Ethics and Religion *Avant la Lettre*
The Perspective from Existential Anthropology

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Just as Aristotle observed that, "men create the gods after their own image", so Durkheim claimed that, "God is only a figurative expression of … society."[1] This view that religion and ethics are socially derived, was shared by Weber and Marx, and it also informed Geertz's view that religious beliefs are a way in which a social group renders its ethos "intellectually reasonable"[2] The problem with these approaches is that they are at once too abstract and too general. The social is identified with groups and institutions, ethics is confused with moral norms, and religion is made synonymous with belief and meaning.

In many societies – including those in West Africa and Aboriginal Australia where I have done extensive fieldwork – 'religion' and 'ethics' are not identified linguistically or conceptually as discrete domains, leading one to ask, as Paul Ricoeur does, whether we would do well to focus neither on a neo-Aristotelian ethics based on the idea of a good life, nor a Kantian approach based on duty and obligation, but rather on questions of 'practical wisdom' (*phronesis*) in everyday life when unprecedented situations arise, problems don't admit of any solution, perfection remains beyond our grasp, and virtue may reside less in achieving the good than in striving for it.[3] In this article, I want to pursue this focus on ethical struggle, ethical dilemmas and existential aporias that I first developed in my 1982 study of Kuranko folktales,[4] exploring the possibility of locating ethics within the social without reifying society, religion and ethics, or regarding them as sui generis phenomena.

My first suggestion is that we dissolve our conventional concepts of the social and the cultural into the more immediate and dynamic notion of intersubjectivity – the everyday interplay of human subjects, coming together and moving apart, giving and taking, communicating and

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[1] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 258.

[2] Clifford Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System,' in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Tavistock, 1966), 1-46 (2).

[3] Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 92. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blaimey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 173-175.

[4] Michael Jackson, *Allegories of the Wilderness: Ethics and Ambiguity in Kuranko Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

miscommunicating. Second, I suggest that we see our sense of the ethical as deriving less from normative maxims, categorical imperatives or cultural codifications than from our deep awareness that our very existence is interwoven with the existence of others, and that the reciprocal character of human relations gives rise, from the earliest months of life, to inchoate, conflicted and diffuse assumptions about fairness, justice, rightness and goodness. As Ricoeur puts it, this means that we retain from Aristotle "only the ethics of reciprocity, of sharing, of living together."[5] To make these moves, however, we need a method of study that suspends a priori notions of right and wrong, good and bad, and draws us deeply into lived situations. Michael Lambek has coined the term "ordinary ethics" to signal this departure from the Kantian tradition of Western moral thought – in which a priori assumptions about autonomy, agency, virtue and community refer to particular situations cursorily, anecdotally or not at all. For Lambek, ethics is "fundamentally a property or function of action rather than (only) of abstract reason."[6] There are echoes here of Veena Das's argument for a "descent into the ordinary",[7] and David Graeber's claim that "if we really want to understand the moral grounds of economic life, and by extension, human life," we must start not with cosmologies and worldviews but with "the very small things: the everyday details of social existence, the way we treat our friends, enemies, and children – often with gestures so tiny (passing the salt, bumming a cigarette) that we ordinarily never stop to think about them at all."[8]

These gestures toward "ordinary ethics", and the ways in which questions of what is right and good figure in almost every human interaction, conversation and rationalization, effectively reinscribe the role of ethnography as a method for exploring a variety of actual social situations before hazarding generalizations. This is not to say that empirical studies of particular events or lives offer no insights into what may be universal. Rather, by locating the ethical in the field of intersubjective life, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically, we call into question the assumption that existence is a struggle to bring one's life into alignment with preestablished moral norms and become more fascinated by our everyday struggles to decide between competing imperatives, or deal with impasses, unbearable situations, moral dilemmas and double-binds.

The present article will touch on three closely related subjects. First, the principle of reciprocity and the moral logic of exchange. Second, recent psychological research on primary intersubjectivity. Third, cases from my Kuranko ethnography that suggest how ethical dilemmas may be resolved in thought more readily than they can be resolved in life. Finally, I explore the limit situations and existential aporias in which ethical resolutions defy resolution.

