

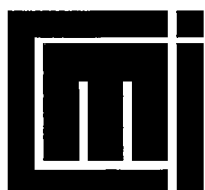
# **Dealing with the good and the evil**

Introducing morality as an anthropological concern

Dag Jørund Lønning

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**Summary:**

Questions of morality and ethics - good and evil - have not been anthropological favourites. Such issues have been addressed within certain applied environments as well as currently within American cultural anthropology, but more generally they seem to have been pushed aside within a basically very relativist discipline. Global problems like ethnocide, military rule and occupation, accompanied by - or perhaps spurred by - a truly international arms trade, do not appear to have shaken social anthropology out of its insistence on morality being studied in its local context. This paper concludes that such an approach to morality is partly dishonest, limits the scope of our discipline, and serves to make us peripheral in an increasingly global discourse on morality and human rights. The paper seeks, tentatively, to show how morality could be incorporated into anthropology.

**Indexing terms:**

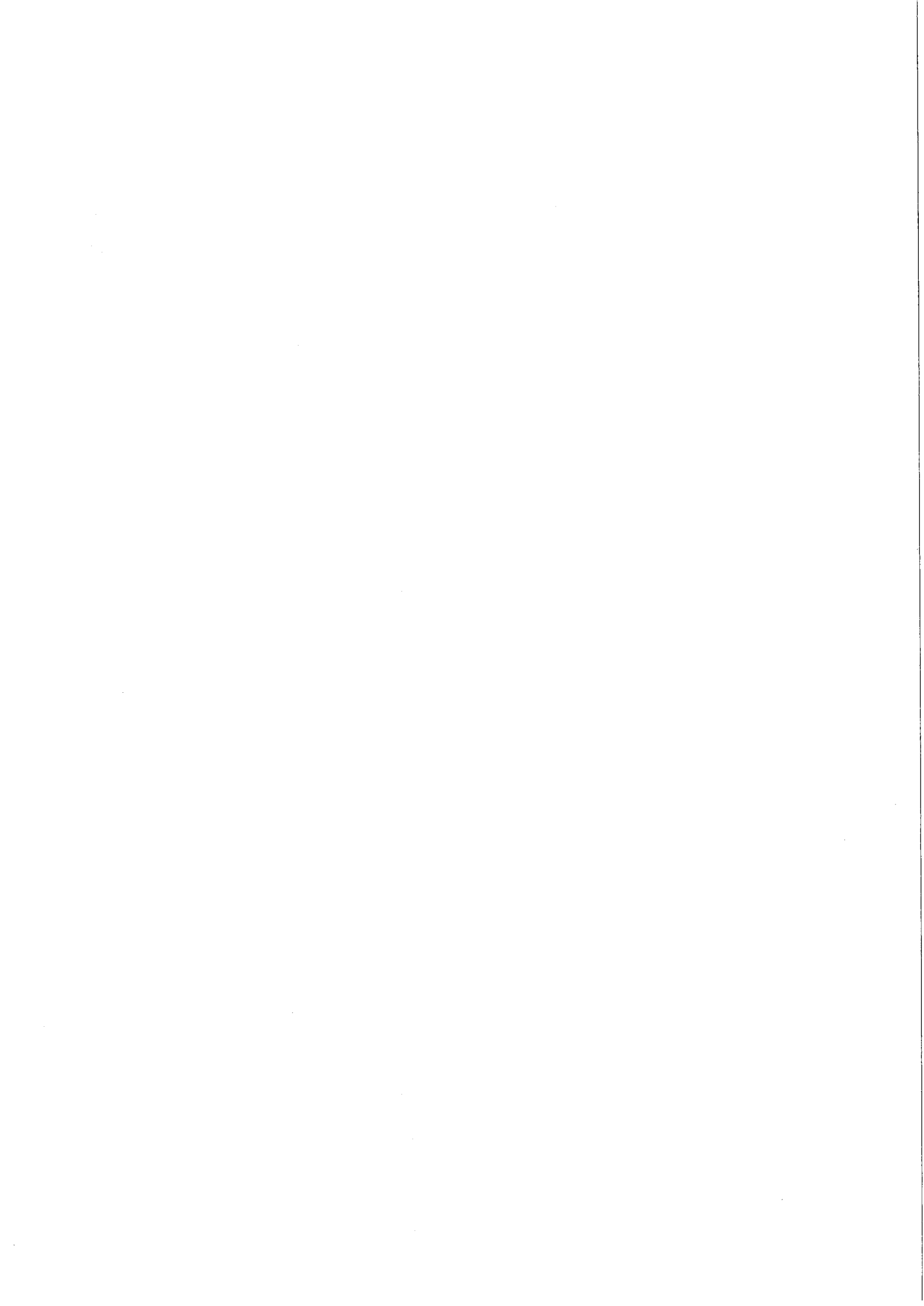
Ethics  
Nationalism  
Culture  
Anthropological theory

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## **Contents**

Introduction: Does evil not concern us?	1
1. Moral relativism: Opening eyes or blinding them?	3
2. Ethics, morality and anthropology: Problems and possible solutions	7
2.1 Morality as research object: A brief look at the literature	10
2.1.1 Objectivity or "the primacy of the ethical": Perspectives on a debate	16
3. Listening to multiple voices	20
References	25

But why is it assumed that when anthropologists enter the struggle we must inevitably bow out of anthropology? Since when is *evil* exempt from human reality? Why do anthropologists so steadfastly refuse to stare back at it, to speak truth to its power? What are we passively *waiting* for? (Scheper-Hughes, 1995:416)



## **Introduction: Does evil not concern us?**

At a PhD-course at the University of Bergen I was - together with Fredrik Barth - discussant on a paper on female circumcision in Gambia. The paper showed that such practices vary from the mildest to the most severe forms. I argued that female circumcision is morally wrong, and wanted to discuss the role of our own attitudes as well as our moral responsibilities in facing cruelty and suffering. Most of the others in the group argued, however, that we should never impose one value system upon another. Fredrik Barth asked me the following: how can I know that female circumcision is wrong if I haven't been there to study it?

I do not accuse Barth of supporting female circumcision. His argument is a theoretical and methodological one connected to the dynamic and constitution of Social Anthropology. Still I find the argument both morally and theoretically dubious. First, it implies the reduction of human suffering to academia. Medical research shows that female circumcision is both painful, partly or fully destroys sexual pleasure, and may lead to severe physical and psychological complications. Probably every anthropologist knows this before going to the field. But does this knowledge become irrelevant as we get to know the involved parties' possible cultural legitimisation models? The anthropological project here consists in the researcher - carrying a moral model - facing a context where female circumcision is culturally legitimated. Does it make good anthropology to pretend that this meeting never took place? And, would it be an anthropological crime to argue that such practices remain repulsive and evil despite playing social and cultural roles?<sup>1</sup>

Second, whose case are we making in relativising female circumcision or other forms of human suffering? In our modern times, there is the media. Racism and populist politicians also present as given facts culturally constructed differences between people. It is highly doubtful whether a relativistic argument for the understanding of violence and abuse in its local cultural context will do any good in combating such attitudes.

