply "follow the rule," there will be no difficulty either in how to deal with the student or how to encounter the members of another tradition. But in general, while we value playing by the rules, and think it is right to punish the student who has lapsed, we do not give much ethical credit to the unyielding, rigid rule-follower, whom we might accuse of a lack of both imagination and empathy. We might remember the Fascists who said in their self-defense that they were merely following orders. Luckily, rigidly unimaginative rule-followers are found more frequently in fiction than in life, and there they usually get their comeuppance.

I shall make the case that Gadamerian hermeneutics offers an appropriate response to incommensurability and that the very activity of conversation (hence interpretation or translation) may be understood as ethical. Following Gadamer's terminology, the units across which interpretation is needed might better be described

as "traditions" than as "cultures," but thinkers within the hermeneutic tradition itself do not agree as to how to conceptualize the plurality of traditions or the distinctiveness of particular traditions. Further, I argue, in a distinctly ironic mode, that the ways in which traditions encounter each other (or conceptualize such encounters) can be distinguished as respectively convinced of their correctness (and hence out to missionize) or fundamentally skeptical or ironic concerning what can be known or justified with certainty (and hence content to understand rather than convert). These can be understood as distinct ethical stances, and the question arises: What can transpire when the border is one between a tradition that speaks with certainty or earnestly and a tradition that manifests with irony? The conversations within hermeneutic philosophy and those within anthropology show similarity to one another on these matters—as indeed does the ethical force of interpretation in our respective traditions. The force of *this* essay is less to reach conclusions than to raise questions.

Hermeneutics of encounter

The questions posed by Jonathan Mair and Nicholas Evans (this collection)—namely whether, in the context of borders, variously construed, people are "limited to using values with which they are already familiar to interpret and judge other values . . . or can . . . genuinely learn from alternative ethical systems"—are ones that have been posed and addressed by a significant thinker in the Aristotelian tradition, but someone located in neither its Foucauldian nor its "Anglo-Saxon" lineage segments. I am thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer and his magisterial *Truth and method* ([1960] 1985) as well as other essays such as those compiled in English in *Philosophical hermeneutics* (1976, but written after *TM*). Gadamer deserves more recognition by anthropologists of ethics than he has received.[1] He elucidates the idea of tradition as a long conversation. He also balances a recognition of the inevitability of prejudice as the particular tacit assumptions and values built into our language and the way we live at any given time, and hence indicative of our finitude, with a recognition of the openness of any tradition or language to other languages and traditions, and hence the possibility of extending the range of conversation and the horizons of any given tradition. The fusion of horizons, in Gadamer's felicitous metaphor, does not indicate full or identical understanding or conversion—conversation partners coming, as it were, to stand at the same place under the horizon as one another—but rather the opening of a space of mutual vision from which genuine conversation can begin and the joint horizon can be gradually opened further. This is what happens as we learn to listen to and speak with others. It is slow, careful work, not a matter of parachuting to a new place under the horizon. It is clear that the issues Gadamer addresses are similar to those of anthropology, and that his mode of response has close affinities with that of Clifford Geertz (1973) in particular. Indeed, I have found that Gadamer offers the

---

1. See Ulin (1984) for an early and insightful appreciation of Gadamer for anthropology, and Mattingly (2012) for a lucid exposition of current lineages of Aristotelian influence in the discipline. Good discussions of Gadamer from the perspective of political philosophy include Warnke (2002) and Beiner (2014).

best account in philosophical terms of what an ideal practice of ethnography could look like (Lambek 1991).[2]

To conjure Gadamer and Geertz is to emphasize the hermeneutic nature of any encounter and, more so in Gadamer than Geertz, the significance of genuine dialogue as the means and, in effect, the end of understanding. The hermeneutic position is one that tries to think outside the opposition between rationalism and relativism, seeking a position that, in the profound words of Richard Bernstein's title (1983), lies "beyond objectivism and relativism," that is, beyond the stark choice these alternatives offer, or that, in Geertz's phrasing (2002), is anti anti-relativist. It is precisely such a position that is needed (or perhaps is described) when people recognize distinct ethical traditions without collapsing the distinction between them.

Furthermore, if I understand Gadamer's understanding of understanding, it is that conversing with another or coming to understand another is itself a form of ethical work. Understanding itself constitutes a kind of ethical know-how that is a part of one's being rather than a detached or scientific knowledge of universals (*episteme*) or a technical skill (*techne*) (Lambek 1991: 46)**.** In other words, understanding is constituted as practical judgment (*phronesis*) and we are in the realm of Aristotelian virtue ethics rather than Kantian rational universals or utilitarian calculations. What Gadamer takes from virtue ethics, then, or what constitutes Gadamerian thought as a form of virtue ethics, is this reading of, and emphasis on, the property of *phronesis*, rather than trying to isolate a set of specific virtues or attributing specific virtues to specific traditions. In this way, Gadamer's approach to Aristotle and tradition is different from that of Alasdair MacIntyre (1981). Virtue theory understood through Gadamer rather than MacIntyre does not constitute a barrier to cross-traditional understanding. Virtue is cultivated but it is a quality more general than specific and it is open to circumstances, including the circumstance of meeting people from other traditions. Virtue inheres in the very openness to understand the Other rather than in what characterizes difference. It follows, albeit with a bit of a jump, that virtuous persons ought to be recognizable (able to recognize each other) across traditions, even in the absence of literal translation of virtues specific to any one of them.

Some historical realism does have to be added to (my superficial rendering of) Gadamer's ideal account. As critics have noted, hermeneutics is sometimes naïve with respect to power, that is, with respect to who can speak louder, with more force, authority, or consequence, and, conversely, who is silenced. You cannot have dialogue if the subaltern cannot speak (or cannot be heard). Most encounters between people of explicitly distinct or distant traditions have not been constituted as conversations between equals; more often, someone initiates with assertions, questions, or demands and the other simply responds or is silenced. The power difference is exacerbated when the interlocutors on the dominant side are convinced of the absolute truth, lucidity, or universality of their position. This is true both of proponents of a global regime of human rights or perhaps Habermasian discursive rationality and of missionaries from the twin Abrahamic traditions of Christianity

---

2.   I named the ethnographic monograph series I have edited since 1991 with the University of Toronto Press "Anthropological Horizons."

and Islam. I am not able to enter subtleties of Habermasian thought that is currently central to political theory except to recall that Habermas and Gadamer once held a useful debate.[3] But missionary work, by definition, violates Gadamer's astonishing precept, "Always recognize in advance the possible correctness, even the superiority of the conversation partner's position" (1985: 189). Or his remark that, "If we want to understand, we shall try to make [the other's] arguments even more cogent" ([1960] 1985: 259–60).