We are all used to such everyday comments as these: "I think she deserves better, considering everything she has been through and had to put up with"; "He doesn't deserve such happiness"; "She is owed more respect than she ever gets"; "He got his just deserts"; "She finally got her due." Against what unspoken or unspecified standard are these notions of deservingness, due, or debt measured? What ethical yardstick determines these kinds of judgment, these claims we make on others and the world at large, this sense of what a human being is owed, is due, or deserves simply by virtue of being in the world?

In his celebrated essay on the gift, Marcel Mauss argued that a minima moralia of natural justice and fair play inheres in every relationship – whether between persons, persons and animals or persons and things. Mauss's model of reciprocity defined three basic obligations of exchange – giving, receiving, returning what is given and received. But Mauss took pains to point out that the things we exchange "have values which are emotional as well as material".[9]

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[5] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another,* 187.
[6] Michael Lambek, *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language and Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 14.
[7] Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 15.
[8] David Graeber, *Debt: the First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2011), 89.

[9] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Function of Exchange in Archaic Societies,* trans. Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen and West, 1954), 63.

We share not only goods and services, but affective and moral qualities such as recognition, kindness, goodwill, sympathy and confidences. Accordingly, two incommensurable notions of value are always at play in any exchange, real or imagined – the first involving the rational calculation of determinate values, the second involving elusive moral values (Mauss's 'spiritual matter') such as rightness, fairness and empathy. This means that all exchange involves a continual struggle to give, claim or redistribute some scarce and elusive existential good – such as recognition, love, humanity, wellbeing, voice, power, presence, honor or dignity – whose value is incalculable. And it is precisely this ambiguity that makes it impossible to reduce intersubjective reason to a form of logico-mathematical reason, for while the latter works with precise concepts abstracted from material, bodily and affective contexts, the logic of intersubjectivity never escapes the impress and imprecision of our lived relationships with others. Closely connected to this contrast between social and abstract logics is the incommensurability of moral and monetary modalities of exchange that David Schneider characterized in terms of the opposition between consanguinity ("blood" relations) and contract (business dealings).[10] And it is this implicit tension between a sense of what one owes others and what one seeks to own for oneself that becomes, from the first moments of contact between tribal peoples and the mercantile West, a bone of contention and a cause of war. In 19th century New Zealand, for instance, Maori were willing to sell land to Europeans because they believed that this would initiate long-term, mutually beneficial social relations between the two peoples. Thus the proverb: *Ko maru kai atu, ko maru kai mai; ka ngohe ngohe* (Giving in abundance, receiving in abundance; everything is going well). For pakeha, however, a land sale was made with no strings attached, no enduring moral obligations, and no further negotiations. It was construed as nothing more than an economic transaction.

In the Conclusion to his essay on the gift, Marcel Mauss, expresses the hope that Europeans will learn to "humanize" their relations with one another, and with other nations, along the lines suggested by this Maori proverb, striking a better balance between self-interest and an interest in others. "In moral matters," he asks, "is there even any other kind of reality?"[11]

Mauss assumed that the elementary forms of moral life (expressed in the principle of reciprocity) were "archaic", which is to say they were vestiges in modern consciousness of a historically prior stage in human evolution that survived, more or less intact, in contemporary "primitive" societies. Anthropologists have long rejected this survivalist explanation for the sense of 'natural justice' or 'fairness' that can be identified in all human societies, but it is only relatively recently that have they adopted an intersubjective perspective that reveals the ways in which the ethical and the social are mutually entailed, and precede any awareness we might have of them as categories of thought.[12]

Merleau-Ponty's intuitive sense of the social as the ground of being has recently been given empirical substance by psychologists researching the field of primary intersubjectivity. Emphasizing the reciprocity of voice, eye contact, touch, smell and playful interaction between mother and infant, Ed Tronick speaks of a collaboration of infant and parent in regulating interaction and laying down the neuro-behavioral foundations of a 'dyadic consciousness" that incorporates complex information, experience and mutual mappings into a relatively coherent whole that functions as a self-regulating system, effectively expanding the consciousness of one person into the consciousness of another.[13] Dy-

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[10] David Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

[11] Mauss, 70, 71.