Third, what about the victims? What are the moral implications of presenting cultural justifications for the maltreatment of sexual organs or - when it comes to for example

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<sup>1</sup> As a digression, I recently spoke with a young woman from Ghana, who argued that "by not discussing the moral aspects of such practices, anthropologists become accomplices in the crime. If anthropologists do not join us in our fight against this tradition, they would do better staying at home".

head-hunting - the chopping off of heads? Aren't we here on a dangerous route, systematising what is perhaps not so systematised or localising something which is perhaps not so entirely local?

Fourth, if e.g. female circumcision, head-hunting or warfare play important cultural roles among the people we study, does that in itself make these practices acceptable? Is it particularly surprising that people who practice female circumcision have cultural justifications for it? If we argue in prosaic terms about head-hunting and its cultural functions, what about the wars in Bosnia, Rwanda and Palestine? Cultural imagery is definitely invoked here also. Further, spears are out and machine guns in. The tremendous "development" when it comes to devastating technology ought to put our relativistic ideas regarding morality in a terrifying perspective.

My basic arguments could be read as follows: Moral relativism makes anthropology increasingly peripheral and possibly dangerous. We need to develop our methodologies to be able to cope more effectively with violence and human suffering.

The latter one leads us to the core of the debate. How do we do it? What does a morally engaged anthropology really imply for the anthropologist and the anthropological project? First, I do not necessarily consider it good anthropology to go around telling informants that what they are doing is wrong. Rather, I will be introducing a triangular model of the anthropological project which highlights the concept of *dialogue*. A continuous dialogue between the field and the two constitutive components of the anthropological persona - the academic as well as the more personal relating to ideas, values, and emotions. It is a model which takes the human being as its point of departure rather than "culture", which is often a reified construct.

In facing violence, abuse and bestiality, a concept of morality emerges from the dialogue triangle by recognising the influence of all the angles in the triangle upon the anthropological project. It may emerge from the personal part of the anthropological persona facing the suffering victims, refusing the cultural legitimisation given, and telling the academic not to reduce the suffering to culture and social structure. It is a dialogue with myself as well as a dialogue with the field. It is an eternally evolving concept.

The issue of what constitutes good and evil, can obviously be addressed at several levels. My support for working out international standards on human rights is part of my sets of values, and thus influential within the dialogue triangle. Still, this paper does not set out to



qualify a formalised universal ethic. Rather, the perspective presented here is in many ways a model forwarding an "ethics of proximity" within anthropology. As a paradigm, the ethics of proximity makes empathy and respect for the human being the cornerstone of human interaction and communication. Only through empathy am I fully able to understand "the other" and his/her needs. Only through empathy may I be able to grasp the meaning of suffering. Social science relates to connections, to social structure and organisation, to culture as collective representation. Only through my empathetic personal abilities, however, am I able to relate directly to the compounded human being. Through the dialogue triangle my values may come to be strengthened, but also challenged for being egocentrically or ethnocentrically based. Abilities and values are not immune to change, changes which might lead to alterations of my scientific models and presentations.

Through this ongoing dialogue exercise, my ethical commitment is formed. Only the developing understandings from the dialogue can determine the actual scope and shape of ethical commitments, or the relation between such commitments and "objectivity". A response to the meeting with human suffering can, within this paradigm, never be predetermined.

I have divided this paper into three sections. In *section one* I will focus on *cultural relativism* as a paradigm outlining its potential and actual problems. Further, some possible political implications of *moral relativism* in our modern era are discussed. *Section two* opens with a discussion of social science - in general and anthropology in particular - and ethics. It is argued that we can hardly hope to eradicate the influence of values upon our science. A more honest and effective anthropology might come, first, from greater openness around such issues, and, second, from redefining the role of values from obstacles or problems to research assets. Further, some anthropological inputs to morality are introduced and discussed, including a debate between Roy D'Andrade and Nancy Scheper-Hughes on the moral - objective dichotomy. This debate continues in *the last section*, where I will tentatively be addressing the issue of alternative procedural agendas to deal more effectively and sincerely with matters of evil and human suffering.

## **1. Moral relativism: Opening eyes or blinding them?**

The anthropological literature abounds with examples of how violence is played out, and which functions it has.

Napoleon Chagnon's (1977) account of the Yanomamö - "the fierce people" - has always been an important introduction to anthropology at the University of Bergen. Chagnon presents the Yanomamö as very violent. Violence is used by men internally in the village, it is used against men from other villages, and it is used particularly harshly against women both internally and externally. Women are regularly beaten with axes or sticks, they are abducted and raped<sup>2</sup>.

Still, the question of morality is strikingly absent. Rather, violent behaviour is considered an integral part of being a person the Yanomamö way, and thus culturally functional or socially constructive. Likewise with Michelle Rosaldo's (1980, 1984) account of male head-hunters telling about the personally and socially enriching aspects of collecting and displaying heads.

Regarding the Yanomamö, more recent studies have been conducted (Lizot, 1994) de-emphasising the role of violence in the society. Keesing (1987, 1989a, 1989b) has repeatedly argued that we should be careful with endowing the different "exotic" culture traits discovered in a given context with too much independent functional agency. They *might* reflect relations of dominance, external influence, or anthropological exoticism. In striving for relativity, the project may in fact turn in on itself and become ethnocentric. For why is it that *we* have complicated power and social relations whilst *they* "only" have culture? Still, regarding the lack of focus on morality in such studies of violence, most anthropologists have kept silent (but see Spiro, 1984). The basic cultural relativist construction of our science makes it difficult to enter into a moral debate about cultural practices.<sup>3</sup>

I believe one of the reasons can be found in a logical shortcoming inherent to the very paradigm of cultural relativism, where an idea of the *relativity of morality* seems to follow logically from an *ethically neutral* methodological principle. To avoid this fallacy, the paradigm of cultural relativism should be divided into several distinct parts. The first one, *methodological cultural relativism*, does not relate directly to issues of morality, but rather represents a principle, a guide to effective anthropology. Methodological cultural relativism insists that acts and practices should be studied in the locality from where they emanate, in their local context. The rationale for such an approach would be that without an adequate understanding of the natural and social predicaments and possibilities human beings in

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<sup>2</sup> According to Chagnon, the wives accept their oppression and argue that men who do not give them an axe blow now and then do not love them. Logically, if you carry scars on your head, you have a caring and loving husband.