There are circumstances in which one side works harder than the other. This is frequently the case when English speakers meet people who speak a different language; people like me flit around the world complacently expecting to rely on English.[4] That means I do not have to put my terms to question as closely as do my interlocutors. This is partly a product of external circumstances, but over time such circumstances come to inflect tradition. It may be that rather than only consider what resources certain ethical traditions have to enable their inhabitants to move further out in the world and expand their horizons of understanding, we should look at the ways in which some traditions impoverish this human capacity and complacently or actively narrow horizons. We should not, then, want to call them ethical in the positive sense of that term. Various forms of provincialism, including determined ethnocentrism and racism, are to be found here. There is also the feature internal to Christianity and Islam (and sometimes found in other traditions), namely the urge to prevail over the other, that is, to missionize. This comes, one could say, out of a cultivated ethical desire to offer opportunities of salvation to others, but at the same time, one could also say, it narrows the possibility for fully understanding those others and for reciprocal recognition of dignity. How a given tradition understands truth (absolute or contingent, correspondence, logical, salvific, poetic or performative) and constructs its relationship to truth with respect to what authorizes practice is critical. It should shape any analysis of the ways in which ethical discourses function alongside or as modes of power, means of colonization, and rationalizers of exploitation. (This is a point well understood by Foucault.)

If missionaries "adapt their practices to make them acceptable for potential converts" (see Mair and Evans, this collection), they are not speaking openly. There is an interesting paradox here, namely that by acting ethically according to their own lights, they are acting unethically with respect to the precepts of hermeneutics or anthropology. Or one could say that in acting ethically according to utilitarian principles, they are violating their own essentially deontological principle to speak the truth. One way to explore this further is to ask whether in practice they recognize making use of a double standard, treating members of their own group with more respect than members of the target group. Furthermore, in exercising judgment with respect to incommensurable values as I described above, they often mistake such incommensurability for, or replace it with, either agreement or outright contradiction. Different branches of missionaries presumably differ in respect

---

3.   See their respective essays in Wachterhauser 1986.

4.   Things have changed from the days when Christian missionaries earnestly learnt other languages so as to better translate the Bible into them.

to how they resolve these matters, and it would be interesting to learn the ethical guidelines and perhaps changing traditions of specific missionary groups.[5]

Another possibility opened up by such encounters happens when missionaries come to learn the errors of their own ways and themselves transcend the values of the practice that brought them across the border in the first place, when they do, in fact, come to genuinely recognize and respond to—or are "read" by—the otherness of the other. By "otherness" here I mean not strangeness but dignity. An ethical Christian missionary, in my prejudiced view, would be someone subject to Kierkegaardian doubt and irony, rather than to overriding fervor or complacency about his or her own faith or values (or, conversely, "going native").

But I speak as an Aristotelian advocate of moderation, an anthropological relative relativist (i.e., a judiciously partial cultural relativist), or perhaps a relative universalist (Descola 2013: 305), and a philosophically skeptical ironist,[6] and I cannot do justice to, cannot fully recognize, religious faith or fervor, that is, cannot act as a good Gadamerian in the face of all kinds of others. (In effect this is a limit to Gadamerian thought—one cannot be equally open to every position.) I confess that I don't like missionaries.[7] Here I confront the limits of my own ethical tradition or character. And I must ask, in describing (propounding?) my own views, am I not also a missionary of a certain kind? The difference here is perhaps one of proportion; Aristotle again.[8]

5. For interesting cases, see Hanks (2010, 2013) on the Franciscans among the Maya of Yucatán and Henn (2014) on the Jesuits in Goa.

6. It would be interesting to discuss, as one reviewer suggested, whether a relativist position is necessarily an ironic one or whether or in what sense an ironic position is necessarily relativist.

7. This opinion would vary according to circumstances and the power differential between the parties, but in general I don't approve of those who attempt to convert others complacently, without the sense either that their own ideas could be wrong or that the practice of attempting to unmoor others from their respective beliefs and practices could be wrong. Like many anthropologists, I come in the first instance to record and understand other ways of life not to change (and thereby possibly destroy) them. Of course, this is to radically oversimplify the range of possible political engagements of anthropologists, which must vary according to the circumstances, and it is certainly not to obviate the need for political debate at home or in general.

8. I have not subjected the anthropological position to the same scrutiny as the missionary one. There is by now considerable discussion about the relations of power and ethics in both ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological analysis. With respect to power, my own positionality is brought out by Emmanuel Tehindrazanarivelo (1997) in his response to Lambek (1997). Further discussion of the ethics of fieldwork is found in Lambek (2012). The complexities are well captured in feminist anthropology about how to write about such matters as female circumcision or other gendered practices distinct from those the anthropologists approve for themselves, as well as in discussions about universal human rights discourse, imposed from more powerful positions on the ostensibly disempowered. As one referee noted, we might begin by distinguishing "power to" (agency) from "power over" (domination), something to which the literature on ethics certainly contributes (e.g., Laidlaw 2010), not to mention accounts

In acknowledging my prejudice, I am drawing some comfort from Gadamer's view that any and every tradition must hold certain prejudices. If the lesson of the encounter for the missionary might be what of his own original thought or practice he ought to give up, the lesson for the anthropologist might be to realize what of her own original thought or practice she ought to keep, or even advocate. In each case, the goal of the *Bildung* is the matter of finding one's voice—in order that one may come to achieve a more direct or fully realized conversation. This is another dimension of the ethics of encounter, or the encounter of different ethics.

In the ordinary course of affairs, most people act neither as anthropologists or hermeneutic philosophers, nor as missionaries, but as neighbors, kin, fellow citizens, or fellow human beings. However, the question of speaking across borders and boundaries still applies, whether from my house to your house, my faction, generation, or discipline to yours, not to mention conversations internal to the self (a self that, as Freud argues, is constituted through conflict or that, as Bakhtin ascribes to the novel, is itself heteroglossic and polyphonous, or as I have described, after spirit possession, can be of more than one mind[9]). There is something very ordinary about the situation that missionaries and anthropologists make extraordinary.

The primary ethical situation is one of listening and judging when to speak or act and what to say, and subsequently of acknowledging that this is what we heard (or misheard) and what we said (or failed to say) and did. Following Wittgenstein or Veena Das, sometimes the thing to do is keep silent, keeping silence understood as itself a kind of speech act. It may not matter which ethical tradition we have been socialized into to know these things.[10] Thus a resource one could add to Gadamer's discussion of conversation and the recognition of one's own prejudices is that of the concept of voice, as developed by Stanley Cavell (1996, 2005) and others. Here I want to acknowledge specifically Das's (2007) distinction between voice and volubility.[11]

On tradition

A question all this raises, the pressing question that Mair and Evans have raised for me, is how to talk about the relation between tradition and practice, that is to say, the relation between ethics of, or as articulated by, distinctive traditions and the ethics of actual practice. I will be thinking as I go here. To begin with, "tradition" and "practice" are not equivalent objects such that one could apportion ethics between them; to do so would be to make a category mistake. Rather, they are each complex concepts whose articulation entails analytic abstraction no less than

---

that give equal weight to patiency as to agency (e.g. Mahmood 2005; Lambek 2010b). Reflection on fieldwork from a broadly hermeneutic perspective can be found, inter alia, in Boddy (1989), Crapanzano (2003), al-Mohammad (2010), and Das (2014).

9.   See Bakhtin (1982); Lambek (2010b).

10.   What can be said, how, and to whom are of course matters relative to specific genres of speaking and differ between speech communities.