[12] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 362.

[13] As Webb Keane, puts it, "the sociological imagination would put the bare fact of life with others at the heart of ethics." Keane also points out that many other ethnographers have arrived at a similar conclusion, particularly in analyses of children's conversations and interactions that reveal "collaborative acts of framing", and "the subtle acts of evaluation and judgment [that] linguistic anthropologists categorize

adic consciousness begins in the stage of primary intersubjectivity, and should an infant be "deprived of the experience of expanding his or her states of consciousness in collaboration with the other … this limits the infant's experience and forces the infant into self-regulatory patterns that eventually compromise the child's development." From this sense of being deeply bonded to another emerges a sense of being beholden to that other. Without the mother's positive mirroring, the infant will feel that it lacks completeness (ego strength). In a sense, the infant owes not only its biological life to the mother but its very existence. But this sense of being implies, from the outset, *a sense of sharing* in the being of another. A child's nascent moral sense does not derive from a sense of indebtedness to the other (because she sacrificed so much of herself for the child's well-being); it reflects the incipient understanding that one's life is never entirely one's own, but tied, neurologically and reciprocally, to the life of another. Daniel Stern goes as far as to say that this "interaffective sharing" is absent only in psychotics and sci-fi aliens.[14] What is good or bad for oneself, therefore, will normally entail, to some degree, the reciprocal awareness that it is also good or bad for others.

One of the earliest verbalized and conceptualized expressions of this awareness is the sense of fairness – the sense that the wherewithal of life should be equally shared, particularly among those who have common parentage or belong to the same community. David Graeber argues that this assumption finds consummate expression in the 'baseline communism' of Marx and Engels: 'to each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs'. This humanistic ethos coexists, however, with socially constructed hierarchical perspectives. On the one hand, we are conscious of our difference from others. Not only is every individual unique, but we tend to draw sharp contrasts between ourselves and others who do not share our values, laws, lands and languages. On the other hand, there is an ineradicable sense that despite such differences we share with all other human beings a common humanity. Moreover, our sense of the human often flows into the realm of animals and objects which, under certain circumstances, take on the attributes of will, consciousness and moral reasoning that define humanness, while human beings may lose these attributes and become, at least metaphorically, mere animals or inert objects. It is this sense that the other is myself in other circumstances, and that anyone may transcend differences and circulate in other worlds as if they were his or her own, that underpins the ethic of hospitality, finds expression in bonds with animals and material possessions, and is evident from time immemorial in patterns of human migration, intermingling and interaction across the globe. Equally timeless, however, is the tension between these competing notions of singularity (ipse) and similarity (idem). An emphasis on distinction implies that a person's worth is relative to birth, nationality, ability or social status, while an emphasis on sameness suggests that one's worth is conditional on nothing else than the fact that one is human. This minima moralia that is suggested by such phrases as 'the right to life', 'a life worth living', or 'human equality in the sight of God', inevitably comes up against distributive moralities associated with hierarchical social formations. All too often, this distributive morality, based on our particular identity as male or female, poor or rich, black or white, old or young, citizen or alien, overrides our awareness of what we owe others, leading us to write off large portions of humanity as essentially unlike us, as having no claims on us, and, in extreme cases, not deserving to survive. Yet a sense of our common humanity continues to haunt us, as though it were impossible to fully divorce categories from persons, rules from lives.

If a sense of the ethical inheres in our relations with others, it also inheres in our relations with the objective environment. Just as the presence of others brings us continually back to ourselves, so the architecture of the world and the things we touch, taste, see and hear in the course of our lives offer a fund of images with which we objectify and articulate our inchoate sense of rightness and goodness. There is therefore an intimate connection between a symmetrical or

as stance." Webb Keane, 'Minds, Surfaces, and Reasons,' in Michael Lambek, ed., op.cit., 64-83 (82, 74).
[14] Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 204.

square figure and the idea of reciprocity (being all square, or fair and square). Physical straightness and crookedness are made metaphors of moral uprightness and wrongness. Something that tastes sweet will serve as an image of wellbeing (*eudaimonia*).