<sup>3</sup> Kapferer, 1988, would be an example of a basically *non-relativistic* treatment of warfare and violence.

different localities face, we would hardly be able to grasp the coherence and logic of any meaning system or culture. Anthropology's most important achievement would probably be its demonstration of the enormity of human social and cultural variation. Anthropology has successfully demonstrated how humans are capable of surviving under and adapting to the most extreme of circumstances. Our species' most important weapon, a weapon we presumably alone possess, is culture, the webs of significance we attach to our natural and social environment. Culture is built around propositions and ideas, and used as adaptive responses to our surroundings.

Whilst this first understanding can be supported or rejected on purely methodological grounds, the second understanding, which I - lacking a better term - choose to call *reified cultural relativism*, plays a significant role in producing the logical fallacy of the blended paradigm of cultural relativism. This form of relativism reduces the human being to a reified "culture" or "society". The transition from methodology to morality takes place when *contextual factors* go from being *explanations* to *justifications*. Context - the social, political and cultural environment - becomes justification for killing, for rape, for molestation, and so often through our history for warfare. When oppression, abuse and violence are presented *and defended* as socially and culturally functional, no moral charges can be brought against the human perpetrators.

Reification of contextual factors opens up for the final building block of the entire paradigm: moral relativism.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, this position has it that as cultural practices are locally and contextually based, they are immune to external critique. The way the position has been communicated, this immunity may have important consequences. First, cultural practices - being cultural and contextual - can in themselves not be subject to moral evaluations.<sup>5</sup> No practice is in any way "better" than another. Second, the anthropologist is not entitled to enforce another standard upon a particular culture, evaluative anthropology makes bad anthropology. Human beings only become morally accountable to their own groups and meaning systems.

Reified and moral relativism - both relating to values - do not follow logically from the methodological principle. Refraining from evaluations as much as possible might be a

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<sup>4</sup> It should be emphasised that the concept of moral relativism at the outset was formulated as a reaction against colonialism and racism. As such it sought to show how so called "barbaric customs" should be understood as being components of complex social and cultural connections.

<sup>5</sup> Shweder (1984) exemplifies this position when he claims that the only way we can evaluate people who emphasise with starving Armenians in relation to head-hunters is by arguing that they are "obviously different".

methodologically wise thing to do, but it does not follow from the anthropological project. Even though cultural practices should be *understood* in local context, why should that make them immune to critique? We should be very cautious in making moral judgements. If cultural practices, however, include killing, physical abuse, suppression of weak groups, etc., it is probably even more problematic to pretend that the moral problems do not exist.

There is another, perhaps even more tragic, fallacy here. Moral relativism within anthropology often presupposes ideas of mutuality, of dignity and respect for the other. First, this is, as I have argued above, a moral argument in itself. Second, and more importantly, it is often a reified and animated view of *culture* which constitutes this "other". It is this entity we pay our respect to. This may be praiseworthy in itself, but what about the human beings who become victims of physical or sexual abuse legitimated according to the inherent ideas of the culture we praise? What do we make of *their* cry for dignity, *their* cry for mutual respect? Implicit in the argument that cultural practices are outside the realm of moral judgement, is another argument - in itself moral, and perhaps not as beautiful - which states that culture takes precedence to the individual, to misery and suffering.

Further, what would be a moral relativist response to the globalisation of violence? Communities which anthropologists studied by the use of harmony models, find themselves engaged in bloody war. Cruelty and ideas of cruelty travel. As Tambiah (1989) has shown, the spread of modern arms is *also* an integral part of globalisation processes.

With technological development tasks become easier. Still the act remains the same even if the technology changes. For the slain, knife or machine gun makes no real difference. As dead objects technologies are beyond morality. Changing dead objects does not make the action more or less moral.

Anthropologists have traditionally been struggling for small and weak communities and groups facing encroachment from more powerful political actors. However, when it comes to internal violence and suppression, modernisation in a way exposes our dubious moral record. Anthropologists have also been accused of presenting the social view of the powerful - men, the wealthy, the chief - as they perhaps possess a "comprehensive" social view more fit for anthropological presentation. The result of the merging of these two trends *might* very well be that the anthropologist himself becomes an accomplice in legitimising human suffering (see Scheper-Hughes, 1995).

*Culture* should ideally be a neutral concept. The practice, however, is often that the concept becomes positively charged. Morally questionable practices easily become acceptable as they are cultural; the cultural becomes beautiful and functional.

Moral relativism *may* lead to exaggeration, the production of functionality and coherence where there is none, and, ultimately, the transformation of ugliness to beauty.

Daniel (1991) uses the metaphor of the blind spot in the eye as his point of entrance to the study of torture and pain. We, as anthropologists, have an urge to explain everything, to give all social life modular form. War and human misery are no exceptions. By transforming terrible suffering to textual models, we create beauty from evil. Still the blind spot is there. When we feel fully confident about our interpretations, the spot stays almost invisible. However, in the presence of suffering it grows - through our feelings of uneasiness - to the point of almost blinding us. We feel obliged to give human suffering modular shape. Still we hesitate: did I really understand what those people are going through? Did I really grasp the meaning of the story that young man was telling about his experiences in the torture chamber?

The blind spot represents that which cannot be properly understood, cannot be reduced to structure and function, cannot be reduced to culture or eventually text. We should become more honest and sincere in the presence of human suffering.

## **2. Ethics, morality and anthropology: Problems and possible solutions**

The relation between anthropology and morality has never been an easy one. Wolfram (1988:108) argues that "morality proper ... has been neglected [among anthropologists]". Pocock (1986:7) simply states that "anthropologists have not been interested [in morality]".

Still, there is more to this than just "interests". The inherent logical fallacy of cultural relativism has been influential in preventing us from addressing moral issues. Further, almost no problem has been more difficult for the social sciences in general than the question of ethics, of good and bad. Is ethics beyond social science, or is it an integral part of it?

Barnett (1988: 21-22) represents the dominant Western view of science when he argues:

Science as we define it in our culture is not designed to validate ethical postulates. Ethical postulates state that a particular action or belief is better (either absolutely or in relationship to some specified criterion)

than some other behaviour or belief. Ethics deal with issues of good and bad, a domain of discourse that lies outside the domain of science.

Nevertheless, it is generally recognised (see e.g. Hellevik, 1987:383-392) that values influence the research process in several ways. A particular research object is chosen first according to the specific interests and the political (as well as ethical) values of the researcher; second, through selectivity and interpretation during the research process; and third, through the selective presentation of data. Thus, in one way or another, values do influence social science. It is, however, by many considered a value in itself to limit this influence as much as possible.