11.   I thank Anna Kruglova for reminding me of the importance of this distinction.

ethnographic observation and direct description. Here I will elaborate on the concept of tradition.

"Tradition" is a complex word. Many people use it in simple opposition to "modernity," with the implications of stasis and conservatism. In this usage, tradition is an objectification and something only possible to imagine once modernity has identified its own distinctiveness. I take it that none of the participants in the conversation in this issue of *Hau* are using it in this sense. "Tradition" is also used in the sense of specific, historically self-conscious disciplinary practices, as one might speak of yoga or of a particular branch of yoga. But one can also considerably expand the use, to designate Islam, for example, as a tradition, in the sense of Talal Asad (1986) and also MacIntyre and Gadamer as a long and ongoing series of conversations or disciplinary practices constructed in a certain manner and carrying their own prejudices. Anthropology is a tradition in this sense, a disciplined conversation that circles around certain topics, questions, themes, oppositions, or incommensurables, with a rough sense of boundaries, limits, and criteria of relevance, validity, and so forth. Thus, for example, when Martin Holbraad pronounces an ontological turn,[12] I hear it as an act conducted within a tradition, not only because of the predecessors he invokes or contrasts himself with or the audience he addresses, but also because of my sense that the "new turn" is his generation's attempt to make sense of issues that irritate anthropology, that is, perennial issues that constitute its core, around which our successive conversations render it a tradition. (Of course, practitioners of anthropology, qua tradition, also draw from, and converse with, other traditions such as sociology, philosophy, or history.)

It is obvious that within any given broad tradition—take Western philosophy—there may be subtraditions that no longer fully understand each other. Within the Aristotelian ethical tradition there are divergent schools, national or otherwise. Conversely, there are voices that attempt to speak across them. These remarks suggest four points about the concept of tradition. First, traditions are recursive and diffuse, embedded within one another or imagined at different degrees of scope (South Asian, Jain, Digambar, etc.) but also able to migrate. Second, any given tradition can be internally heterogeneous, composed of multiple strands. Third, just as conversations between traditions or streams of a given tradition can produce fusion, as it were (processes and effects that we sometimes call agreement, unification, syncretism, vernacularization, inculturation, rationalization, etc.), so can conversation within a single given tradition produce fission that starts from or grows into misunderstanding, outright disagreement, incompatibility, or incommensurability. (Perhaps the ontological turn has become a tradition whose adherents cannot fully understand or be understood by those in a hermeneutic, structuralist, or materialist tradition of anthropology.) The fourth point is that tradition is intergenerational and faces the matter of generational *succession* no less than that of factional *secession* (and must sometimes invent its past). Succession entails ambivalence and tensions between identification and separation.

In sum, traditions are not static, but they change at a human and generational pace, ideally not with the speed of capitalist modernity, in which "all that is solid

---

12. As he did in a panel at the AAA, Chicago, fall 2013.

melts into air" (Berman 1988, after Marx). Rather, tradition is where the air of current talk and action condenses like breath on a cold morning.

Tradition describes the cumulative manner in which thought has reflected on itself, the remains of that condensation, and its diffusion and recirculation in the air around us. By tradition we mean something between the air we breathe, that is, the thoughts we think or that circulate through us, and a kind of self-conscious realization of the quality of the air and the acts and effects of breathing in our neighborhood, understanding the words of others and replying in our own voice. Breath and air are perhaps too evanescent to make my point that tradition is at once the effects that past conversations have on how we converse now, our realization of or reflection upon, and sometimes our objectification of, such effects, and the means of accumulation, storage, and transmission of those conversations, for example in manuscripts, schools, initiations, disciplinary practices, veneration of ancestral figures, and authorizations of various kinds.

It is easy to idealize tradition—in the senses both of admiring it and of treating it as somehow immaterial—and to link it exclusively with writing. In order to withstand these tendencies, I take a short detour and offer an image of congealing rather than condensation. The image—really two images, which in my superficial encounters appear to approximate one another—comes from West Africa, where I was nothing more than an ethnographic tourist. The cave opening of the Tallensi oracle is partially covered by a huge mound of the remains of sacrificial offerings—bones, blood, and feathers piled up and sinking down into a kind of compost bin. The lesson of this mass became clearer to me after a visit to a *féticheur* in Mali.[13] The object over which the *féticheur* conducted his business was a sculpture barely visible beneath the accretion of congealed blood and dirt of past sacrifices conducted upon it, an unappealing smelly mass over which flies hovered. In both cases, the power of the oracle and the fetish is undoubtedly indexed and derives from the history of the past sacrifices it displays, layer upon layer of deliberate, irreversible performative acts conducted at the spot. These material and dematerializing histories of past illocutionary acts add their perlocutionary effects. "Tradition" is manifest as a rotting but fecund mass.

This register of decaying blood, skin, feathers, and bone, material evidence of a history of acts of sacrifice, was unfamiliar to me and, not having done my Gadamerian or ethnographic groundwork, I have certainly not understood it. It coexists in these West African places with written, artifactual, musical, dance, theatrical, and especially oral registers. Whatever the register, but presumably differently according to the affordances (the materiality, the medium) of any specific one, tradition is formed through the temporal layering of acts and utterances, of conversation in a serious, Gadamerian sense. Such cumulative acts and utterances are partially determining or affording of, and partially accessible to, further conversations and future generations. Across the North Atlantic we pass on a certain tradition of weddings and sometimes we pass on the actual wedding dresses from grandmother

---

13. Thanks to Simon Lambek for accompanying me to Tallensi (northern Ghana) and Ben Soares for inviting me to meet the *féticheur* and helping translate his practice. Neither is to be blamed for these rash remarks. *Féticheur* is a word used in Mali by practitioners of this kind.

to granddaughter. The latter are material signs of the liturgical order that produces and authorizes specific performative acts within the tradition.

The visceral quality of sacrificial remains is not to be found within predominantly Muslim contexts. In *halal* sacrifice the blood is drained away and, at least where I worked in Mayotte, the carcasses of sacrificial animals were carefully buried to ensure they were not violated by living animals. Thus, in places like southern Mali and northern Ghana where many visitors to the shrines are simultaneously Muslim, I assume the divergent material manifestations of distinct ethical traditions could be highly salient. People in Mayotte spoke of their nausea at the experience of reburials in highland Madagascar. In non-Muslim and non-Christian venues in northwest Madagascar the processing of dead royal bodies entails separating the liquid from the solid. Dry bones, indexing former lives and persons, are carefully buried or small pieces are placed in reliquaries, and those of sacrificed animals are sometimes displayed for a time, but corporeal fluids are disposed of in bodies of water, which serve to transform and recycle, producing new life, or else themselves become repositories of pollution. Presumably, each tradition addresses these matters in its own way, whether we are talking about acts of sacrifice and their bodily remains, acts of argumentation and their entextualization, or other kinds of marked acts and their intentions, consequences, side-effects, or remains. In acting and conversing in certain ways today, we recognize past acts and conversations and anticipate future ones, whether or however tacitly or explicitly. Insofar as we acknowledge past, present, and future interlocutors, our acts and utterances have an ethical dimension.

