

REVIEW OF

Moral Engines: Exploring the Ethical Drive in Human Life

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BOOK REVIEW BY STUART LANG

Even with the push towards inter-disciplinary work in recent time, bridging the gaps between the many ways of thinking about the world is still something not easily done. *Moral Engines: Exploring the Ethical Drives in Human Life*, however, is a shining example of what can be done when different ways of thinking openly discuss with one another. This volume, edited by Dyring, Louw, Mattingly and Wentzer, assembles a varied collection of chapters from both anthropologists and philosophers all whom are examining a common question; what are the 'moral drives' in human life? The editors identify three categories that the chapters in this volume fall into, the first being a 'focus primarily on the concrete instantiation and social shape of the moral in such phenomena as values, criteria and standards', the second stressing 'the features of moral experience and the experiential dimensions of being ethically committed or confronted by an ethical demand', and the third category looking to 'the existential roots of morality as a way to investigate what it is to be human' (2017,20).

Mattingly's chapter is a discussion primarily on her argument for rethinking what is meant by the 'narrative self'. This argument focusing on the idea that the self, in response to ethical dilemmas and demands, 'engages in narrative experiments' (2017,41). The narrative self, in regard to the question at hand, is not static but malleable. With this in mind, the author presents her moral engine, being 'care of the intimate other' (2017,41). The 'care of the intimate other' being tied to long-term self-definition due to 'commitments to projects and significant others' (2017,44). In Throop's chapter, he explores how the moral is interwoven with 'moods of possibility' (2017,62), with a particular focus on regret. Throop looks at how these moods affect human life focusing on stories of sufferers of type-2 diabetes in Yap, situated within the Federated States of Micronesia. Louw focus is on the people's perceptions of good and evil and how our judgements of what constitutes as either good or evil is not a straightforward matter in everyday life. With her fieldwork based in on followers of Sufism in Uzbekistan, the author explores ideas of haunting, and how the idea of haunting applies to one's moral life. Meinert discusses 'forgiveness' through the lens of fieldwork carried out in Uganda. Forgiveness not being a simple speech act but something that has to be shown every day. The author, through the interviews presented, shows that it is everyday actions that act as moral engines. The metaphor of

using a grinding stone used by Meinert aptly explains this daily struggle to forgive; 'it is slow, it takes muscle power, you get better at it with experience and it is continuous work that has to be done every single day' (2017, 113). Dyring deals with the idea of human freedom within anthropology and the issues surrounding the question of the disciplines "ethical turn". "Possibility" is a central theme of the chapter, with Dyring explaining that possibility 'the possibility of developing a sound anthropological approach to the ethical. But such an approach relies heavily on figuring out what the term 'possibility' itself can even mean' (2017,119). Dyring explores the questions through both anthropological text, *Radical Hope* (2006) by Jonathan Lear, and art in the form of Marco Evaristti's *Helena & El Pescador*. Zigon examines the moral drives on life by looking at his ethnographic work done on anti-drug war political activism. By discussing his interactions with research participants in the United States and Canada, Zigon explores the idea of dignity and by extension the idea of dwelling. The author argues that an anthropology of morality, or moralities, not only allows us to uncover how moral concepts came to be but may also 'offer new concepts that better articulate the moral experiences of our ethnographic subjects' (2017,197).

In the chapter by Raffoul, the idea of responsibility is considered and the central role "responsibility" holds in philosophies of ethics. He engages with Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean ideologies in the discussion of what 'the very sense of being responsible' is (2017,239). And that by dismantling previous assumptions on ethics and morality the work to understand what it means to be responsible can begin anew. In his chapter, Lambek argues for an understanding of ethics that 'is to be found at the conjunction of practical judgment and performative action' (2017,139). For Lambek it is these two aspects of human

action, is the 'immanence' of ethics. The author is careful to state that he is not arguing that morally 'good' judgements or actions are immanent but rather that the 'possibilities for acting (well) and judging (wisely) are immanent' (2017,143). These possibilities are realised through 'criteria', which, for Lambek, are made accessible through the social life, or 'the work of culture' (2017,149). Robbins offers a 'socially and psychologically realistic answer' to the book's central questions (2017,155). Through the definition of moral facts formulated by Durkheim, the author posits that 'values', or more accurately, representations of values, are moral engines capable of driving human behaviour. It is the engagement with these representations of values and their elaboration, Robbins posits, that enable people to 'experience the existence of values and come to feel their force as engines of moral action' (2017,171). Laidlaw's contribution is primarily concerned with the questions of what an ethical subject is and what possess ethical agency, the foundations of moral engines according to Laidlaw. The author grapples with issues raised by other theorists. An example being Eduardo Kohn's and Cheryl Mattingly's beliefs, Kohn arguing that the ethical subject and agency go beyond the human, while Mattingly sees these characteristics specifically human. Laidlaw attempts to strike a balance between the two polarised viewpoints while addressing other theorists in the chapter. Wentzer's chapter is a fascinating contribution from the discipline of philosophy and is intriguing to the reader coming from an anthropological background. Using 'philosophical anthropology' as his method, the author offers the idea of responsiveness as a moral engine, stating 'the ethical, I maintain, is bound to human responsiveness' (2017,226). Wentzer posits that by the virtue of humans existing, they are responsive beings. It is this responsiveness that helps our understanding of ethics and agency (2017,211).

Overall the text offers an insightful interdisciplinary discussion on the topics of morality and ethics, albeit a conflicted title and theme as is made evident by many of the authors' concerns with the idea and term

'moral engines' throughout the volume. A fascinating read for those interested in the in the field regardless of what side of the fence one resides.