Unfortunately, in practice this often implies rejecting or refraining from relating to it altogether in textual presentations. For anthropologists - using their own bodies, emotions and social capabilities as research tools - the relation between science and ethics is a matter of the utmost importance: how can we counter the influence of values by the use of what perhaps some would argue is such an unreliable instrument? The obvious answer would be that positivism and anthropology do not go together well. Values are too deeply embedded in our science. Our data are rarely quantifiable. They are created by being filtered through our very persons. Even though another anthropologist decides to question my work through using exactly the same persons as I did as informants, there is no guarantee that they would relate to him in the same way as they did to me. The relation between the world as it exists out there and the world as it is presented in an anthropological text is long and winding indeed.

The way out of this predicament lies, first, in fully recognising it - thus becoming more honest. This is the reflexive approach. Second, it lies in turning the whole debate to our own advantage. Values are research assets, they can be put to direct and active use. As long as values are integral to the entire constitution of the anthropological project, this provides us with the opportunity to reject the archaic view that they are necessarily anathema to science.

In its suspension of moral judgement, the paradigm of moral relativism may *on the surface* be read as a "neutral" and "objective" concept. However, in the end it turns out to be a highly moral quest. In its heart it carries concepts like mutuality, mutual respect, dignity. Norms claiming validity pervade our object areas.

The entire anthropological encounter is in itself a moral encounter. Through our meetings with our research subjects we utilise our entire persona, our scientific models often blend with emotions and interpretations whose origins cannot be reduced to the university.

We develop friendly relations, again utilising more of ourselves than we present in our texts. "The other" influences me as I do with him in a continuing dialogue.

Again, *dialogue* is the keyword to an ethically committed anthropology. Whilst norms emphasising respect and dignity for the other do not fit in with an "objective" moral relativism rejecting evaluations, they may come to mature in the anthropological encounter itself. Our encounter is not primarily with "culture", it is with human beings. It is the human being who deserves mutuality, respect and dignity. We need a concept of morality which makes the human being the point of departure, a concept - created and ever developing through dialogue - which in the face of culturally legitimated oppression and abuse is an antithesis of moral relativism. "Cultures" should in my view be "holy" only to the extent that they function to provide the human being with the space to live a life in dignity. "Culture" should never be an excuse for oppression.

The individual human being is also the point of entry into understanding *culture* as some form of collective representation. To show respect for the individual may thus often imply showing respect for a cultural collective. Through focus on socialisation processes, anthropology has demonstrated how human beings gradually develop skills in mastering cultural ideas and symbols, and grow into becoming full-fledged members of a particular community. Such internalisation and mastering of symbols - essential assets for all human beings - is in a way the collective represented through the individual. However, the view of the plural one gets from proceeding from the singular is seldom coherent and orderly. The relation between individual and collective *may* be one of contradiction and outright verbal and physical force. The different forms of sanctions applied by a collective to make the individual conform, may reveal a lot about this collective. If our primary ethical commitment is to the human being, we thus have a perfectly legitimate opening for making evaluations about the particular collective of which he/she is a part.

Following such a methodology in my own work on inter-ethnic conflict, inter-ethnic dialogue and enemy images in Israel-Palestine (Lønning 1995a, 1995b), I have shown that collective cultural meaning systems on both sides contribute significantly to the widening of the conflict and continuing blood-shed. A lasting peace is dependent upon *culture change*.

In our dealings with human beings in an often grisly world, we need to be able to argue that peace is better than war and that eating is better than starving. We need to develop our methodologies to be able to address evil at face value.

## 2.1 Morality as research object: A brief look at the literature

I have already argued that morality was never an anthropological favourite. Relativism has also limited the scope of the few contributions made by anthropologists.

An example can be found in a volume on anthropology and human rights edited by Downing and Kushner, 1988. The position forwarded here is very "traditional", and very much based on the "small is beautiful" argument. Scale becomes an important variable in determining whether an act can be said to represent a breach of human rights. I include a passage from the work of Schirmer (1988) to exemplify:

The scalp or human head is not equivalent to the combat stripe ... for the lack of congruency between small warring bands with spears and knives and "special counterinsurgency forces" ... who slaughter thousands of unarmed civilians. (ibid. 97)

There is nothing untrue about this assertion if scale is our only variable. Small is not the same as big. However, to Schirmer, the argument is moral: slaughtering thousands is morally wrong, taking scalps and human heads is at least less morally wrong. Further, it is a cultural thing and thus partly beyond the scope of moral judgement.

Pocock (1986) attacks anthropology for not focusing on morality. His own approach does not relate to evaluations, but is rather an attempt to treat moral thinking as an objective phenomenon. To Pocock morality is a way of thinking about human existential problems. It is the individual's way of sorting out the different predicaments and alternatives facing his life. It is human reflection, and thus much more than the set of codes and conventions we usually collect. It is personality versus society and collective claims. This is the universality of morality, this is also Pocock's critique of cultural relativism. In our focus on "cultures", we have overemphasised the categorical meaning of boundaries, he argues. He is sceptical to *inside-outside*, and *us and them* dichotomies, and argues that: "[t]he apparent distinction between the human and the sub-human might be better represented as a distinction between the human and the human-not-quite-our-type" (ibid. 14). Categorisations are responses to moral dilemmas and alternatives, but do not necessarily imply that we exclude the not so favoured in our categorisations from the moral universe of humanity. Instead he favours comparing inside-outside dichotomies with internal dichotomies made for example between the sexes.



The reasoning here is vague, and so is the message. It is not particularly surprising that people everywhere face moral dilemmas. Neither is Pocock's conclusion very innovative, when he states that upon recognising the role of moral thinking in social life "this of course will have uncomfortable consequences for us when we are obliged to recognise that moral thinking informs behaviour which we may at the very best despise" (ibid. 18). Interviews with former Nazis, as well as writings from Nazi leaders, show that the extermination of the Jews was in many ways conceived of as a morally good act determined to save the human race from "pollution". This is moral thinking producing massive immorality. History abounds with further examples of dehumanising moralities which ought to tell us that the *moral fortresses* - based on enemy images (see below) - people construct between *us and them* cannot be reduced to internal differentiations.

Samuel Fleischacker (1994) is strictly speaking no anthropologist. Still his approach is very "anthropological" in taking on the concept of culture as the point of departure for his discussion of morality. Moralities are visions of the ultimate good, Fleischacker argues, and as such, they are borne and developed through different cultural constructions. Fleischacker rejects traditional universalism. Universal moralities cannot address the individual in his daily life, he argues. They are too vague. Only God knows the ultimate good. The good life for man, according to Fleischacker, is the life spent in seeking for the good life of man. Thus he introduces the concept of tradition. Traditions are stories about what the ultimate good is and how to strive for it. They are stories about our group and how to be a member of it. As such they mediate between private conceptualisations and the ultimate good. Traditions give local answers to existential problems.