The concept of tradition, whether in the material sense of the accumulation, or continuing and successive presence, effects, and relevance of prior acts and utterances, or in the ontological sense propounded by Gadamer, has the advantage over the concept of culture that temporality, action, and plurality of voice are directly built in. Traditions found alongside each other are also neither mutually encompassing nor mutually exclusive in the way we sometimes think (or once thought) of cultures as bounded totalities, though different traditions have differing imperial ambitions, as it were, and differential access to power. In certain historical and political circumstances a given tradition, like Islam or Christianity, might take exclusivity and encompassment as ideals and might come close to approximating them, whereas a participant in the anthropological tradition might also be a rock musician, a member of a Christian or Muslim congregation, a practitioner of a specific kind of yoga, and sometimes even a tourist, missionary, or contributor to sociology or philosophy. Plurality of traditions and flexibility of affiliation and articulation among them is a characteristic of life in societies above a certain scale and, I suspect, of all societies. This suggests that social life is inherently heterogeneous and heteroglossic, offering different avenues of interest and cultivation, multiple accumulated means to enable or enhance different human capacities, singly or in specific combinations or constellations. (These are metaphorically and metonymically linked together, producing the kinds of structures we refer to as culture, from which new practices and traditions in turn emerge.)

A live tradition can be described as having an *ethical* dimension insofar as it is the contemporary manifestation of the steady coalescence and acknowledgment of what has been retained through a particular history of language and language

use, of deliberate acts, judgments, and recognitions, and of the cumulative sedimentation and objectification of these words, conversations, acts, and judgments in such forms as criteria, narratives, rules, laws, aphorisms, proverbs, genealogies, and commentaries, as well as in other materials or embodied practices. The Confucian tradition is evident in the characters signifying the various virtues hanging in (preserved or revived) ancestral halls and elsewhere.[14] A tradition likewise includes a particular repertoire of diverse types and genres of performative acts, more or less articulated in some kind of liturgical order, as well as the criteria for felicitous enactment, and commentaries and debates over such felicity. These place persons, relationships, and acts under particular descriptions.[15] Finally, an ethical tradition includes a set of disciplinary practices for the cultivation of appropriate comportment, knowledge, and skill, thereby enabling its reproduction. In sum, a tradition may be described as ethical insofar as it includes both distinctive means to recognize and establish positive conduct and orient people with respect to it and the cumulatively objectified reflections on what the tradition does and what its goals and limits are.

A tradition may include elaborate philosophical or religious arguments or procedures to establish the legitimacy, certainty, truth, and finality of what it does, but it is comprised of not only the means to reflect on correct action, but also both the criteria to constitute acts and to evaluate them as correctly enacted, and the criteria that the acts produce and in relation to which practice can be evaluated. That availability and even necessity is part of what I call the ethical condition (Lambek 2015[forthcoming]). The particularity of how the criteria apply and are applied and the judgments entailed in meeting the criteria, assessing whether they have been met, or recognizing and transcending the limits of established or available criteria are part of the substance of ethics in any given tradition and social arena, what it is that ethics is and does. Likewise, the tradition supplies a field in which new performative acts can be anticipated and engaged in or the judgment exercised to dispense with them or with specific conditions or criteria.

Tradition and practice

What, then, is the relation of an ethical tradition (any given ethical tradition) to ordinary life and practice? Conversely, what is the relationship of ordinary ethics (ongoing activity) to the various traditions people are confronted with or inhabit? I suggest that these do not fully map onto one another. The members of any given society probably encounter more than one ethical tradition. Insofar as their ethical judgment entails how to articulate these diverse traditions in practice, we could say that ordinary practical judgment transcends any given ethical tradition even while it can only take place as part of and with respect to traditions, and even when it is

---

14. Compare Shohet (2011) on the various kinds of texts displayed at Vietnamese funerals.

15. For elaboration of these necessarily condensed remarks see Rappaport (1999) and Lambek (2010a, 2015[forthcoming]).

sometimes in self-conscious departure from a given tradition or maybe even from the very idea of tradition.

In describing the plurality or heterogeneity of tradition, and hence in distinguishing the objectivized singularity of any given tradition from what one could call the ordinary—ordinary ethics, ordinary life—I part company with a great contemporary philosopher of tradition writing in the Aristotelian tradition, namely Alasdair MacIntyre (1981). MacIntyre looks back nostalgically to what he imagines were relatively closed, comprehensive, and internally consistent ethical traditions or historical phases of a single great tradition, phases that presumably mapped well onto the social life and ordinary experience of the people who drew on and participated in them. He compares them positively to what he perceives as the incoherence of ethics, or, rather, ethical fragments, in modernity. In this he is in line with pious adherents of the various religious traditions who seek to fully inhabit such ostensibly consistent, closed, and comprehensive worlds, whether of Orthodox Judaism, fundamentalist Christianity, Salafi Islam, or, perhaps, in MacIntyre's case, Thomist Catholicism.

I have enormous respect for MacIntyre and have learnt a great deal from him about tradition, virtue theory, and the history of the virtues, and I admire his portraits of the ethical worlds of particular epochs. I have found particularly useful his distinction between goods internal and external to a given practice (MacIntyre 1981; Lambek 2008b), as well as his discussion of three versions of moral inquiry (MacIntyre 1990; Lambek 2011). However, I challenge his general picture, one that I may have unfairly parodied here, and I do so on three grounds.[16] I think it is wrong empirically: most if not all historical periods and places have been characterized by heterogeneity of tradition (much as by plurality of languages). I think it is wrong philosophically: no given tradition is sufficient to answer the existential quandaries of human life, and people shift between traditions as they reach the limits of one or another. In Mayotte, practical judgment regularly entailed precisely such movement—and it was emphatically not thereby a manifestation of amorality or ethical confusion. Thirdly, I think it is wrong on ethical grounds: it is unwise to seal oneself within a given tradition. Among other things, that prevents the openness toward other traditions or to extending one's horizons that Gadamer advocates and it leads MacIntyre (1988) to the quandaries of how to imagine or enable respectful conversation between traditions.

In sum, pluralism of tradition is of very long standing. Moreover, ordinary life implies openness to multiple traditions and is constituted in practical judgment with respect to the incommensurable ideas and performative acts offered by the distinct traditions at hand. Excessive devotion to a single tradition—as a fervent proselytizer, for example—is to move beyond the ordinary. To revert to Gadamer, openness no less than prejudice is a feature intrinsic to language.

Ethnography of practice

My understanding of tradition is strongly informed by my ethnographic encounters (and no doubt their fortuitous affinity with my own historical location, prejudice,

---

16. For a stringent critique of MacIntyre, see Laidlaw (2014).

and character). Before I began to think explicitly about the ordinary or the ordinariness of ethics, I wrote *Knowledge and practice in Mayotte*, about the articulation of three distinct traditions in the lives of villagers in a western Indian Ocean Island. These were Islam, spirit possession, and a third tradition, namely astrology or cosmology, that arrived along with Islam and whose texts were also written in Arabic script, but that is distinct from Islam (and presumably historically prior to it), much as astrology in Canada or the United Kingdom is distinct from Christianity, or Christianity from science. In a word, these traditions are incommensurable to one another. By incommensurable, I mean they cannot be compared along a single yardstick or according to any neutral external measure.[17] Hence, in practice, and despite the declarations of some earnest proponents, of Islam in particular, they are not mutually exclusive alternatives.

