

There is no such thing as the good

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There is no such thing as the good: The 2013 meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory

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Proposing the motion: Veena Das and Hatdar Al-Mohammad

Opposing the motion: Joel Robbins and Charles Stafford

Abstract

This comprises the edited proceedings of the 2013 debate on the motion “There is no such thing as the good” held at the University of Manchester.

Keywords

Anthropology of ethics, the good, normativity, emotions, reflex and reflection

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Introduction: Wittgenstein’s spade

Jonathan Mair and Soumhya Venkatesan (University of Manchester)

Speakers invited to debate a motion are expected to emphasize the differences between their own view and that of their opponents, and to play down the similarities. When the imperatives of competition are set aside and arguments

are considered with a cool head, it often turns out that the two sides have more in common than they realized or were willing to admit. Sometimes what appeared in the heat of the moment to be material disagreements turn out to be differences in favored definitions of the key terms, in which case there is no fact of the matter to disagree about. These observations apply to this debate to some extent, but there was at least one issue on which the speakers did disagree, a subtle but profound one, one that we think has important implications for the anthropology of ethics.

We will return to that issue at the end of this short introduction. First, though, we turn to the areas of only apparent disagreement. A central element of Das and Al-Mohammad's argument was a homology based on a triple opposition of forms of temporality (the everyday/the event), forms of action (just doing/acting on reflection), and forms of ethics (truly ethical/normative). They describe what they see as a truly ethical form of spontaneous action that they have observed among the people they write about. This is "just doing," which occurs in "the everyday" and is not based on stipulated rules. We are thrown into life, Al-Mohammad says, and we do what we do – we do not stand back and think, "why am I doing this?" "Is it good?"

This form of ethical life requires vindication, they claim, against a view of ethics in anthropology that they attribute to the opposition team, one based on an objectified, abstract idea of the good, in which action is formulated nonspontaneously through self-conscious intellectual reflection on fixed rules, not in "the everyday," but in the context of "the event."

Two prominent elements in the literature of the literature on the anthropology of ethics make this picture plausible. The first is Zigon's (2007, 2009) discussion of moral breakdown – which he argues forces people into ethical reflection by disrupting the unthinking and habitual repetition of everyday life; the second, James Laidlaw's Foucauldian inspired anthropology of ethics with its focus on freedom, reflection, and sustained ethical projects (Laidlaw, 2013).

However, the opposition team's arguments seem to us to fit awkwardly, if at all, into the proposition's model of the anthropology of ethics, and so for the most part are not vulnerable to their attacks. Neither opposition speaker emphasises reflection in his argument. Stafford's argument is particularly difficult to criticize on that basis because of the emphasis he puts on the role of emotion – what is distinctive about ethical judgments, he says, is that we *feel* them. Das criticizes the use of the concept of "the event" in Robbins' published work, associating it with Badiou's contempt for ordinary life. But Robbins does not really oppose the event to the everyday. His interest is in the importance of the notion of conversion as a definitive rupture with the past and its consequences for our understanding of culture in a Christian context. In any case, his arguments here, like those of Stafford, are not obviously related to any particular form of temporality.

The point about normativity, mainly developed in Al-Mohammad's speech, seems to us to have more bite. Drawing on Kant's distinction between genuine ethics and the automatic adherence to rules, Al-Mohammad argues that any concept of the good that relies on a stipulated set of norms cannot be ethical. Stafford

and Robbins each define the good in two ways: first formally, and then in terms of specific content. For Robbins, the good is that overarching value or goal for which people aim and in terms of which they judge, for Stafford, the good has to do with the process by which we make judgments that are emotional. These formal definitions define the good as a process that could be applied to any content, and they therefore appear to escape Al-Mohammad's Kantian critique.

However, both opposition speakers also venture substantive definitions of the good. For Robbins, notwithstanding cultural variation, the content of the good always relates to the social, it is about relationships. For Stafford, some of the judgments about which we emote are culturally variable, but many – the value of reliability, the prohibition of incest – are universal, as Westermarck's survey demonstrated. In terms of these substantive definitions of the good, both opposition arguments may be vulnerable to Al-Mohammad's "puppet effect" critique. Interestingly, the strand of the anthropology of ethics that has most rejected normativity in this sense is the Foucauldian virtue ethics strand that emphasizes reflexivity.

Now to turn to the issue on which the two sides are most clearly divided: *is meaningful action always to be understood in terms of one or more overarching goals, or can some forms of action be understood, in the last analysis, only in their own terms?* The distinction may appear mystifying at first, but it is clarified in a passage of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Reflections* (p. 217) to which Das referred in her answer to Andrew Irving's question in the discussion that followed the opening speeches:

"How am I able to obey a rule?" – if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way I do.

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do."

In these terms, each side has a different view of the bedrock of human action, the end of explanation from which the spade of analysis rebounds.

Das and Al-Mohamad paint a picture of human action in which (some?) action is simply its own explanation – there is nothing more to say. For Das, things people do can escape language, they do not always join up – this makes speaking about "the good" as inexplicable as speaking about "the bad." Al-Mohammad complements Das's approach by his insistence on the "thrown-ness" of life, the embeddedness of people in the flux of life.

By contrast, for Robbins action is to be explained in terms of the attractiveness of "the good," the ultimate good in which chains of value culminate. Stafford emphasizes the emotional pull of the good and conversely the repugnance and disgust people feel when faced with the bad. While both Robbins and Stafford are cautious about definitively identifying the content, both are clear that people across the board recognize some things as the good. For Stafford, this recognition itself has moral significance as an argument about humanity belonging to a single

species. He also makes other, more subtle, arguments about the effects of proximity vs. distance and the resulting generosity and between humans in the aggregate and individuals who are in particular relationships to one.