Culture is for Fleischacker a meaning system built up around such stories and a set of authorities to convey them and apply them in the real world. As such culture is morality, as it is the frame which provides the moral questions and answers. Stories trigger and potentially satisfy the individual search for meaning to life and in life. The meaning of a story can only be found by living it out.

This is Fleischacker's universality. The search for the ultimate good, never to find it, but always grasping more of it. It is always a locally situated quest.

Still, Fleischacker does not resist the temptation to become more specific. Only a few stories (he mentions Nazism) can, according to him, be excluded from the following definition:

for anything to count as a morality or ethical code: it must be action guiding, ideal based, overridingly important, directed toward a conceivable end, accompanied by a conception of "personhood" that does not severely conflict with our own, and not aimed toward the degradation or destruction of any being fitting that conception of "person" (1994:19)

This is a description of culture conceptualised as a set of moral stories. As a theory of culture, it is also a universally applicable model.

Fleischacker distances himself from moral relativism if this implies the rejection of the possibility of intervention in another culture. Intervention is possible, according to Fleischacker, as the general frame around which culture is built is universal. Intervention should nevertheless be based on principles internal to the culture in question. Are there themes within the culture which resemble ideas about freedom from oppression, rejection of sexual and physical abuse, etc.? In most cultures there are, he argues, and intercultural dialogue means expanding such themes to the benefit of all sides.

Intervention should nevertheless always be the last option. Cultures are moralities, and "ours" is not better than "theirs". Moral systems may, however, become distorted:

We may regard an entire society as having distorted its own ethical tradition into an inhumane version of itself if

- (1) we can see that the society has been subjected to external pressures threatening its very survival (members of any culture can lose their ability to concern themselves with ethical judgement when they live in fear of murder and starvation);
- (2) we can locate a larger cultural structure, extending back before the pattern of actions we want to condemn, to which we can appeal as a more solid, long-term identification of the culture; and
- (3) we can find clear signs, preferably independent of the practices to which we are objecting, that trust in the structure of authorities which normally carries the culture from one generation to the next has broken down (1994:172).

If these conditions are met, intervention is ethically correct. Again Fleischacker mentions Nazi Germany as an example.

Still, the theory of Fleischacker partly rests on a flawed idea of the world as well as of culture and tradition. Taking the latter first, it is very much a primordialist argument. It rests on the premise that, in a healthy cultural system, stories and authorities survive over the generations. Obviously, continuity is an element which should be addressed, and which will very often be found within certain cultural traditions. However, if one argues that even within a perfectly healthy culture and society change is more prevalent than continuity, that stories are invented and circumvented (see e.g. Handler and Linekin, 1984, Keesing, 1989a), that authorities and authority systems fall and new and different ones emerge, the theory becomes

more problematic. Furthermore, how do we know that previous patterns are more "solid" than contemporary ones?

The world is also changing. One aspect of modernity is the production and dissemination of metanarratives on morality. Freedom from oppression, self-rule and human rights is one such narrative. These provide models for locally produced stories and ideas. One aspect of nationalism and other forms of sectarianism is the reinterpretation of local stories to become one version of the metanarrative. Local tradition is thus only one variable in a much more complicated picture.

Further, Fleischacker's definition of morality does not fit well with our contemporary violent and sectarian world. Many contemporary stories conveying identity stress the opposite of his definition. By the use of enemy images they *do* degrade other humans, they even reject their humanity altogether (see below for a further discussion of enemy images). Instead of building open moral universes we are building moral fortresses, where culturally constructed identity is the only entrance ticket.

Fleischacker remains within the domain of relativism in providing so much independent agency to *culture* and *tradition*, arguing that the individual is only morally accountable to such reified constructs. As evil is globalising, this view does not bring us much further. His is basically a descriptive account of morality. That is, he tries to find the morality existing out there already. This is praiseworthy, but the world of Fleischacker is basically a tranquil moral world. The world of the seven o'clock news is a world of violence, torture and hate.

Let us thus turn to Wolfram (1982), who in his essay "Anthropology and morality", is particularly preoccupied with "Utilitarianism", a direction he claims provides a point of departure for anthropological empirical research.

Quite briefly, utilitarians argue that "acts are morally right in proportion as they promote happiness, morally wrong in so far as they do the reverse" (ibid. 262-263).

Wolfram expands this simplistic version into a relational and social concept. A major emphasis is put on *all concerned*. Morality is what constitutes human society. This means that we are not only talking about the actor and his counterpart, but also the wider ramifications. In fact, what is at issue is the amount of happiness or misery a certain human act brings to human sociality or community. This is the criterion for judging an act's moral content.

The empirical task, "discounting factual error and idiocy" (ibid. 274), actually becomes the most important. It implies "following the loops" (Bateson, 1972) of different acts to try to grasp their wider ramifications, a task anthropologists are well qualified to do.

Still, the utilitarian concept is open to attack from several angles. Most obvious are the problems of "counting" the distribution of happiness or misery within a certain social field stemming from a particular act. And, what is happiness really? How do we measure it?

Utilitarianism can also be accused of promoting blatant egotism. The original developers of the concept, philosophers like David Hume, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill did not reject the proposition that individuals could act to serve their own self interest, if only the act could be seen as maximising the good of all. Wuthnow (1991) demonstrates how many Americans involved in charity work utilise this version of utilitarianism as the rationalisation - "it makes me feel good" - for their involvement. Utilitarianism is thus hardly a concept suitable for promoting dignity of and mutual respect for the human being. Utilitarianism is reductionist in its treatment of the individual. It does not pay attention to the totality of the individual, his/her life-world and his/her inherent moral capabilities.

Within philosophy itself, the so-called "ethics of proximity" - as a moral discourse - can be read as a strong critique of utilitarianism. Whilst the concept of the person is more or less absent within utilitarianism, the human being is the point of departure for the ethics of proximity. A basic emphasis is put on emotions as moral phenomena.

Deducting empirically researchable hypotheses from the fundamental premises of an ethics of proximity is not an easy task. While utilitarianism is a theory of what constitutes a morally good or evil act, the ethics of proximity is much more than that. It is a theory of man.

Two Norwegian proponents, Vetlesen and Nortvedt (1994), claim that the human being is equipped with a fundamental capacity for empathy - stemming from and essential for human sociality. It is a human characteristic to empathise and sympathise with the other's situation. The moral field is the field of empathy, and empathy is the most basic of our emotions. In that way the human is a moral creature.