I organized my account as a social organization of knowledge, articulating the cultural content of the respective traditions with the social modes of access to them. I crosscut description of the three traditions with three different practical stances toward them. These stances are what Alfred Schutz called the expert, the man on the street (which I rewrote as the person on the path), and the well-informed citizen. The expert draws from warranted assertions, the person on the path on practical recipes, sentiments, and passions, and the well-informed citizen aims "to arrive at reasonably founded opinions" (Schutz 1964: 122). Schutz's categories are not social statuses or roles but shifting orientations. While not everyone might be an expert in any one tradition, experts in one field are also persons on the path or well-informed citizens not only with respect to other fields, but also at times with respect to the tradition in which they are capable of expertise. The shifts among these stances have strong implications for how dialogue with other traditions is conceived and practiced at any given moment, shaping what it is one has to defend about one's own tradition and what it is one can ask or expect of another tradition.

As the title suggests, I took the substance of the respective traditions to be "knowledge" rather than "ethics." Returning to the theme of the practical articulation of traditions through the lens of ethics rather than knowledge—though the two can hardly be distinguished—I bring to it now the development of a more recent argument (Lambek 2010a, 2015[forthcoming]). This is that ethics is to be found in the relationship between what I call practice and performance. Performances are performative acts as constituted within a tradition. It is within a given tradition that performative acts and utterances are found, that is, demarcated and reproduced as such. Performatives are tradition specific—indeed that specificity may be part of what we mean by a tradition insofar as they put people and relationships under particular descriptions according to specific criteria. Thus, a Hindu wedding is not the same as a Jewish one; a Buddhist nun is not the same as a Roman Catholic one; and so forth. In Mayotte, wearing an amulet made for one by an astrologer is a different kind of act from uttering a Muslim prayer, and different again from speaking to or as a spirit. Practice is what precedes and follows performances, the stream in which they are located. Practice is also the stream in which traditions are located, always broader than any given tradition; it is via practical judgment that people take up a performance from one tradition or another, perhaps in various heterodox

---

17. On incommensurability, see the very useful discussion in Bernstein (1983).

combinations, for example when a spirit is asked for advice about destiny to compare with that given by an astrologer, or an amulet contains both astrological notations and a verse from the Qur'an.

Ethical practice is constituted with respect to the criteria generated within given traditions, sometimes within formal liturgical orders (Rappaport 1999). Participants within a tradition must discern the relevant criteria and judge or balance among them at any given instance in initiating new performative acts, and in evaluating practice prospectively and retrospectively. However, insofar as they participate in more than one kind of performative act from more than one tradition, practice itself is not tradition bound. The practical considerations of when to engage in a specific performative act or which acts from which traditions to conjoin are not themselves internal to a given tradition.

Beginning in Mayotte[18] and more intensively once I worked in northwest Madagascar, I began to think about heterogeneous social spaces in which diverse traditions were seen not as being inherently at odds or competing with each other, nor as necessarily trying to encompass and dissolve one another, nor even as devoted to earnest dialogue in Gadamerian fashion, but happy sometimes to articulate in practice and at other times to engage in a sort of parallel play, deliberately ignoring or perhaps engaging in humorous and ironic representations of one another (Lambek 1993, 1995). In northwest Madagascar these traditions include Islam, Christianity, and what is now sometimes homogenized as "ancestral practice," but also subdivisions within each of them. Social identification or ascription is relatively open and hence subject to practical judgment, including the tacit judgment of when and how to acknowledge particular forms of interpellation. I have found something of the same order in the relationships among Christianity, biomedicine, and complementary healing practices during research in Switzerland (Lambek 2007).[19] To be sure, the scale of relations is very different in the three sites. For clarity, I stick to a village in Mayotte during the last quarter of the twentieth century, that is, before the effects of full French schooling and departmentalization.

Explanations of misfortune in Mayotte included the arbitrary intervention of spirits, sorcery attack by consociates, personal failure to maintain taboos, impersonal destiny and the position of the stars, and, finally and most comprehensively, the will of God. Prevention and alleviation of misfortune drew on a broad array of sources: God and other Muslim figures, spirits, astrology, local medicines, biomedicine, maintaining taboos, and so forth. Thus, the circumcision of young boys, as prescribed by Islam, was preceded by both a smoking out of evil spirits from their bodies officiated by an astrologer and a widely attended performance of a specific Muslim prayer, the *Badry*, applied to ward off potential enemies. Both the smoking

---

18. I wrote of Mayotte that, "There is no a single objective unity that underlies life. . . . There is instead a plurality of unities, lying always just ahead. They are the fragile, contingent, evanescent products of conversation and practice, the moments of insight, of satisfaction, of closure" (1993: 379–80). The confluence or conversation among the traditions provoked different moments of ethical climax but always in the context of the others.

19. See also the film on "traditional healers," *Le secret du secret* by Louis Mouchet (2000). My thanks to Jeanne Rey-Pelissier for the film.

and the operation were precisely timed and placed by means of astrological calculations, judgments that the positive spirits who possessed various family members often monitored and sometimes challenged. As the actual cutting took place, these spirits would rise in women to protect the boys, cover their cries, and heighten the intensity of the event.

Abstractly and intellectually, the traditions can be related to each other in various ways. In practice, the invocation of a resource from one or another tradition depends on all kinds of circumstances, including the ongoing narrative that is being constructed. There may be debate among clients and practitioners about which is the relevant factor in the circumstances. Readings are provisional and the product of discovering a judicious fit between available narrative devices and contingent events (Lambek 1993: 385). These readings cut across traditions that were more or less well known to particular individuals but equally part of the life of the society. At the same time, acts and interpretations often showed people trying to do what was right by each other and for themselves, drawing on ideas, values, or sentiments that perhaps escaped the specificity of any of these traditions and were embedded in practices of kinship, community, and hospitality, notably what I called reciprocity scenarios (Lambek 2000, after Ortner 1978), as well as in general ideas about the dignity of human being,[20] informed at the time of my early fieldwork by live memories of the indignities incurred by colonialism, racism, and servitude, and, increasingly since, by injuries of class.

In the end, most people in Mayotte cared less about whether I conformed to Islam (ignoring whether I uttered the *bismillah* or advising me to simply eat covertly during Ramadan) than whether I treated people with dignity, acknowledged salutations, remembered people's names (often the subject of humorous testing that continues to embarrass and irritate me), joked at the right times and refrained from joking at the wrong ones, and, in general, showed respect to others, as they did to me. While they would have been delighted had I become Muslim—whether out of conceding the rightness of their position, as an index of my intimacy with them, or for the sake of my soul—they cared more that I did not steal, commit acts of manifest violence or sorcery, exhibit undue greed or anger, and so forth. Sometimes they described such matters as being the heart of Islam.