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The presentations

Veena Das: Everyday life and its moderate amorality

It is a great privilege to be here in Manchester in a debate with my honorable opponents Joel Robbins and Charles Stafford on the question of the good. At the outset, I wish to state clearly that the debate, as I see it, is not about the metaphysical question of whether something like “the good” exists. We have already managed to perform the magic tricks of conjuring lots of things in anthropology – nature, humanity, society – and then making them disappear. Let us then leave questions about existence to theologians and metaphysicians – and, instead, ask what kinds of discursive regimes are enabled when we name something as “the good,” a value that is made to stand apart from the flux and flow of everyday life and bestowed with a thing like quality. My colleague Hayder Al-Mohammad, will show that in supporting this motion, we are contesting precisely this temptation to separate out and name what is a normal stance people take in their attentiveness toward each other and thus to perform a baptism that will create boundaries around “the good” arrogating to anthropology the right to judge the behavior of others, good intentions notwithstanding.

For the anthropologist, the question might be reframed as follows. In his impressive formulation on the history of sexuality and its relation to the truth-speaking discourses, Foucault showed that constituting sexuality as a subject in its own right with its accompanying notions of truth telling created the conditions for certain ways of talking about sex (see Davidson, 1994). We might similarly ask, what is the talk about, when we are confronted with such phrases as the “ethical turn” or “toward an anthropology of the good” to suggest that a revolution of thought in anthropology is around the corner. We might wish to inquire what is it that such talk enables as a discursive practice?

I am fortunate in having Joel Robins as the first opponent of the motion for he has, indeed, made a strong case for arguing that anthropology has become stuck in what he calls a “suffering slot” – a stance in which, he says, it has abandoned the long-cherished concept of cultural difference and replaced it by a sentimental

rendering of “suffering” that manipulates us emotionally by evoking such notions as empathy or witnessing that seek to connect humans directly without the mediating concepts of culture (Robbins, 2013). For Robbins, this is a symptom of the decline of anthropology and the cure is to turn it toward an “anthropology of the good.” Robbins contends that fortunately there are global events that point to the fact that salvation might be around the corner – he specifically picks up two such events – that of the growth of the Pentecostal movement around the world which, according to him, shows that people everywhere are looking for the good. This popular turn to the search for the good is mirrored in uncanny ways for Robbins in the interest that current philosophy has shown in the “Pauline event” (Robbins, 2010), thus signaling the importance of a particular picture of the good as an unexpected event, which anthropology can capitalize on to make itself relevant for the current moment. This kind of theorizing on the good, I submit, is symptomatic of a certain tiredness of having to deal with the quotidian forms of suffering in anthropology (as, indeed, in popular culture, resonating in terms such as donor fatigue that circulate in the media) and to my ears it repeats the promise of salvation that I have come to distrust, whether it is couched in religious or secular terms (see Das, 2007: 44).

Here is how Robbins frames the philosophical moment and invites anthropology on the name of the good to seize this moment:

In certain high-visibility philosophical circles, the early twenty-first century has belonged surprisingly to St. Paul. Held up by Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek, among others, as a figure who models the nature of radical change that arrives not as a teleological march of progress but rather as an unexpected event. (Robbins, 2010: 633)

Inviting a dialogue between the “high-visibility” philosophers and the anthropologists of Pentecostal Christianity, Robbins says – “anthropologists can bring to this encounter materials pertaining to the way actually existing Pauline transformations work in the contemporary world, while the philosophers can bring carefully conceptualized models of change as radical discontinuity and event.” (Robbins, 2010: 636).

It is worth spending a few moments on the picture of everyday life in Badiou (2001), the philosopher whose notion of the Pauline event has served as inspiration for Robbins. It is not Badiou’s philosophical sophistication that I doubt, but his sensibility to the everyday and his barely hidden contempt for those for whom securing the everyday might itself be an achievement. Badiou argues that to be awakened to one’s life is linked to the fidelity that one shows to the figure of *radical* change – otherwise you are but an animal stuck in “the situation.” Badiou’s language, when he is discussing the division between those who recognize the good and those who remain indifferent to it, is tinged with a violence that I find hard to accept. Either, he says, you show your fidelity to the (Pauline like) event or you remain in the situation and in the latter case you are but “bipeds without feathers,

mere acculturated ants.” It is true that Badiou has argued that the affirmative account of the good that he is providing is not dependent on St. Paul and that there are secular examples such as that of Galileo and that of the French Revolution in which the event could not be absorbed within the existing categories of the situation. However, the violence of the language that he uses against those who do not show this awakened quality, this fidelity to the radical event, carries strong religious overtones, and he seems deaf to the fact that it is precisely such language that has been used to perpetrate enormous violence against the nonbelievers – those who did not believe in the miracle of Christ or those who did not believe in the miracle of the Communist revolution. Thus, the first thing the talk of the good enables Robbins and his high-profile philosophers to do is to launch a savage attack on everyday life itself – elsewhere I have argued that a barely suppressed violence against the everyday is indicative of philosophy’s urge to and investment in escaping the everyday (see Das, 2007; Das et al., 2014). Anthropology, many of us thought, was a discipline that showed more patience toward the work of the everyday not only in its attempt to understand the lives of ordinary people but also in tracking the conceptual labor entailed in products of thought in such forms, as myths or rituals (for a further discussion, see Das et al., 2014). In contrast, the division of labor proposed by Robbins – they, the philosophers, will give us the theory and we, the anthropologists, will tell them how things are on the ground – inaugurates yet again a subservience to philosophy as the “queen of sciences.” I had thought that anthropology had overcome this diffidence when Lévi-Strauss (1966, 1981) showed decisively against Sartre that the “primitive” was perfectly capable of rational thought and that it was misleading to characterize collective modes of thought as expressed in myth to be purely expressions of emotive reactions to the world (Das et al., 2014).

Now let us turn to the second thing the talk of the turn to the good authorizes as it seeks to delegitimize the work that has emerged on the theme of social suffering. Though not immediately evident, I will argue that a close attention to the way Robbins goes about identifying the grand events in anthropology in relation to social suffering, rests on the unexamined idea of anthropology as a discipline in which all theoretical moves happen in Western universities, while the history of anthropology in other non-Western countries is reduced to that of consumption of ideas rather than their production. I am not interested in making this point as a moral point, but rather in reflecting on the processes through which particular maps of knowledge are created – much as Foucault’s notion of *parresia*, or truth telling as an ethical force asked us to consider, not the opposition of truth and falsity, but the relation between truth and its doubles.