Ethics of proximity (Lévinas, 1985, Løgstrup, 1991, 1993, Baumann, 1993, Vetlesen and Nortvedt, 1994) asserts that the simple human encounter is *per se* a moral encounter. Meeting "the other" challenges me. It reveals the other in all his weakness, at the same time there is a relation of power in the meeting. Through his weakness he gets power over me, the other's face utters a command, a moral command which forces me to relate to the ultimate

moral challenge, do I respond or do I turn away? Løgstrup and Lévinas argue that the moral challenge is pre-existent, it cannot be explained through epistemology, or through logical rationalisation. The ultimate challenge (Løgstrup, 1991) was created with man, and is intimately connected to the being of man in the world.

Bauman (1993) demonstrates how this challenge is everywhere and nowhere. In one sense it is thereby universal, but it is nevertheless fundamentally anti-universal in its lack of capacity to produce universally valid ethical rules and norms. It is anti-authoritarian, and cannot be questioned. It is social, meaning inter-human, but comes before "society" and "culture". As morality in this sense cannot be turned into law, there are no established recipes of morally correct behaviour. There are only eternal questions. "*Did I do enough? Could I have done more?*" These problems are raised through every human meeting and can never be solved. Bauman claims that the times through which we are passing - which he calls post-modernity - on one level are characterised by rebellion against existing political structures, organisations and laws. "Identity" has become fluid, and instead of talking about political systems we would do better talking about meetings and contexts. Thus he labels post-modernity the age of morality, as it enhances the individual's capability of listening to the ultimate challenge.

However, theory and practice have never seemed to be further ahead than on this point. Listening to the daily news, "the age of morality" is not the first one thinks about. Our times might perhaps provide the opportunities, but humanity does not seem to have grasped them yet. Humanity seems to have developed the utmost expertise in destroying the morality stemming from the other's face. We destroy the human capacity for empathy through our cultural constructions. Our often diabolical us-versus-them constructions are images, they do not exist in the natural world. *Enemy images* bolster internal unity within our group but at the same time deprive *the other* of his humanity.

On this point, anthropology has a lot to offer. The anthropological focus on ethnicity and nationalism could be expanded to include the moral dimension. No human system of thought has brought more suffering through the ages than our culturally constructed boundaries between us and them. On one level or another, they are integral to all human strife and war-making. We can hardly be relativist in studying these categories, as they seem to be a universal property of the human species.

As such we can do no more than hope to get rid of them. We do, however, need more information about their role in propagating human immorality. Anthropologists have worked closely with stereotypes of different sorts as systems of orientation in the world, particularly in multi-cultural societies. On the other hand, surprisingly little attention has been devoted to *enemy images*. Enemy images are stereotypes of a different and more malevolent kind. As Spillmann and Spillmann argue: "...the function of enemy images corresponds to the function of stereotypes with the decisive difference that enemy images dictate orientation while stereotypes help in orienting oneself" (1991:71). Enemy images dehumanise the other, they blame the evil on the other, they make him a legitimate object of attack and eradication.

Before us we have a case of cultural dysfunctionality, cultural constructions destroying human beings and human society, destroying the human capacity for morally good, and partly relational, thinking. These are cultural processes whereby humans are transformed from moral beings into monsters and killing machines.

### *2.1.1 Objectivity or "the primacy of the ethical": Perspectives on a debate*

An interesting debate is conducted in *Current Anthropology* 36:3 between two leading scholars of American anthropology, Roy D'Andrade - emphasising objectivity and search for truths - and Nancy Scheper-Hughes - advocating a more "militant anthropology" in favour of the weak and oppressed.

Scheper-Hughes seeks "to call anthropology's bluff, to expose its artificial moral relativism and to try to imagine what forms a politically committed and morally engaged anthropology might take" (1995:410). Scheper-Hughes argues, as I have done, that the idea of moral relativism is partly outdated and partly dangerous in our violent world of today. Anthropology, "if it is to be worth anything at all, must be ethically grounded" (ibid. 410).

She claims that participant observation means involvement if you want any feedback from your surroundings. People who live on the point of starvation have, naturally enough, problems understanding the meaning of the observing neutral anthropologist. Similarly, the field-situation *in itself* breeds involvement, it breeds empathy. Involvement thus becomes both an ethical commitment as well as a natural aspect of fieldwork. She sums up the project of the morally engaged anthropologist in the following paragraph:

While the anthropologist is always a necessarily flawed and biased instrument of cultural translation, like every other craftsperson we can do the best we can with the limited resources we have at hand: our ability to listen and to observe carefully and with empathy and compassion (ibid. 418).

D'Andrade (1995) advances the continuation of objectivity, although recognising that science is not "unbiased". D'Andrade's main point is that a moral model cannot be empirically tested whilst an objective one can. The separation of subject and object has been one of the main triumphs of science. A moral model, however, builds on the values of the observer, thus making it outside the realm of proper science. Anthropology should find truths, not fight them.

His main point can be summarised by the following passage:

The experience of people trying to find out about how the world works is that you find out more when you avoid the use of evaluative terms - otherwise you spend all your time arguing about the use of these terms, trying to make the bad things get the bad words and the good things get the good words (ibid. 406).

D'Andrade claims that anthropologists involved in moral studies simplify what oppression is, where it comes from, and how it can be combated.

Thus, D'Andrade gives us several examples where he believes the moral model will fail in providing a proper account. He asks:

Is taking away the freedom of serial murderers oppression? Most people would say that it is not - that they deserve to have their freedom taken away, and that it is prudent to do so as well. Is it not oppression, then, if the people being dominated deserve to be dominated or need to be dominated for the common good. But who is to say who deserves to be dominated? And who is to say what the common good is? (ibid. 405)

Further, D'Andrade distances himself from relativism, but still utilises relativist arguments in his attacks on moral models. Consider the following:

Finally, the current moral model is ethnocentric. It is strong for equality (the escape from inequality) and freedom (the release from oppression). In my view these are not bad values, but they are very American. These are not the predominant values of modern Japan, India, China, the Middle East, or Southeast Asia, but they are the predominant values in the United States and much of Europe. It is ironic that these moralists should be so colonialist in their assumption about what evil is (ibid. 408).

In my view, these arguments are not convincing. Even though the case about serial murderers is a metaphor for the complexities and difficulties involved in making a moral judgement, it is not a good one as such.<sup>6</sup> It does not reflect the realities of Scheper-Hughes'

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<sup>6</sup> To me it is in fact as far-fetched as reminding me of the question I was asked during the obligatory

oppressed and starving informants in Brazil. The only "crime" most of them have done is to be born.