Let us consider in more detail the Kuranko conception of moral personhood. *Morgoye* (personhood) connotes moral qualities of magnanimity and mindfulness of others that Kuranko set at the foundation of the social order. Ideally, such virtues will be found in persons who are responsible for maintaining the social order – chiefs, elders, and ancestors. Since one's social status is determined by birth and worth is relative to birth, chiefs are superior – in both a social and moral sense – to commoners, while men are superior to women, elder siblings are superior to younger siblings, adults are superior to children, and people are superior to animals. However, the distributive morality implied by this hierarchy coexists with a humanizing morality that reflects qualities of personhood that are only contingently tied to birth. Thus, while rulers ideally protect and care for those under their jurisdiction, many rulers prove incapable of meeting the needs of their people, and the virtues of chieftaincy may be found in a mere commoner. At the same time, youngsters may prove cleverer than their elders, and women more compassionate than men. But in Kuranko myth, this idea that virtue is *contingently* distributed is taken much further.

This may reflect a universal logic, since no human being can exemplify absolute virtue. Accordingly, someone from beyond the pale of one's familiar world – a totemic animal, a prophet, a passing stranger – embodies the ethical essence of humanity. In the first myth, the outsider is a member of the lowest and most marginal Kuranko clans – the finaba, the bards and genealogists on whom chiefs rely for their legitimacy.

> Saramba was a ruler and also a warrior of great renown. But his half-brothers became jealous of his fame and decided to kill him. They plotted to ambush him along the road. Though the conspiracy was discovered, Saramba was unable to delay his journey. A bard (finaba) called Musa Kule decided to disguise Saramba in his clothes. He donned Saramba's clothes so that he would die and thus save Saramba's life.
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> On the day of the journey, they left together. A little way along the road, Musa Kule took off his hat, gown and trousers, and gave them to Saramba, his lord. Musa Kule then dressed in Saramba's clothes. They went on, riding on horses. As usual Saramba was riding ahead. When they reached the place where the ambush had been laid, Saramba, disguised, passed by. The men in hiding said, "Oh no, not that one, it is only his poor finaba." Musa Kule then came, dressed in Saramba's clothes. They shot him.
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> Therefore, since the time of Saramba and Musa Kule, they have always been together. Therefore they say, "Musa Kule and Saramba," meaning that they "go together".

The structure of the story involves chiasmus – an exchange of social positions (signified by swapping clothes) that effectively nullifies the status distinction between the ruler and his underling since the bard's altruism (a moral disposition) proves to be as great as the ruler's power (an inherited social position). To put it in Kuranko terms, a 'wild' or 'contingent' moral quality that symbolically belongs to the bush is transferred to the domesticated, hierarchically ordered world of the town, humanizing it.

Let us now consider a second narrative that accomplishes the same kind of transference. While the story of Saramba and Musa Kule explains the equality or closeness of the descendants of a high-born ruler and his low-born bard, the following story explains the similarly intimate relationship between clanspeople and their totemic animal.

The clan is the Kuyaté, and the animal is the monitor lizard.

> The Kuyaté do not eat the monitor lizard. Our ancestor went to a faraway place. There was no water there. He became thirsty. He was near death. Then he found a huge tree, and in the bole of the tree was some water left from the rains. The monitor lizard was also there. The ancestor of the Kuyaté sat under the tree. The monitor lizard climbed into the bole of the tree and shook its tail. The water splashed the man. The ancestor of the Kuyaté realized there was water there. He climbed up and drank. He declared: "Ah, the monitor lizard has saved my life!" When he returned to town he told his clan about the incident.

He said, "You see me here now because of that monitor lizard." Since that time the monitor lizard has been the Kuyaté totem. Should any Kuyaté eat it, his body will become marked and disfigured like the body of the monitor lizard. His joking partners will have to find medicines to cure him.