In sum, ethics is a facet of action (and interaction). Tradition is relevant less as a series of objectified texts or injunctions abstracted from practice, less as ethics in or for itself, than in the way the performative acts it defines enter into and inform practice. Texts are relevant ethically less for what they say than for what they do or for what people do with them, how they are put into practice, accepted by people as shaping their practice. (Hence the significance in so many traditions of recitation, prayer, prostration, and of reading conceived as active rather than passive.) Conversely, practice entails the judicious enactment of performative acts drawn from different traditions. Among the critical acts are those of listening, acknowledgment, and respect, which can be understood beyond the confines of any given tradition.

---

20. In fact, "human being/s" is a better translation of Malagasy *olon'belo* than the more common "person/s," or "people."

The encounter between earnest and ironic traditions

I suggest that conversation across ethical traditions that recognize themselves as distinct from one another is more or less easy, or takes one or another form, depending on the kind of tradition found on each side. This is a matter not only of how culturally or historically distant the traditions are from one another or how arduous translation is but of whether affiliation or membership is understood by a given tradition as singular and exclusive.

I am thinking of a broad and relative ideal-typical difference between what for lack of better words I call earnest and ironic traditions. A tradition is earnest insofar as it emphasizes the virtue of seriousness and engages in conversation with the goals of reaching agreement, consistency, certainty, and truth. A tradition is ironic insofar as it acknowledges irony, in the complex sense of Kierkegaard or as discussed in recent work by Alexander Nehamas (1998) and Jonathan Lear (2003).[21] An ironic tradition, whether playful or tragic, recognizes human finitude, the unavailability of certainty (salvation, consistency, completion, etc.), the limits of understanding, and hence the limits of the tradition (any tradition) itself.

An earnest tradition tends to emphasize what I call, after Locke, the forensic dimension of personhood (Lambek 2013), making and sticking to singular commitments, reaching certitude of judgment about acts, character, and goals, selecting among mutually exclusive alternatives, and staying true to one of them, most importantly staying true to the given tradition itself. An ironic tradition emphasizes what I call the mimetic dimension of personhood, thus contingency, multiplicity, discontinuity, and movement, such that alternatives are not mutually exclusive and every judgment is shadowed by alternatives. Irony recognizes that we may be of two minds and that in some instances this is not a bad thing. A keyword for ethical traditions earnestly attuned is *responsibility*; for traditions ironically attuned the equivalent word is *responsiveness* (Wentzer 2014). Another pair of contrasting words might be truth and wisdom.

These are, of course, highly idealized types, and it is likely that any given tradition establishes a moving balance between them. They could also be taken as different redactions or modes of understanding or participation in any single tradition rather than as distinguishing traits intrinsic to different traditions.

I am not suggesting that Kantian deontology is earnest in contrast to Aristotelian virtue ethics as ironic. MacIntyre is a virtue theorist who is earnest in the sense of the term I am using here. That is why he begins *After virtue* (1981) by decrying the heterogeneity of modern ethics.

I hypothesize that the ethical conversation goes differently when the two traditions (or respective modes of adherence) are each serious—earnest and literal minded—than when the two traditions are each ironic or skeptical or understood and taken up by their respective proponents in an ironic mode. But the situation I want to describe is when one of the conversation partners is earnest and the other ironic. This is more or less the case when the Abrahamic ethico-religious traditions (in their common manifestations) encounter many (but presumably not all) other

---

21. Lear (2003) points out how shallow and inadequate are the dictionary definitions of irony.

traditions, in contexts, where, for example, deity is understood polytheistically, or even deictically, rather than nominally (Lambek 2008a), or where what Michael Carrithers (2000) has termed polytropy is prevalent, that is, traditions characterized by heterogeneity, mimesis, heterodoxy and heteropraxy—traditions characterized, in a word, by irony.[22]

I mention two instances of such encounters, of very different location.

The first is the published conversation between Gadamer and Jacques Derrida (Michelfelder and Palmer 1989). For an aficionado of Gadamer, this makes painful reading. Gadamer is earnest. He thinks that any conversation taken up in seriousness ought to lead to some mutual comprehension, some opening up of horizons, so that the interlocutors can understand each other, at least minimally. As described above, his hermeneutics hangs on such a possibility.[23] Derrida tries to subvert this, by refusing to understand, by playing with Gadamer's words, and so forth. Gadamer is the ideal foil to Derrida's irony, and the harder Gadamer tries, the worse it gets for him.[24]

I think I have been told that the two philosophers eventually came to a mutual respect—and if that is the case, Gadamer may have been proved equally right in the end. But that is not evident in the published encounter; if it happened, it took place *hors-texte*. And that of course illustrates an important lesson, namely that ethics is not to be understood as a purely intellectual activity or exclusively as objectified text but must be taken with respect to, or, rather, as a dimension of, lived practice. Practice, I have been arguing, overflows the ideas to be found in any given intellectual tradition.

My second example is ethnographic. The articulation between Islam and spirit possession in Mayotte as I observed it from the 1970s onwards illustrates a practical conversation between a fundamentally earnest tradition that draws its authority from recitations of objectified sacred text, and an ironic tradition that is reproduced through embodied performance. I have to add immediately that there were also conversations internal to Islam between more earnest and more ironic forms

---

22. However I do not mean to equate or conflate earnest traditions with what I called above missionizing ones, or to make an absolute contrast between monotheistic and polytheistic traditions. As Jonathan Mair points out (pers. comm. August 8, 2014) and as recent decades in South Asia have shown, ostensibly polytheistic traditions can become hostile and intransigent vis-à-vis ostensible competitors.

23. This points as well to a possible limit of Gadamerian hermeneutics, as observed by an astute reviewer, namely whether the fusion of horizons leads to homogenization rather than the maintenance of diversity. In fact, the metaphor of horizons is one of degree and of partially shared or overlapping perspectives and terms or criteria rather than of submersion into common identity. The aim is to enrich rather than narrow conversation, to let oneself be challenged by another tradition while remaining located within one's own, to enlarge the understanding of both traditions rather than to merge them. As another reviewer noted, a similar issue can be founded in the important collection on syncretism edited by Stewart and Shaw (1994).

24. An irony or paradox here is that relative to many earnest traditions it is Gadamer, with his deep acknowledgment of human historicity and finitude and his rejection of epistemological presumption, who could be expected to hold the ironic position.

of living the religion,[25] including the arrival of a purifying movement (*jaula*) criticizing the musically performative modalities through which the sanctity, power, and pleasure of Islam were realized, and a strong local resistance to that critique.