Furthermore, D'Andrade seriously misrepresents Scheper-Hughes and her focus on the involvement and compassion created through fieldwork. My reading of her would rather emphasise the following question: in our personal meetings with victims of violence, with people on the point of starvation, *how can we avoid dealing with moral issues?*

And, to respond more directly to the questions raised: *The people living out there* are to say what the common good is. *You* are to say it. *I* am to say it. This is what we do, we are all discussing it, and this discourse is also what anthropology should reflect.

The argument in the last quote, forwarded without any empirical evidence, *can* - if presented by for example a right-wing politician - be read as partly racist. Whoever decided that fighting against inequality and oppression are particularly American ideas? Are "they" any more happy about oppression than "we" are? What about the Kashmiris in India, the students at Tianmen Square in China, the guerrillas in the Middle East, the people of Burma?

A political culture is not necessarily the same as the culture of the people. Even though there is a political tradition of autocracy and oppression within a certain region, it does not necessarily mean that the people *like* being dominated.<sup>7</sup>

Further, people are not stupid. With the spread of new systems of communication, oppressed peoples see and hear that others lead better lives. Thus, despite living within hierarchical cultural systems, they also seek better lives for themselves. Should we refuse them the possibilities of hearing about others' lives? Should we continue exporting them coca cola and soap operas while censoring ideas of freedom from oppression?

Ideologies of resistance and human rights are ever widening discourses. At the same time the borders or boundaries - separating the poor from the rich and the free from the oppressed - in fact become strengthened as the political, cultural and economic capital of

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police interview following my refusal of military service: "You don't want to kill people", the inspector said, "but did you ever kill flies, mosquitoes or wasps?" "No", I replied, knowing that any other answer might do serious harm to my application.

<sup>7</sup> Personally I was accused of imposing my values on another culture after publicly criticising the lack of democracy in the recent Palestinian election campaign. Still, my experience from fieldwork in Palestine is that people do not fancy oppression. They are seriously preoccupied with it and frustration is growing over the many signals that the new administration is becoming very traditionally "Arab" on these issues. The democratic fundamentals created during the Intifada have come under serious attack as the new rulers coming in from the outside are becoming more "Egyptian-like", "Syrian-like", "Iraqi-like". Newspapers now have two censors, the workload of human rights activists has doubled.



modernity is concentrated on fewer and fewer hands. As a result people rebel, resulting in the immense growth of ideologies of self-rule and nationalism.

I have another problem with D'Andrade's argumentation, namely his emphasis on "finding truth". This positivist assertion is not easy to reconcile with anthropology's basically interpretative constitution. In a world so full of "complex webs of causes", as well as interpretations - what constitutes truth? D'Andrade argues that when using moral models, the researcher's own model will be the determining factor. But does not this go for "truth" as well? Ultimately it will be the scientist's own version of truth which will prevail in his presentations. Is "truth" really objective whilst morality is merely subjective? How can one know that the theoretical constructs of D'Andrade (e.g. 1984, 1987, 1992), reflect a more true world than Scheper-Hughes' accounts of human misery and suffering?

We are dealing with human beings, not numbers and stones. Pairing *truth* with *anthropology* hardly produces a lively offspring. The best we can do is to search for our version(s) of truth through dialogue and discourse.

Still, D'Andrade has a point in warning against political involvement in the field. Studying dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, interfering with personal opinions during a dialogue session would have destroyed my project (see Lønning, 1995a). Although I must admit that I admire Scheper-Hughes for doing it, I do not *necessarily* agree with her when she argues that anthropologists should become *companheiras* - involved in the battle against oppression with their subjects. It might become inevitable, but personal engagement in the lives of the human beings we meet would be a more comprehensive definition of an ethically committed anthropology. We are ethically committed to the suffering people who open their lives for us to enhance our academic careers. But only through the dialogue triangle can our commitment be moulded.

We need to be more open to the different moral impulses of the field situation, to the way we face the field situation and the happiness and misery communicated to us, to the way we interpret and respond. We need to become - using a popular contemporary term - more reflexive, more reflexive in the way we use ourselves as research instruments and barometers in the field. The last part of this paper deals with this issue.

### 3. Listening to multiple voices

Then, taking the reflexive critique of anthropology into account (Clifford and Marcus, 1986, as well as Marcus and Fisher, 1986, are some of the best known proponents of this critique), how should we go about becoming more "honest" in our work. Our method *par excellence* is participant observation. However, when one reads much anthropology, there is very little about the participant part. It's as though the anthropologist has been a walking tape recorder, seeing, but not being seen and noticed. Still, the information goes through her, she filters it by the use of her own filters, she transcribes it into anthropological language. At one level or another, anthropology *is* an interpretative quest.

The field experience is as dynamic as it is fascinating. For the anthropologist, it is an interplay between experiences, interpretations and emotions. The anthropologist uses his own personality as his research tool. His personality in the field has at least two components, one truly personal and one academic. The context will often decide which aspect is emphasised in his presentation of self. Sometimes the two clearly separate, sometimes they mingle. For the informant, relating to the anthropologist is not easier. The anthropologist must walk the tightrope between friend and researcher, the informer between friend and informant ("does he mingle with me because I am me, or because he needs the information I can provide"?). Anthropologists are dependent upon friends, but friendship is a two-way process. It involves giving and taking, it involves influencing the other and his actions and words. Friendship does not work if only the other talks. I have to talk as well. I have to give my opinions, and my opinions will influence the other person as his will mine.

Scheper-Hughes (1995) makes a distinction between observation and witnessing. The first one is associated with the natural sciences, the latter with moral philosophy. An anthropologist getting seriously involved in the lives of his subjects, is much more a witness than an observer, she argues. The anthropologist thus becomes a messenger:

... participant-observation has a way of drawing ethnographers into spaces of human life where they might really prefer not to go at all and, once there, do not know how to escape except through writing, which willy-nilly draws others there as well, making them party to the witnessing (ibid. 419).