Most clan myths proceed from an explanation of how a particular animal became the clan totem to an account of how certain other clans became allied or incorporated as joking partners or marriage partners. Just as the moral bond between a clan and its totem is expressed in bodily terms (eating one's totem results in a disfigurement of the skin that mimics the body markings of the totemic animal), so sharing a totem with another clan is often seen as a form of common embodiment.

This incorporation of different clans as members of a common moral polity, may be effected by other means. In the myth that explains why the Kamara and Yaran clans are 'one', the first women of both clans give birth to children in the same house at the same time. When the house catches fire, a dog run into the burning house and brings out the babies. But in the confusion, the mothers cannot decide whose baby belongs to who. Thereafter, a ban is placed on intermarriage between the Kamara and Yaran. In yet another myth, the ancestors of the Kargbo and Sisé clans come to a great river. The Sisé transforms himself into a crocodile and ferries the Kargbo across. The Sisé then cuts off the calf of his leg, roasts it, and give it to the Kargbo to eat. The crocodile becomes the totem of the Kargbo clan, and the bond between Sisé and Kargbo becomes inviolable.

Kuranko clan myths contrive to eclipse the nominal differences between clans by conjuring images of intermingled bodies or blood, crossed lines of descent, confused filiation, and near identical appearance. However, this fusion of identities is never fully consummated. Even though informants speak of sanaku linked clans as 'one person', as 'kin', as 'like affines', or as 'close friends', the word sanaku connotes duplication or duplicity, and it is this ambiguous mix of identity and difference that gives rise to the joking relationship. United on one level (as a result of events that effectively nullify or mask their differences), they remain, nonetheless, divided by name, status, and, often as not, a ban on intermarriage. Perhaps the most exact analogy to the *sanakuiye tolon* is with successive siblings, where the status difference between elder and young is recognized yet at the same time blurred. In the words of one informant, sanakuiye is 'when two clans originate with two brothers who are born next to one another.' Alternatively, an analogy is sometimes drawn between the sanakuiye and the relation between half-siblings, who share one blood ('same father') but have different mothers. It is as if one cannot take the mythical fusion of identities seriously, which is why the sanaku link gets acted out in forms of licensed abuse and mutual denigration that dramatically undermine status distinctions.

At a bestowal, a man might give a handful of stones and a pariah dog to his joking clan partner, saying, "Take this kola and this cow as our contribution to the bride wealth." At a naming ceremony for an infant, a joker might declare, "Ah, one more slave in the family!" After an initiation, a joker might approach one of the neophyte's fathers with a bundle of dirty, discarded rags, saying, "I have brought this gown of manhood for your son to put on." And at a funeral, a joker could enter the house of the deceased and bind the hands, feet, and body of the corpse with rope, saying, "Heh, you cannot bury him; he is my slave," or he might order to the bereaved to cease crying, promising to bring the dead person back to life.

It may be that the ideal of fused identity and common humanity can only be realized imperfectly because it depends on qualities such as goodwill, magnanimity, and altruism that cannot be enforced or ordained. It is the same reason why a social order cannot be built upon freely chosen ties of friendship, or marriage based solely on love.

And yet, in totemic icons, in the sharing of totems, and in the bonds of the sanakuiye, the Kuranko affirm a conception of moral personhood (morgoye) that goes beyond the prescriptive domain of close kinship and extends the possibility of sociality into the wider world. In so far as the outside world is regarded as bush, the mythical scenario involves ancestral journeys into the wilderness and identifies the virtues of personhood with animals. Thus totemic univer-

salization, by extending humanity to certain animals, may be said to provide a model for transcending ethnic boundaries. As Lévi-Strauss put it, the totemic classifications and clan correspondences in the western Sudan effectively prevent the closure of each group, and promote "an idea something like that of a humanity without frontiers."[15]

But this humanistic reading must be tempered by a realization that open borders and openness of heart are conditional upon relative peace and prosperity. Given their bitter memories of invasion, border disputes, and colonial rule, it is not surprising that the Kuranko distrust strangers, seek to keep their own counsel, and are preoccupied with marking the perimeters of their bodies, houses, villages, and chiefdoms with protective charms. The bond between totemic animal and ancestor, like the bond between sanaku linked clans, is steeped in ambivalence. The other to whom one owes one's life, or in whom one's identity was once lost, remains other. Humanitarianism is haunted by hierarchy. The very freedom of choice that once united people in friendship or kinship may be exercised to divide them. If Kuranko clan myths have any abiding value, it lies not in their power to prescribe a permanent unity between self and others but in their power to sustain an ironic sense that in the long run distinction and separation can be as inimical to one's social survival as the absolute incorporation and blurring of self in the being of another.