Consider, Madame Chairperson and Members of the House, *how* Robbins presents his argument in the claims that the study of the good inaugurates a new moment in anthropology. He first traces the great “reflexive turn” in anthropology to the 1980s when, he says, that anthropologists turned from the study of societies defined as “other” (often equated with “primitive”) to the study of their own

societies. He contends, after Trouillot (1991) that the reason anthropology turned away from the study of the primitive was because the figure of the primitive that had occupied the savage slot in anthropology did not fulfill the cultural needs of European societies any longer. While applauding Trouillot for the theorizing from the heights of a mountain top, Robbins also detects a lack in that Trouillot (and proponents of the reflexive turn) did not speculate on what has replaced this savage slot that the other occupied? Robbins then identifies this empty space as having been filled by another slot – that of the “suffering subject.” Perhaps a short citation will help to see how the understanding of issues relating to pain, poverty, or violence is seen as having led to the loss of critical force in anthropology. Here is how Robbins summarizes the issue of the figure that has replaced the primitive other as the object of anthropological attention. “I argue here that from the early 1990s onward to an important extent it has been the suffering subject who has come to occupy its spot, the subject living in pain, in poverty, or under conditions of violence or oppression now stands at the centre of anthropological work” (Robbins, 2013: 448). Finally, Robbins detects another move now that he sees as a positive one in which different topics – a laundry list includes value, imagination, gift, time, empathy, hope – all of which are likely to coalesce in his mind toward the anthropology of the good.

I submit that there is a curious analogy between the colonial modes of talking about the good and the teleological model in which trust is placed in sudden upheavals, unexpected events – the colonial contests being one example – through which a civilizing mission is instituted. Consider each of the moments of the paradigmatic shifts that Robbins identifies and notice please that these happen primarily within Western stories of the creation of anthropological knowledge. First, Robbins endorses the notion that the challenge to anthropology as the study of the primitive other happened with the *Writing Culture* moment when anthropology turned to the study of one’s own society by Western scholars. But this particular recounting completely ignores the fact that the study of one’s society was already the cornerstone of other anthropologies such as in India, China, and Brazil (see Das, 1995; de Castro, 1998; Peirano, 1998; Srinivas, 1966, 1997 for a further discussion on these issues). As Periano (1998) has noted, it is as if any local story told by a North American anthropologist becomes a universal story, whereas even major theoretical innovations in anthropologies considered to be peripheral (as in Indian or Brazilian anthropology) are merely local stories. I have no objection to grounding one’s theories in one’s experiences as long as these are not then used to obliterate other histories of anthropology to make grand claims about “anthropology” with a capital A.

As for the central figure of the primitive other, the story is more complex as we begin to see anthropology not simply as a product of European imagination but as made up of different streams – for instance Gell’s (1997) seminal work on tribal communities in middle India shows that the relation between the Hindu king and his tribal subjects was defined by a complex set of rituals that drew on a rather longer term cultural logic that the colonial government completely failed to

understand. I am not denying the power of European colonialism, but the trend to assimilate all history into a unitary “world history” or “anthropology” denies the manner in which particular local or national histories (including histories of disciplines) reflect the ability to make the discipline. When we come to the so-called shift from a savage slot to a suffering slot, it becomes obvious that even if there was merit in this formulation, it would at best describe some parochial developments rather than grand events in the history of anthropology. Yet in Robbins’ discussion, there are repeated assertions about this or that seminar in a department of anthropology in North America that persuades him that an ethos of privileging the suffering subject was the most important component of anthropological thinking and needed to be contested by showing the importance of a turn toward the good.

Let me finally take one of the examples that Robbins takes to support his argument that the shift to the suffering subject has taken away the critical force of anthropology and that turning to an anthropology of the good would reinstate that critical force. Referring to Daniel’s (1998) paper “Crushed glass, or, is there a counterpoint to culture?” Robbins focuses especially on Daniel’s formulation that the suffering he documented of survivors (whether victims or witnesses), “resists the recuperative power of culture.” He faults Daniel for not providing the cultural context of the narratives he collected from two brothers who saw gangs of Sinhala youth kill their elder brother and father. Now it is true that Daniel who had gone to Sri Lanka to do work on folk culture was confronted suddenly with stories of the horrendous violence that had been unleashed on the Tamil population in the 1983 riots and subsequent escalation in militancy and in the state violence. I read Daniels as resisting the idea that any consolation was to be had in the recuperative powers of culture. It makes no sense to me to juxtapose Daniel’s account of the trauma these two brothers relate in the aftermath of the horror they witnessed to the criticism of trauma theories and their deployment by state institutions dealing with asylum cases in France that Fassin and Rechtman (2009) show in their book, *The Empire of Trauma*. In the first case, the victims and survivors were trying to have their story told in the context of complete denials of violence against the Tamils by the Sinhala state – in the second case, the trauma theory was a tool in the hands of powerful state agents and their accomplices to regulate claims for asylum. Should one be surprised that it is the same scholar who is asking for “cultural context” who manages to completely obliterate the differences of power within which these narratives unfold? So great is the lure of the good, that power disappears in rethinking the social.

It is true that confronted with such violence as Daniel first dared to bring into anthropological thought unhinges one’s ability to work within received categories – and in his first accounts of this violence Daniel made an appeal to our humanity. But it is also the case that in both, his earlier work on the suffering of tea plantation Tamil laborers and his book on the violence in Sri Lanka. Daniel shows us what historicized forms of violence and suffering take us to the edges of experience and makes us question any easy notion of the human (Daniel, 1993, 1997). Let me then offer another example from Daniel’s work.

Let us recall that Daniel (1997) interviewed several young men in Sri Lanka who were members of various militant movements and who had killed with ropes, knives, pistols, automatic fire, and grenades. But what seems to me as traumatic for Daniel in hearing these accounts of killings was the manner in which the styles of killing and the wielding of words were interwoven. Here is one account given by some young men about a particular scene of killing of a young Tamil boy.

He was hiding in the temple when we got there . . . This boy was hiding behind some god. We caught him. Pulled him out . . . The boy was in the middle of the road. We were all going round and round him. For a long time. No one said anything. Then someone flung at him with a sword. Blood started gushing out . . . We thought he was finished. So they piled him on the tyre and then set it aflame. (Daniel, 1997: 209)

Daniel finds the shifting between the “we” and the “they” to be noteworthy, but what stuns him is the next thing that happened.