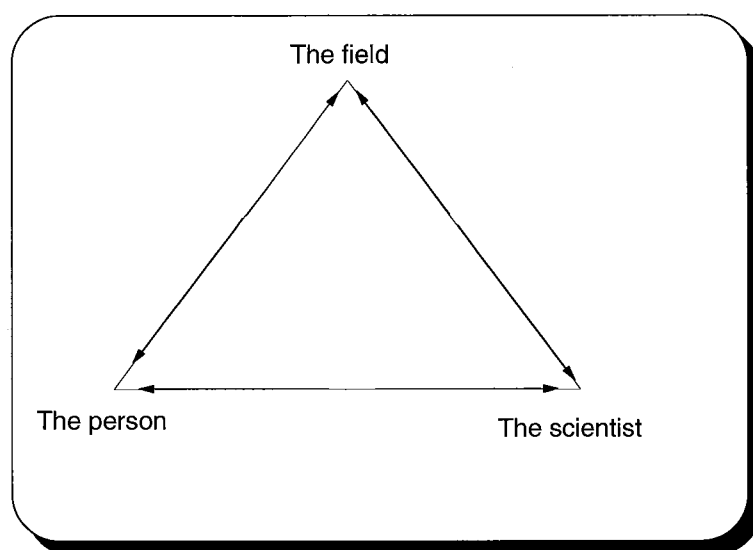
Most anthropologists, I would guess, participate and influence their field. That is, up to the point of representation. Then this influence disappears, as does the anthropologist himself - including his ad hoc interpretations and emotions. I have often found myself

wondering while reading an anthropological account of some rather bizarre and violent ritual or act: "What did you feel when you witnessed this? Did you manage to keep your scientific and personal interpretations of it totally separate when taking notes and contextualising? How much of yourself is there - unwritten - in your formalised functional presentations? Or does perhaps the personal part of your anthropological persona disappear as the material goes from your fieldnotes to the text as the current paradigm tells you that it is none of your business to feel anything at all?"

Looking back at my own fieldwork periods, these are troubling questions. Reflexivity leads me to acknowledge that I may have done violence to the magic of the field situation. It is the meeting between the anthropologist - carrying his double persona - and the field which creates anthropology. If one, then, excludes vital aspects of this meeting - the interpretations and emotions of the person behind the anthropological mask - important data is lost.<sup>8</sup>

The anthropologist sometimes presents himself to the field as a "friend" - or using other personal characteristics, maybe even "enemy" - sometimes as a scientist, sometimes both. The field, in return, responds to him in the same way. Sometimes it engages his non-academic persona - carrying its cultural ideas and images - sometimes his academic. This interplay is bound to affect research in one way or another. To utilise it more consciously would create a more honest anthropology. The *dialogue triangle* (Figure 1) shows this interplay of forces between the anthropologist and his field:

**Figure 1**



<sup>8</sup> Lavie, 1990, tries to deal with this duality by ubiquitously separating between "I" and "anthropologist" in her study of Bedouins in the Sinai. After witnessing a ritual of Clitoridectomi she writes: "... I stop being an anthropologist, and throw myself upon the shore, vomiting and crying, vomiting and crying ..." (ibid. 146).

If this is the field situation, why should we destroy it in our representations? Our science needs renewal as our challenges change. Renewal comes through liberation from established conventions and paradigms. It comes from reflexivity, from opening up to new voices - including our own. If we use ourselves as research tools, there should be no reason why we should not use ourselves - reflexively - as research barometers (see Cohen, 1994).

Further, it comes from applying concepts dynamically in the field - what they mean to "them", what they mean to "us" - instead of just reserving them for the representational part. Anthropological fieldwork and representation is exactly that - listening to multiple voices. Sometimes my personal interpretations might collide with my academic ones. As both are part of my anthropological persona, I have to listen to them, reconcile them, or perhaps explain why they are irreconcilable. At other times, the concepts and interpretations of the people I study might collide with mine. This collision should also be debated.

Multiple voices are also present in any community. We cannot assume, at least with the information flow of today, that the holistic moral version we are told by some high-ranking figure necessarily permeates the entire community. As Berreman (1979) has shown, it is absurd to argue that the outcasts in India willingly accept their subordinate position.

If only one moral voice is heard - or at least spoken out loud - in the community we study, we have to explain why. We have to demonstrate relations of domination as well as their potential hegemonies of meaning. In my previous (Lønning, 1995a, 1995b) as well as my current work, I am trying to show how, metaphorically, people can become "prisoners" of their own cultural constructions. Internalised enemy images - in the shape of cultural codes - in Israel-Palestine, make inter-ethnic dialogue and peace-making an extremely difficult and risky kind of affair. Several of the members of the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue groups I have studied, have been met with the most extreme of sanctions, even attempted murder. Yitzak Rabin paid with his life.

There is a collision between an internalised cultural capital produced during almost a century of war and the new political situation. How is one to interpret it? Leaders on both sides have to relate to the sentiments people already hold in their attempts to gain support for the peace process. Israeli leaders speak about getting rid of the fear-producing other through the establishment of secure borders. Thus the peace process leads to the, at least partial,

fulfilment of Zionism, the pure Jewish state. The new Israeli Foreign Minister Ehud Barak, recently came up with the following legitimisation:

*"Those who have a Greater Land of Israel vision say we should remain involved with the Palestinians who hate us, Barak said, pointing to Lebanon and Bosnia as examples of where leaving mixed populations proved disastrous" (Jerusalem Post, 24.11.95: emphasis added).*

Clearly - as the parties themselves recognise - peace-making is dependent upon attitudinal and cultural change.

I believe the metaphor *listening to multiple voices* provides a hole in the closure which moral relativism has placed in front of our discipline. Having morality off limits as our working doctrine does not serve us well in the modern world. As the voices multiply, so do the messages. Today we have an almost global discourse about human rights and ethics. More and more nations and groups enter this debate. Anthropology has a role to play as some kind of a mediator in this discourse. Anthropologists should also be messengers carrying alternative systems of morals, as when people in poor countries argue that Western consumer society is a breach of human rights *per se*. Naturally, human rights cannot be disconnected from cultural and social differences. This is what the international debate is about. Human rights have to be some form of minimum standards, which could be applied in different ways in different cultural and social settings.

Cultural and social particularities have to be related to in an open dialogue on human rights. However, to work for a global idea of humanity and dignity we also need to limit relativism to issues not involving violence and oppression. During my recent participation as a delegate to the International Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, the representative of Saudi Arabia delivered a speech to the Commission which I think pin-points the entire debate: He argued: "We very much support this body and the work it does. Still, in its approach to Saudi Arabia it exceeds its legitimacy. Saudi Arabia is governed by laws which were handed to humanity by God through his Prophet. How can we question them? In the eyes of Saudi Arabia, it is a blasphemy when this Commission sees itself as capable of challenging God and his laws."

There is no attempt to reject the charges of extensive use of capital punishment. Still, cultural legitimisation makes the perpetrator - in his own eyes at least - immune to criticism. This is the official view of a powerful political actor in the Middle East.

Thus we need instruments and concepts to initialise the dialogue and bridge the gap. As we approach the 21st century, the world is, *on one level*, rapidly becoming one place. Acts of as well as debates about goodness and evil are integral to globalisation processes.

As the world and the challenges change, so should anthropology.

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