In practice, spirit possession deferred to Islam. The music and dancing of spirits stopped during the call to prayer and the spirits would not visit during Ramadan. Spirit mediums and healers began their activities with the utterance of the *bismillah*, thereby rendering them under the sign of Islam and with respect to Muslim values. When the spirits themselves arrived, the situation changed. The *patros* spirits, indigenous to the island, were not Muslim and they drank alcohol and blood, things specifically proscribed by Islam. Given the medicine of an inscribed verse from the Qur'an washed off into a glass of water, a spirit choked and spat it out (Lambek 1995). But certain other spirits, notably *tromba* (apparitions of deceased Sakalava monarchs), who had been Muslim during their lives, appeared in spirit form as Muslims, despite the fact that Islam itself denies the possibility of such possession by former humans, and decries any public revival of the dead. To honor and please one of these spirits, Ndramañavakarivo, who famously converted to Islam during his life in the early nineteenth century, people perform the *Maolida*, a poetic, musical, and dance composition that venerates Muhammad and that is generally performed on nonspirit occasions during the lunar month of the Prophet's birth and at other Muslim celebrations.[26] In other words, spirits—who from the perspective of Islam are officially outside the bounds—can, from within the tradition of spirit possession, be Muslims themselves or come to watch Muslims perform the *Maolida* on their behalf. Sometimes, too, spirits rise among the performers at a Muslim celebration. In sum, if Islam in principle circumscribes or excludes spirit possession, so spirit possession in practice incorporates and recontextualizes Islam.

I can only state, without developing the point, that earnest traditions generally assert the ethical and existential distinction of either/or (mutually exclusive oppositions of radically different value, like good/evil, faithful/apostate, etc.), whereas ironic traditions acknowledge an ethics and logic of both/and. They are ironic precisely insofar as both/and inevitably includes either/or. Put another way, earnest traditions or earnest proponents of their respective traditions assume commensurability or strive for it (in more or less violent ways). Ironic traditions or ironic proponents of their respective traditions assume incommensurability and live with it (more or less happily).[27]

---

25. See Louw (2012) for an excellent account of an ironic form of practicing Islam in Kyrgyzstan.

26. It is not irrelevant that Ndramañavakarivo's conversion anticipates the conversion of all the followers he brought with him from Madagascar to Mayotte. Hence virtually all mediums in Mayotte are Muslim. The *Maolida* is also observed and performed by the non-Malagasy-speaking spirits of former Muslim Sultans of Mayotte (Bouffart 2009), just as it is by Christian and other non-Muslim mediums of Ndramañavakarivo and his relatives in Madagascar.

27. The case of Gadamer, or Gadamerian hermeneutics as I have portrayed it, is evidently more complex, adverting seriously to the ironic recognition of incommensurability.

Conclusion: On the relation of practice to tradition

This collection of articles concerns contexts in which people explicitly recognize their participation in distinct ethical traditions. This is already to speak of ethics in a relatively objectified form—where ethics is distinguished from other things, like, perhaps, law, religion, kinship, medicine, or simply living well together, and where one version or tradition is distinguished from another, parallel or competing tradition. This is a situation that is facilitated by literacy and by literati and might be a depiction appropriate to South and East Asia. But where ethics is largely embodied or reproduced through ritual and practice, the abstraction or discrimination of distinct ethical traditions or traditions that are distinctively ethical might be less expected. Moreover, the encounter between primarily literate and primarily nonliterate traditions carries with it the potential for misunderstanding, confrontation, and imposition, as well as the kind of creative flair evident in spirit possession.

Any tradition that constitutes itself as ethical ought to inculcate in its members the abilities to transcend what is passed on as the substance of that tradition. On analogy with language, it supplies not fixed sentences but grammar. With grammar we can say virtually anything, at least we can make new sentences, and we can do so without giving up our language for another. That is not the same as saying that we can or ought to say anything or everything. Speech is a matter of judicious practice, and it is judicious practice rather than a list of specific virtues (let alone rules) that is the enduring message of Aristotelian ethics.

It may be that sometimes we confuse the grammar of ethics with specific acts or injunctions. Actually, anthropology has not given much thought to the grammar of ethics, or within the grammar, what, if any, are the deeper, perhaps universal features and what are the ones closer to the surface and more particular to a given tradition. By grammar I refer to the general conditions and processes of human thought, feeling, and action that generate specific criteria, virtues, values, and judgments. It is possible that the deeper the grammar, the more commensurable; hence that the very distinction between commensurability and incommensurability is not absolute. I have tried to elucidate one aspect of this grammar in my analysis of the entailments of performative action (Lambek 2010a).

We could examine conversations across traditions according to whether they focus on acknowledging the "said" or the "means of saying," that is, at what level of structural depth understanding or misunderstanding takes place. We could also distinguish where primary commitment is to acts and identifications that precede the encounter (hence to the Self, to continuity) or to an openness toward the encounter (to the Other, to risk and transformation). This is not the same opposition as the one I drew between earnestness and irony.

While some virtue theorists, like MacIntyre, elucidate the particular virtues associated with a particular tradition or with a particular historical horizon within that tradition, there is something to be said for placing more emphasis on the broadest or most general virtue, *phronesis*, call it here practical reasoning or wise judgment, and for acknowledging its presence in ordinary life, irrespective of tradition. Moreover, as Gadamer points out in opposition to MacIntyre, incommensurability is

nothing new,[28] and hence neither are attempts at understanding across boundaries; they are intrinsic to the art of living. Wisdom should apply beyond the application of specific virtues, known scenarios, or predictable circumstances. A strong tradition ought to provide its inhabitants a certain kind of freedom or expansiveness both to proceed with ordinary life and to meet the relatively unexpected—including encounters with other traditions. In the ideal case we are able to acknowledge others, treat them with dignity, and are acknowledged and so treated in return.

Acknowledgments

References

al-Mohammad, Hayder. 2010. "Towards an ethics of being-with: Intertwinements of life in post-invasion Basra." *Ethnos* 75 (4): 425–46.

Asad, Talal. 1986. *The idea of an anthropology of Islam*. Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, Washington, DC.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1982. *The dialogic imagination*. Translated by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Beiner, Ronald. 2014. "Hans-Georg Gadamer: Philosophy without hubris." In *Political philosophy*, 122–34. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Berman, Marshall. 1988. *All that is solid melts into air: The experience of modernity*. New York: Penguin.

Bernstein, Richard. 1983. *Beyond objectivism and relativism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Boddy, Janice. 1989. *Wombs and alien spirits*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Bouffart, Sophie. 2009. "La possession comme lieu et mode d'expression de la complexité sociale: le cas de Mayotte." Doctoral thesis, Paris-Ouest Nanterre.

Carrithers, Michael. 2000. "On polytropy: Or the natural condition of spiritual cosmopolitanism in India: The Digambar Jain case." *Modern Asian Studies* 34 (4):831–61.

Cavell, Stanley. 1996. *A pitch of philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

———. 2005. *Philosophy the day after tomorrow*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Crapanzano, Vincent. 2003. *Imaginative horizons*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Das, Veena. 2007. *Life and words: Violence and the descent into the ordinary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

---

28. See his letter to Bernstein in Bernstein (1983: 264–65).

———. 2014. *Affliction: Health, disease, poverty*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Descola, Philippe. 2013. *Beyond nature and culture*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. (1960) 1985. *Truth and method*. Translated by Garret Barden and John Cumming. New York: Seabury.