This was the early days of my horror story collecting and I did not know what to say. So I asked him a question of absolute irrelevance to the issue at hand.

Heaven knows why I asked it; I must have desperately wanted to change the subject or pretend that we had been talking about something else all along. “What is your goal in life?” I asked. The reply shot right back: “I want a video (Video Cassette Recorder: VCR).” (Daniel, 1997: 209)

What comes across to me here is not that Daniel is appealing to a common humanity, but that no picture of the human we might have cherished is going to help here just as no picture of culture will help. Indeed if Daniel was to have followed the impulse to track this back to some aspect of Tamil culture, as present-day explanations for terrorism that track it to Islamic culture try to do, he would have failed any test of fidelity to this kind of event. It is not that one cannot understand the utterance about wanting a VCR, but that in this context, when these words are spoken, they seem not to belong – they seem not to have a home. It is not my contention that the social is not relevant here or that working on suffering does not entail risks of voyeurism, or of pornographic rendering of horror. Rather, I am arguing that within the same scene of violence and suffering, we also get glimpses of care, solidarity, and ability to resist the collective madness as Daniel finds in the small gestures of a Sinhala woman quietly placing her hand on the lap of a Tamil school teacher who is sitting beside her when the bus they are traveling in, is attacked by a Sinhala mob – thus creating the impression of a Sinhala couple.

Finally, let me take a view that Laugier (2009) characterizes as that of “ordinary realism” in which we see suffering, pain, attention to the concrete others (rather than the grand Other) in our life as the way to think of how anthropology might respond in a plural world to events that anthropologists who find it difficult to buy the promises of either religious salvation or neoliberal freedom, given the conditions they encounter, are trying to give expression to. As Sloterdijk (1987) puts it,

everyday life lives on essentially in a moderate amorality and is satisfied when things remain in this moderation . . . this is simultaneously the reason why people with a fairly solid and just feeling for reality are against harshness in matters of punishment in the name of autonomous values such as justice, goodness, honor, etc. They know that punishment in its strict moralism can be more immoral than the actions of those who are to be judged by applying these values to them.

In supporting this motion, members of the house, you would be supporting such a view of the everyday in which something called “the good” does not stand in alienated majesty separated from all suffering and pain or from the everyday realism that the Hindus call the age of *kaliyuga* – an age when you endure both misfortune and small fortunes as simply signs of the age we all live in. You would also be rejecting the idea that “the good” is the common ingredient of the laundry list of topics that Robbins has helpfully provided us with in his programatic statements just as alcohol might be seen as the common ingredient in beer and wine. Let us not forget that after all even gay science was never so gay as to forget the wounds and vulnerabilities from which it sprang.

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Joel Robbins: Ways of finding the good in ethnography

Murdoch (1971: 1) begins the opening essay of her well-known collection *The Sovereignty of Good* with the following observation:

There is a two-way movement in philosophy, a movement toward the building of elaborate theories, and a move back again towards the consideration of simple and obvious facts. McTaggart says that time is unreal, Moore replies that he has just had his breakfast. Both of these aspects of philosophy are necessary to it.

I had thought at one point I would open my remarks in Moore's idiom, suggesting that Professor Das had made a good argument for the nonexistence of the good, and then resting my case. But as it turns out, I have found I want to walk both sides of the street in trying to argue that there is such a thing as the good. I want to adopt Moore's voice to point to some things I think are pretty obvious, or that we as anthropologists routinely and with good reason take to be obvious, and that indicate our need at least to assume the good exists, but I also want to engage in a bit more elaborate theorizing about the good in ways that might not be so simple. Let us call my first, obvious argument, the easy one and the second, slightly less obvious one the hard one. I would like to think the easy argument is the only one I need to make convincingly to carry my opposition to the motion, but I also hope that the hard one helps give us a sense of why we as anthropologists should care about getting the question of the good right in the first place.

The easy argument has to do with what I take to be our basic model of human action – a model I do not think any really interesting anthropologist manages to do without. The first sentence of Aristotle's (2009: 1094a, 1–3) *Nichomachean Ethics* is as good a place as any to turn for a strong, crisp statement of it. "Every art and

every inquiry, and similarly every action and every choice,” Aristotle tells us, “is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.” And lest you imagine that Aristotle, despite his current vogue in anthropology, is a little too old to be a good guide to how we think now, here is Durkheim (2010: 45, his emphasis) giving voice to pretty much the same notion of how human action works: “It is psychologically impossible to pursue an end to which we are indifferent – i.e. that does not appear to us as *good*.” On this model of human action, people do things because they take them to be good things to do.

I should pause immediately to clear up one possible confusion. This model of human action does not commit us to the assumption that everything people do really is good, or even to the assumption that we could reliably render such a judgment in all cases. People can for all kinds of reasons be wrong about what is good and hence be motivated to do things we think they should not do, or that we cannot be sure they should do. All this model of human action commits us to is the idea that human beings tend to think some things are good and that this plays a crucial role in shaping their actions. I think this observation ought to be enough to convince us that at least in this anthropologically meaningful sense, the good does in fact exist.

It ought to convince us not just because it is obvious, but because I think it is a model of action which we as anthropologists never get beyond, and probably should never get beyond. We should not get beyond it because we need it to help us understand why people do what they do and, even more crucially in ethnographic work, to help us understand what it is they think they are doing. Let me give you an example of what I have in mind.

Jains, as is well known, hold to the ideal of *ahimsa* or absolute nonviolence. This commits them, among other things, to vegetarianism and to taking all possible precautions against injuring living beings. Both Laidlaw (2010) and Valley (2008) have looked at how Jains living outside India, particularly in Anglophone countries, have adapted their religion to their new surroundings. Both have found that diaspora Jains have made much of the similarities that hold between their *ahimsa* ethic and the ideals important in many branches of the environmental and animal rights movements. For younger Jains in particular, especially those born overseas, commitment to these movements has become a way, as they see it, of expressing their traditional religious commitments in locally meaningful terms. As many diaspora Jains appear to understand the matter, taking on environmental and animal rights concerns is a simple extension of what they, as people who subscribe to the *ahimsa* ideal, have always done.