In a sense this ambivalent refrain – referring as it does to narrative images that closely juxtapose sameness and difference – is grounded in the problem of marriage. While the union of man and woman is a universal metaphor of mergence and incorporation, the resistance of the I to the not-I is, to use Georg Simmel's words, "felt nowhere more deeply than here".[16] To be sure, marriage is the bridge between one's own natal world and the res publica, and, as Martin Buber noted, the most forceful human acknowledgment of what it means to enter into a rela-

tionship with and to be answerable to an-other: an affirmation of "the fact that the other is [and] that I cannot legitimately share in the Present Being without sharing in the being of the other."[17] But the very density, necessity, and intimacy of this relationship transforms it into a site where the balance between self and other, fusion and separation, is most difficult to maintain. For the Kuranko, it is the husband's lineage and the wife's lineage that define these two contrasted poles of identity. If marriage transcends the difference between erstwhile strangers, confirming affinity in alliance and exchange, in-lawship remains nonetheless dependent on interpersonal relationships between brother and sister, and husband and wife. No matter how imperative and imposed are the jural ties of affinity, they are always susceptible to the vagaries of personal affection and desire. While love, forbearance, and respect strengthen affinal ties, infidelity, capriciousness, and deceit may destroy them. "All the palavers in this world can be resolved, except the palavers caused by women," goes the Kuranko adage.

Legally incorporated utterly into her husband's household, a young bride nurtures emotional ties to her own family and female friends that are often seen as inimical to her role as dutiful wife and caring mother. Among the Kuranko, as in many other societies, the young wife, divided in loyalties and caught between the imperatives of structure and sentiment, is often made the focus of men's anxieties about controlling the border between their own world and the wilderness beyond. But if many Kuranko men are preoccupied by the problem of how to ensure that women do their bidding, many young Kuranko women are just as deeply preoccupied by the problem of how to escape the onerous and restrictive demands placed on them. Keti Ferenke Koroma put it, "When women consider the fact that they bore us, yet we pay bridewealth for them and they become our wives, they get angry." Sinkari Yegbe of Kamadugu readily confirmed this view. Many women don't like being beholden to men simply because bridewealth has changed hands. Domestic malinger-

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[15] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 166.

[16] Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950), 128.

[17] Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Robert Gregory Smith (London: Fontana, 1961), 83.

ing and cheating on their husbands are, she confided, "ways of getting their own back."

The hierarchical relationship between superordinate and subordinate thus finds its most troubled expression in conjugal life. Subjected to the formal constraints of marriage, and made an object in exchange, a young wife may at the same time form clandestine attachments, assert her right to make demands on her brother (whose own marriage was conditional on the bridewealth her marriage brought to his family), and rejoice in her ability to control and influence the destiny of her children. This is why men often stereotype women as seducers and traducers who poison good relations between men and, in the past, used their wiles to betray their husbands to enemies.