———. 1976. *Philosophical hermeneutics*. Translated by David E. Linge. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 1985. *Philosophical apprenticeships*. Translated by Robert R. Sullivan. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

———. 2000. "Anti anti-relativism." In *Available light: Anthropological reflections on philosophical topics*, 42–67. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hanks, William. 2010. *Converting words: Maya in the age of the cross*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 2013. "Language in Christian conversion." In *A companion to the anthropology of religion*, edited by Janice Boddy and Michael Lambek, 387–406. Boston: Wiley-Blackwell.

Henn, Alexander. 2014. *Hindu–Catholic encounters in Goa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Laidlaw, James. 2010. "Agency and responsibility: Perhaps you can have too much of a good thing." In *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language and action*, edited by Michael Lambek, 143–64. New York: Fordham University Press.

———. 2014. *The subject of virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lambek, Michael. 1991. "Tryin' to make it real but compared to what?" *Culture* 11 (1–2): 29–38. (Special issue, "From method to modesty: Essays on thinking and making ethnography now," edited by Michael Lambek.)

———.1993. *Knowledge and practice in Mayotte: Local discourses of Islam, sorcery, and spirit possession*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

———.1995. "Choking on the Qur'an and other consuming parables from the Western Indian Ocean front." In *The pursuit of certainty*, edited by Wendy James, 252–75 (ASA Monographs). London: Routledge.

———. 1997. "Pinching the crocodile's tongue: Affinity and the anxieties of influence in fieldwork." *Anthropology and Humanism* 22 (1): 31–53. (Special issue, "Fieldwork revisited: Changing contexts of ethnographic practice in the era of globalization," edited by Sandra Bamford and Joel Robbins.)

———. 2000. "Localizing Islamic performances in Mayotte." In *Inside and outside the mosque: The anthropology of Muslim prayer across the Indian Ocean*, edited by David Parkin and Stephen Headley, 63–97. Oxford: Curzon.

———. 2007. "The cares of Alice Alder: Recuperating kinship and history in Switzerland." In *Ghosts of memory: Essays on remembrance and relatedness*, edited by Janet Carsten, 218–40. Oxford: Blackwell.

———. 2008a. "Provincializing God? Provocations from an anthropology of religion." In *Religion: beyond a concept*, edited by Hent de Vries, 120–38. New York: Fordham University Press.

———. 2008b. "Value and virtue." *Anthropological Theory* 8 (2): 133–57.

———. 2010a. "Toward an ethics of the act." In *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language and action*, edited by Michael Lambek, 39–63. New York: Fordham University Press.

———. 2010b. "How to make up one's mind: Reason, passion, and ethics in spirit possession." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 79 (2): 720–41, (Special issue, "Models of mind," edited by Marlene Goldman and Jill Matus.)

———. 2011. "Anthropology's ontological anxiety and the concept of tradition." *Anthropologica* 53 (2): 317–22.

———. 2012. "Ethics out of the ordinary." In *ASA handbook of social anthropology*, Vol. 2, edited by Richard Fardon et al., 141–52. London: Sage.

———. 2013. "The continuous and discontinuous person: Two dimensions of ethical life." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 19 (4): 837–58.

———. 2015 (forthcoming). *The ethical condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lear, Jonathan. 2003. *Therapeutic action: An earnest plea for irony*. New York: Other Press.

Louw, Maria. 2012. "Being Muslim the ironic way: Secularism, religion, and irony in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan." In *Varieties of secularism in Asia*, edited by Nils Bubandt and Martijn van Beek, 143–62. Oxford: Routledge.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1981. *After virtue*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

———. 1988. *Whose justice? Which rationality?* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

———. 1990. *Three rival versions of moral enquiry*. London: Duckworth.

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of piety*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mattingly, Cheryl. 2012. "Two virtue ethics and the anthropology of morality." *Anthropological Theory* 12 (2): 161–84.

Michelfelder, Diane, and Richard Palmer, eds. 1989. *Dialogue and deconstruction: The Gadamer–Derrida encounter*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Nehamas, Alexander. 1998. *The art of living*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ortner, Sherry. 1978. *Sherpas through their rituals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rappaport, Roy. 1999. *Ritual and religion in the making of humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rorty, Richard. 1980. *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Schutz, Alfred. 1964. "The well-informed citizen." In *Alfred Schutz, collected papers, Vol. 2, studies in social theory*, edited by Arvid Brodersen, 120–34. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Shohet, Merav. 2011. "Text artifacts, traces of grief, and colonial legacies in achieving a 'good death' in central Vietnam." Paper presented at the AAA 110th Annual Meeting. Montreal, Canada.

Stewart, Charles, and Rosalind Shaw, eds. 1994. *Syncretism/anti-syncretism: The politics of religious synthesis*. New York: Routledge.

Tehindrazanarivelo, Emmanuel. 1997. "Fieldwork: The dance of power." *Anthropology and Humanism* 22 (1): 54–60. (Special issue, "Fieldwork revisited: Changing contexts of ethnographic practice in the era of globalization," edited by Sandra Bamford and Joel Robbins.)

Ulin, Robert. 1984. *Understanding cultures: Perspectives in anthropology and social theory*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. (Second edition, 2001.)

Wachterhauser, Brice, ed. 1986. *Hermeneutics and modern philosophy*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Warnke, Georgia. 2002. "Hermeneutics, ethics, and politics." In *The Cambridge companion to Gadamer*, edited by Robert J. Dostal, 79–101. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Wentzer, Thomas. 2014. "'I have seen Königsberg burning': Philosophical anthropology and the responsiveness of historical experience." *Anthropological Theory* 14 (1): 27–48.

L'herméneutique des rencontres éthiques: entre traditions et pratique

Résumé : Johnathan Mair et Nicholas Evans (cette collection) prennent pour objet de leur analyse l'espace de l'herméneutique. En d'autres termes, le moment de la rencontre entre deux formes de tradition est éthique seulement lorsqu'il est approché de manière herméneutique. L'approche herméneutique se situe au-delà du choix entre rationalisme et relativisme, et bien évidemment au-delà de l'assurance doctrinaire que notre tradition est la bonne. L'herméneutique s'accorde bien avec l'éthique de la vertu aristotélicienne, surtout telle qu'elle est interprétée par Gadamer. De plus, les « traditions » et les frontières surviennent à plusieurs niveaux d'inclusion ; parler au-delà et en-deçà de ceux-ci est une pratique ordinaire, et ceci doit être pris en compte par toute tentative de restitution de la vie éthique. Je propose d'illustrer ce propos en revisitant sous l'angle de l'éthique les parcours croisés de trois traditions décrites dans *Knowledge and practice in Mayotte* (Lambek 1993).

Michael LAMBEK holds a Canada Research Chair and is Chair, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto Scarborough. He is author of *Knowledge and practice in Mayotte* (University of Toronto Press, 1993), *The weight of the past: Living with history in Mahajanga, Madagascar* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), *The ethical condition* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), and editor of *Illness and irony* (with Paul Antze, Berghahn, 2003), *Ordinary ethics* (Fordham University Press,

2010), and *A companion to the anthropology of religion* (with Janice Boddy, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), among other works.

Michael Lambek
Department of Anthropology,
University of Toronto,
19 Russell Street,
Toronto,
Ontario M5S 2S2,
Canada
lambek@utsc.utoronto.ca