But Laidlaw and Valley, even as they document the extent to which diaspora Jains are quite legitimately able to point to the continuities between traditional Jain practices and their own, indicate that in fact what Valley (2008: 567) calls the “overarching goal” of Jain nonviolence is utterly changed when it comes to be expressed through involvement in environmental and animal rights concerns. In orthodox Jainism, *ahimsa* aims at spiritual liberation from the Karmic cycle of

rebirth. As Laidlaw (2010: 69) puts it, for these Jains “The point of cultivating experience of the world as teeming with life is to arouse a feeling, which Jains call ‘disgust’ or ‘revulsion’ with world” that can lead to “self-renunciation” aimed at cultivating nonviolence so as to detach from it. For diaspora Jains, the nonviolence of the environmental and animal rights ideals by contrast serves to bind them more closely to the world, to cultivate in them love for all living things, rather than revulsion from them. The point for these Jains is to make the world a better place, not to leave it behind.

My simple point here is that without understanding changing diaspora Jain notions of the good – what Valley’s referred to above as their changing “over-arching goals” – we could not understand any of this. We could not produce the very elegant analyses both Laidlaw and Valley have given us, because all we would be able to see is a set of practices, such as vegetarianism and a heightened attention to nature, that would appear to have been simply carried from one place to another and linked up with some similar looking practices in the new environment in which they have landed. If we did not know that orthodox and diaspora Jains take different things to be good, we would simply have little sense of what their practices were about or how they differed from one another. Without some notion of the good, ethnography of Jains and of everyone else would at best come to look something like those time lapse films we have all seen, except with nothing we could recognize as flowers blooming, snow melting, or hectic traffic finally giving way to empty streets at the end of the loop. And at worst, and most likely, ethnography would hardly be worth doing at all.

Given how obvious I take all this to be, I have had to ask myself why anyone would want to argue that the good, at least as an integral component in the production of human action, does not exist. I can imagine two reasons one might take this course. One of these I will take up later, but it makes sense to take up the other here.

Looking at some of Professor Das’s and Al-Mohammad’s previous work, I wonder if their real enemy is not the good *per se*, and certainly not the kind of good I have been defending thus far, but rather the right. Although not as outrageously plastic as the ethics/morality pair, which it often seems anyone can define in any way they want, the distinction between the right and the good can be pretty semantically variable as well. But one established way of using it is to distinguish between moral discussions of the good framed in terms of desire, motivation, and goals and those of the right framed in terms of obligations, imperatives, and rules (Larmore, 1990). The story those who make use of this distinction tends to tell how an ancient focus on the good – as in the Aristotle quotation with which I began – gave way to a modern focus on the right, a shift that reached its first great expression in Kant’s development of the notion of the categorical imperative (see e.g., Larmore, 1990; Murdoch, 1971: 52). And the point of telling this story is to urge a recovery of some appreciation of a morality of the good. Those proposing the motion currently under debate seem to me somewhat ironically to be working toward the same end. When Das (2012: 134, 137, 138) writes about ordinary ethics,

she opposes it to “rule following,” the “mere fulfillment of social obligations demanded by rules and regulations,” and speech that takes “the imperative form.” Here it is clear that it is the right stuff, and not the good stuff, that she is setting aside. And when Al-Mohammad and Peluso (2012: 44) call for an everyday ethic that “would be one in which ethics is neither judged nor understood against an ideal of the Good or extracontextual imperatives,” I think they are making much the same move, the capital “G” “Good” they are rejecting here really standing in for what we should understand as the right.

I have no problem with setting aside the right in some of the contexts we study – with focusing on the ways ethical life is sometimes negotiated without reference to rigid, context-transcending rules. But I do not think that in doing so Das or Al-Mohammad and Peluso also get by without implying some notion of the good. If they did, their very moving ethnographic accounts of the careful, often quiet ways people living in profoundly difficult circumstances help others and acknowledge their dignity would have no force. When we read their work, we care that the people who do these things do them because they see them as good, even if they have no need to consult an abstract moral code to come to this conclusion.

So much for the easy argument. By now you have probably figured out it takes the form of a transcendental one – my basic claim is that without some notion that people act toward what they understand to be the good, ethnography itself would be impossible. Therefore, I am suggesting, one cannot deny the notion of the good in the sense of something people work toward and still be an anthropologist.

Onwards then, to the hard argument, or at least to one hard argument. The hard argument I want to take up has to do with the definite article contained within the motion. I take it that my easy argument that people live as if the good exists at least showed that this kind of good exists, but on this understanding, there could of course be as many goods as there are people who live in terms of them. So that argument does not help us much with what it might mean to say that something like “THE” good exists. How might we, as anthropologists, think about this claim?

We are, I think, too convinced, or even in many cases too morally committed, to cultural difference and pluralism to posit the existence of a single ultimate good that holds universally. We are thus unlikely to accept any definition of THE good that is based on a claim that all the various versions of the good we might find in the world point to a single overarching one – like, say, pleasure or happiness. Our unwillingness to accept such an argument would be a second reason for wanting to claim the good does not exist. But perhaps we have the resources at hand to posit that all the varied goods we find, even if they do not point to one summum bonum, do have something in common – something we could then take to be constitutive of something like THE good across all the various forms in which it appears.

In his discussion of the good and the right, Larmore (1990: 16) distinguishes the “imperative” view of the right from what he calls the “attractive notion of the good.”

It is this notion of attractiveness I want to focus on in trying to determine what might be common to instances of the good. For in choosing this term, Larmore taps into one to an important stream of thought that figures the good as something we feel has a power to draw us toward itself. Murdoch (1971) frequently refers to this attractive power of the good as “magnetic.” Murdoch means this image, I think, to capture both the good’s ability to tug at us and its inability sometimes to overcome other forces that sometimes tug us in other directions. These other forces, for Murdoch, are usually ego-centered, self-serving ones. What the good does is pull us outside of ourselves, toward others. Because the good pulls us outside of ourselves, for Murdoch (1971: 73), the magnetic center that is the good is also in this sense “transcendent,” at least of the persons on whom it has its effects. Durkheim (2010: 36), it is worth noting, has recourse to similar imagery, for the good, like the sacred, attracts us, and “takes us outside ourselves and above our nature” – it takes us, ultimately, as with Murdoch, into the social field.