Ethics

On what grounds can we speak of humanizing a social landscape, or of a humanitarian intervention, or of 'inhumanity' and 'humanity' when different societies, polities and faith-based traditions tend to define the human in their own particular terms and in the light of their own particular interests? This problem would seem insoluble if worth were completely determined by birth, making our humanity relative to our position in a social hierarchy or our membership of a particular ethnic group or nation state. Even humanism and human rights would, in this perspective, be seen as products of a particular moment in European history and a projection of a particular European social class. The usual, but spurious, resolution of this problem of relativity is to universalize a particular conception of the human. Advocates of human rights and of humanitarianism typically proceed as if the genesis of their assumptions in European culture were irrelevant and that those cultures that do not recognize human rights as defined in Western discourse are premodern, 'medieval' or simply 'barbaric.' The other strategy for giving universal or absolute legitimacy to a particular ethos is to argue for its genesis in some *extra-human* sphere. These two logical options associate ultimate ethical principles with divinities or with nature. Virtue is thus transcendent. Though human beings may deny it, rightness and goodness endure because they lie beyond the sphere of human interests and manipulations. A third option is not to tie humanism to any category, either this-worldly or other-worldly, acknowledging that virtue makes its appearance irrespective of any social determinations, natural laws or divine revelations. It may appear in the magnanimity of an animal that saves a human being from death in the wilderness, in the altruism of a Samaritan or a good neighbor, or in the intervention of a God or a djinn. The good is not necessarily found where one expects to find it. It is neither a function of socially constructed or divinely revealed moral truths, nor a monopoly of the powerful, but of a random patterning that humans cannot determine or even understand. The same holds true of evil, which also makes its appearance in the unlikeliest persons and places.

This view of ethics – which I have encountered in my ethnographic work in both West Africa and Aboriginal Australia – is far more accepting of the unsystematic and unfathomable distribution of virtue and vice in this world than prevailing Western views that spring from Judeo-Christian or Greek traditions. Among the Kuranko, for example, qualities of moral personhood (generosity of spirit, mindfulness of others) are, like unkindness and cruelty, potentialities of all life forms, not just of human beings. Some children are born with good dispositions (yugi kin), others with bad dispositions (yugi ma kin). Virtue finds expression in an animal rather than a person (in the totemic myths), in a low-born bard rather than a ruler (in the Saramba myth), in a djinn rather than a person (in tales of helpless children helped by a supernatural intercessory). Those in whom virtue ideally resides may, in a crisis, show themselves bereft of it. It is said that God "slept" during the civil war, as though indifferent to the fate of his people. Some chiefs exploit their people rather than care for them. Some parents fail to look after their children, or put their own interests first. And despite what men say, women are often the paragons of virtue and men lose their own humanity in laying down the law or being corrupted by power.

What is striking about ethical behavior is its indeterminacy. While there is little or no ambiguity surrounding moral norms, one can never be certain when and where the good will be manifest. Accordingly, our sense of ourselves as ethical resembles our sense of ourselves as human. There are times when we exaggerate our differences from others, calling them cockroaches, vermin, animals, or mere things while retaining for ourselves alone the designation 'human'. At other times, we recoil from the idea that we are essentially different from others, and assume ethical responsibility for their welfare. This quandary is spelled out in *Genesis*, where Cain is a tiller of the ground, and Abel a keeper of sheep. Cain offers a portion of his harvest to God; Abel offers the firstlings of his flock and the fat thereof. God accepts Abel's sacrifice but ignores Cain's. In a fit of jealousy, Cain kills his brother. To God's question, Where is thy brother Abel? Cain responds, *Am I my brother's keeper*? Thus is broached one of humanity's first existential dilemmas: do we have a responsibility to care for and protect others? And where, if anywhere, do we draw the line between those we are obliged to look after and those we are not?

Despite the power of distributive moralities to deny our sense of common humanity, goodness appears and reappears in unexpected quarters, persons, and ways – as in the case of the Good Samaritan, or an animal saving the life of a human, or an act of kindness shown in a situation of unspeakable cruelty. That the good cannot be legislated or universalized may be all for the good, for in its surprising randomness we are perennially reminded that our very humanity, like the virtues of love and friendship, can never be entirely determined by social orders and their associated moral norms, and that it is this very indeterminacy that redeems us. This sense that virtue cannot be totally prescribed or predetermined, means that much ethical activity is best understood as a function of a *relationship* between unpredictable situations and extant moral norms. Because rightness cannot be derived from any one external measure – be it a social rule or moral norm – we cannot preemptively say that any human action is essentially deviant, antisocial or unnatural. Its measure is to be found in our struggle to make the best of our situation, not to what degree we conform to an established code or moral exemplar.