Now, we can worry over the likely culture-bound nature of the image of the human person with its selfish inclinations that both Murdoch and Durkheim are working with here, but even if we drop this part of their arguments, I think we, again as anthropologists, might be able still to find some value in their idea of the good as an attractive force that people find pulling them further and further into social life. We might even be able to give this abstract vision some ethnographic flesh. For example, one thing an anthropology of the good attuned to these ideas might attend to is the way people often coordinate actions in series over time to move ever closer to a good that pulls them forward. I have, for example, talked elsewhere about the fact that the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea always shake hands with a person when they see him or her for the first time each day (Robbins, 2012). The Urapmin like to do this, they are drawn to this practice, even as they are also obligated to carry it out (so it is right as well as good, but I will leave discussion of that for later if anyone wants to ask). I have argued that Urapmin people feel this way about hand shaking because it realizes what they take to a key good in their social life – the making or affirming of social relationships. But they also know that shaking hands is in a sense a minor practice of the good. They are even more powerfully drawn to and excited by practices that make more elaborate relationships, such as exchanging food, exchanging valuables, gardening and hunting together, moving into the same villages, and at the very high end of the scale uniting families in marriage. As ethnographers, we need to attend to how the force of the good increases as one moves through these various practices that are linked in what Munn (1986) refers to as chains of value transformation, chains we can think of as producing ever more attractive, magnetically powerful realizations of the good.

I dwell on these chains of increasing realization of the good for two reasons. First, I think an awareness of the way people concatenate actions to move themselves closer and closer to the magnetic center of the good can help us learn to identify the kinds of social projects we need, as ethnographers, to understand. But I also dwell on them because I think such chains are places we can see the existence

of the good in action – not in the form of single good acts (which are of course important in themselves), but in the making and maintaining of whole ways of life. And it is these, after all, that it is our job to understand.

On this account, what various goods share that lands them in the category of the good is this kind of force, a magnetic pull that draws people into various socially recognized chains of value transformation, participation in which renders their lives properly social. One can be drawn to evil too, of course, and it would take more work than I at least have yet done to differentiate this appeal from that of the good. But the existence of one kind of force in the world does not invalidate the existence of others, so I would not want us to get sidetracked by this problem.

So much, then, for my easy and hard arguments for the existence of the good. I had heard some worry that this debate might turn out to be too philosophical, and I have been mindful throughout to argue not just for the existence of the good, but for the existence of the good in forms that I think ethnographers both can and should explore. Those are the kinds of good we may be best at finding, and in any case, I have suggested, they are ones we cannot do without.

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Hayder Al-mohammad: We can do without the good

The motion I seek to defend is: *there is no such thing as the good*. But, I would be happy to go further, as if outright opposition was not far enough, by echoing Bernard Williams’ sentiments of God in morality, by saying of the GOOD that it “either adds to nothing at all, or it adds the wrong sort of thing” (1997: 65). Or,

as I should probably clarify, not much hinges on “the GOOD” in terms of helping us get closer to the struggles for life, well-being, and voice, which we would like to consider as being “ethical” in some form or another. However, notions of the GOOD do rest on at least two issues that most anthropologists in this room today, I assume, would be most unhappy committing to. I can broadly pen these issues under the banners of the “*puppet effect*” and the problem of the “*Who*” and “*Where*” of ethics.

Let me begin by addressing the issue of the “puppet effect” with the following rather long quote:

Supposing now that nature had here been compliant to our wish and had conferred on us that capacity for insight or that illumination [of the Good] which we would like to possess or which some perhaps even *fancy* themselves actually possessing... However, the *attitude* from which actions ought to be done cannot likewise be instilled by any command, and the spur to activity is in this [case] immediately at hand and *external*... The conduct of human beings, as long as their nature remained as it is, would thus be converted into a mere mechanism, where, as in a puppet show, everything would *gesticulate* well but there would still be *no life* in the figures. However, it is quite different with us. (emphasis in original Kant, 2002 [1788]: 185–186)

This is no quote from Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze or any philosophers of the second becoming. Not only is the quote from Immanuel Kant’s work, it is also from the *Critique of Practical Reason* – Kant’s most sustained exposition “on the moral law within me,” as he liked to put it. The problem as Kant sees it, were we to have access to what the GOOD is in *content*, outside of the GOOD as a theoretical posit, or as he terms it “the unconditioned totality of the object of pure reason,” we would not have ethics but dumb rule or command following. If it is stated somewhere in the world that it is the GOOD to do such and such, on the model of the GOOD, I do such and such, to some degree at least, because it is *the* GOOD.

Trying to get out of this quandary of norms preceding and determining action by suggesting that the GOOD is historically, socially, and politically contingent, or emerges from social action itself, does not quite cut it. By claiming something like that the GOOD emerges from social action to ultimately then coordinate social action is to see the social actor as like an artist only to be later swallowed up in her own painting. These claims and argumentative strategies do not dispense with the “*puppet effect*”: the GOOD can only have explanatory power if somewhere along the story of social life it can be shown to have some determining effect. In Agamben’s terms, and I am in full agreement with him here:

The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize. This is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or that substance,

this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible – there would be only tasks to be done. (1993: 42)

The Good is just such an end – indeed, maybe *the* end.

If you are still unsure if the “puppet-,” *only tasks to be done*, effect is not so serious an issue, witness just how odd thinking of our own behaviors and actions in terms of the GOOD would be: I showered this morning because it is GOOD to be showered than nonshowered. I have not killed anyone in my life – you will have to take my word for that! – because it is GOOD, in and of itself, not to murder someone. And so on . . . There is something grammatically awkward about these statements, which might point to the notion of the GOOD as sitting awkwardly within the grammar of our own lives. *Maybe . . .*

Kant, the philosopher of the Highest GOOD, saw the problem in substantializing the notion of the GOOD. If we had access to the GOOD in content, we would act not from within the spontaneity of our practical existence and reasoning, but as a mere mechanism, responding almost stimulus/response like. Kant was committed that his ethics must also liberate life from the rigidity and conceptual determinism of the GOOD in order for there to be such a thing as ethics in the first place.

What is odd is how Kant, the arch-conceptualist as he is so often taken to be, is so aware of this difficulty. Why is Kant struggling not to close off the vivacity of life in his account, yet in anthropology we are prepared to posit GOODS which the people we work with must have, it seems, almost direct access to?

For no other reason than argumentative parsimony, Occam’s Razor if we want a formal name for it, why posit a second-order explanation of conduct and action when there are first-order, immanent accounts and modes of engaging ethical life at hand? I shaved my stubble this morning because within the cultural coordinates I exist within, it is taken, cosmologically, ontologically, deontologically, as preferable for me to be shaved rather than unshaved . . . *How tiring to think all this is going on . . .*

This leads me to a problem already contained in what I have just spoken about, namely the “*Who*” of ethics.

We are not a removed Cartesian-like subject grounded in some ethereal like *res cogitans* substance that must choose to become ethical. We already *are* ethical, *are* shaped by ethics, before we “breakdown” and reflect on it. Given a situated, enmeshed self, we are ethically *thrown*. An ethical bearing in one way or another *goes all the way down*. We are always already ethically situated and committed. The moral paralysis that alarmists imagine as the result of relativism without a notion of the GOOD would be no more a realistic expectation than worrying that readers of Descartes’ *Meditations* will fall victim to such a radical epistemological doubt that they would not be able to get out of bed in the morning.

One of the questions that might arise in response to these comments might be: are we so fundamentally committed to the ethical world into which we are thrown?

Are there no appeals beyond our finite ethical engagements and interinvolvements? Such questions seem far too quick to me. Finitude means this world of ethical understanding must be incomplete, frayed at the edges, even contradictory at its core; this is the concealment at work in claims to reveal supposed ethical truths and norms. To put it another way, the attempt to make manifest, or cash-out, our pretheoretical, practical, everyday engagements and understandings in terms of this “society takes such and such to be the GOOD” effaces more than it reveals.

Imagine the following scene. I enter someone’s house. I’m asked how I am, how things are going. I respond with a nod, or maybe a grimace, depending on my mood and the situation. I offer to take my shoes off; I’m told there is no need to. I’m shown into the living room. Children are on the floor playing and watching television. They say hello to me, and I to them. They collect their toys as much as they possibly can. The more comfortable seat is offered to me. *I don’t want to be a bother*, I saw awkwardly. *Not at all, make yourself comfortable*, one of the hosts says as they place a glass of juice on the coffee table in front of me. I am left alone briefly and find a coaster on another table across the room. I get it quickly in the hope that maybe the wood has not stained under the glass of juice. The kerfuffle begins to die down as the hosts finally join me, and the children return to playing on the floor, and the toys are once again spread across the room . . .

Maybe if this scene was played out in the Middle East, where I work, I might have been forced to reference Islam, the twinned shame/honor, or how the glass of juice symbolizes vitality, or the wooden table male power and authority, or whatever version such logics now take in the discipline. But, thankfully, we will be spared this today for the above took place in North London in the home of an Anglo-Saxon couple for whom we do not seem to have prepared logics and cosmologies as yet. From the door to the living room, and eventually sitting down, I myself am not confronted by logics of hospitality which I must enact, but possibilities whereby I might question; I might step aside to let one of the hosts through, or hold back in entering the home or a room in case of something or other. My awkwardness is not just borne of unsureness, but an attempt to convey a quiet deference to the couple and their abode. On other visits to the couples’ home, I have entered with cheer or sadness, excitement, or sullenness. Each situation, each visit, containing its own possibilities and limitations, which are never truly made explicit, nor necessarily hold as firm as one might imagine.

An objection here might be: it is all very well you being uncertain, but what of history! Tradition! damnit . . . *what about culture?! To which my simple response is: what about it? Some of you sat here today I know rather well. When we have emailed, or called each other the day before an interview, a talk, a conference, workshop, and panel, trying to workout: is the paper I have written appropriate to the situation? Will Professor “X” be offended if I do not cite her, or cite her in negative terms? What should I wear? Should I be early? How early is too early? And so on . . . Of my interlocutors, you know who you are!*, we have inhabited the world of academia for a decade or more; we have codes of conduct within the discipline and the institutions we work in, and still we could not figure this darn

game out – how odd the ethnographic subject has figured out her world and can so easily locate goods and bads, never fluffing the distinction . . . In truth, we inhabit worlds we are not masters of, and with no clear blueprint or principles by which to proceed – no matter how many texts and traditions we keep citing and referring to. What we find in the world are not GOODS which make claims on us, but *oughts*. As the philosopher Wilfred Sellars once put it, the world is *fraught with ought*.

On whom are these oughts placed, however?

The *who* of ethics is not the subject, and it is most certainly not the *what* of agglomeration of facts and values that come to form GOODS, no matter how contingent those GOODS are asserted to be, and no matter how many ethnographic examples we may or may not have. The *WHO* of ethics may be closer at hand within the discipline than we might think. Many anthropologists, of course, have maintained the primordially of sociality or that social relationships constitute the grounds from which persons emerge. Our understanding of ethics, and ultimately our move away from thinking of the GOOD, must be complicated by taking into much greater consideration the relationality, interdependency, and intercorporeality of human existence, what I have called elsewhere an *ethics of being with*. Our ethical lives are entangled and enmeshed into the lives of others and this enmeshment indicates not only that our existential coordinates are ex-centric, that is, outside us, but so to our ethical coordinates and responsibilities (cf. Al-Mohammad, 2010, 2012).

That is the point. We are already ethically enmeshed and intertwined such that we do not need to conceptually bring together disparate lives under the name of a “society” and generally agreed upon or recognized GOODS. If one begins from lives as always already related or enmeshed, whatever your preference may be, modes of life need no longer to be “*judged*” in terms of their degree of proximity to or distance from an external principle such as the GOOD, but are “evaluated” in terms of the manner by which they take on an existence one might, someday, be able to call their own. The fundamental question of ethics is not *What must I do?*, but rather “*What can I do? What am I capable of doing?*” (which is the proper question of an ethics without the GOOD).

Ethics is always undermined by negotiated forms of (ethical) value and/or morality by the insistence of a preliminary recognition of some figure or other, some end, some GOOD. Ethics is what so many philosophies seeks to isolate and describe, and thus render special in some way, distancing the ethical from the “everyday” – the manifold possible forms of life that exist before conceptual recognition. Such theorizing ignores not only the *Who* of ethics, our always already ethically, intertwined, modes of life, it also seems to ignore the *Where* and *When* of ethics as it is lived, namely the everyday.

Everyday ethics does not explain how and why we obey laws or not, it struggles much more, it seems to me, with that which we should and can make of ethics, of our lives. The claim to explain the reason behind our supposed “obedience” to the GOOD only comes from the will to philosophise and theorise. The type of ethics most anthropologists find in what we still glibly call to this day “fieldwork,” is one which is

lived, and not necessarily made explicit – or even that which could be made explicit (cf. Al-Mohammad, 2011). It emerges from the immanence, the potentiality, of the world realized in our own becoming as humans. Ethics, which is an everyday ethics, is resolutely lived, as opposed to transcendent, divine, or prescriptive. This form of ethics does not take its authority from outside, but only from within our engagements, encounters, and understanding of ourselves and the worlds we dwell in.

Ladies and gentlemen, how awful would it be if there are GOODS in the world and our job is simply to enact them, or judge our actions against them? I urge you to vote to support the motion: there is no such thing as the GOOD . . . and . . . *and* . . . if there were GOODS in the world, they either add nothing to ethics, or the wrong sort of thing . . . !Thank you.

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Charles Stafford: A species-level view of the good

Since my job today is to argue that “there IS such a thing as the good,” I might as well start by confessing my sins.

First, I want to confess that while carrying out fieldwork in rural China and Taiwan, I have never found the behavior of people I met there especially strange or mysterious. Of course, some odd things have happened. In Taiwan, I became friends with a spirit medium who – when possessed by a god – would slash his forehead with a long sword and then dab the blood from this onto the magical charms he made for his clients. Surprising as I found this at first, it was in fact totally conventional spirit medium behavior, and (to state the anthropological truism) once you knew the background it made a lot of sense. Crucially, it was not hard for me to imagine becoming a spirit medium myself, and in the course of fieldwork I came to appreciate – one might say to believe in – the magical efficacy of Chinese gods, especially San Taizi and Mazu.

By contrast, I have sometimes found the behavior of my younger sister, Rebecca, totally baffling. I am not sure, but I have the idea that Rebecca’s ontological commitments are radically different from my own, in spite of the fact that we grew up not only in the same society and culture but actually in the same house

on 36th Street, next door to the Wallace family with their annoying German Schnauzer dog. And I am making a serious point here. I think we need more sibling studies in anthropology. I am confident that such studies would illustrate an important fact: that individual-level variation *within* societies, even within single households, is sometimes more dramatic and interesting than aggregate-level variation *between* societies. After all, the more we are talking about humans on aggregate – even if we divide everyone up into separate “societies” or “cultures” – the more we are, by definition, talking about our species in general.

This brings me to Westermarck, and to the question of whether there is such a thing as the good. If anybody knew something about cultural variation in ideas of the good, it was surely Edward Westermarck. His two-volume doorstop, *The origin and development of the moral ideas*, lays it all out in exhausting Fraser-like detail before concluding with an anthropological statement of the obvious: “A mode of conduct which among one people is condemned as wrong is among another people viewed with indifference or regarded as praiseworthy or enjoined as a duty.” In this sense, there clearly is no such thing as “the” good, and Westermarck was indeed famous for his (controversial) theory of ethical subjectivity, which held that any attempt to devise a universal or scientific morality was doomed to failure.

Being a systematic thinker, however, he was also struck by patterns in the otherwise highly variable case studies that he brought together. One point is that humans in all societies must deal with the same existential constraints. These include the fact of us having to rely on other people who are frequently very unreliable, and who thus manage to seriously annoy or even “injure” us in some way. Unsurprisingly, behavior of this kind is not appreciated very much in *any* human society, and tends to be judged pretty harshly.

But the pattern that really struck Westermarck was found in the *emotional* dimension of these moral judgments across cultures. In brief, whatever (culturally variable) view of the good we might hold, we are rarely dispassionate judges. When we hear about a young man attacking an elderly woman in her own bedroom at night, for instance, we actually get upset about it. Conversely, when we hear of a kind act, even on a small scale – e.g. someone giving encouragement to a child who is painfully shy and withdrawn – it is not just that we think it is good for them to have done this, we somehow *feel* it in our hearts. Or, to give a different kind of example, one that some in this audience may find harder to get their brains around, it is not just that people out there say that homosexuality is wrong, and then follow this up with a dispassionate account of why this is so. The very thought of it being allowed makes some people angry, they actually find it disgusting!

The recurrence of this pattern, i.e. of moral judgments (whatever they are) being invested with feeling led Westermarck to formulate his most important conclusion: “. . . that the moral concepts, which form the predicates of moral judgments, are ultimately based on moral *emotions*” – and in particular those linked to gratitude and resentment for helpful and harmful behaviors, respectively (p. 738). The origins of these emotions are to be found in our shared evolutionary past, but I hasten to add that Westermarck is the opposite of a crude universalist. After

all, he has just spent hundreds of pages telling us (rather tediously, to be honest) about variation in morality across societies and through history, and he himself was an experienced ethnographer, one who knew perfectly well the complexities of everyday moral *and* emotional life for ordinary people. Indeed, the immersive fieldwork methods of anthropology, typically attributed to Malinowski, were arguably just as much the invention of Westermarck¹ – who became a professor at the LSE in 1907 and was one of Malinowski's mentors.

It has to be said that Westermarck was ahead of his time, and not just in relation to fieldwork. He published a lot on homosexuality, to return to that topic, which is impressive for somebody born in 1862 in Helsinki. Bear in mind that only the year before, in 1861, the UK had abolished the centuries old death penalty for buggery, replacing it with a minimum 10-year sentence. If Westermarck had been born a mere 70 years later, I might have met him in the 1980s at the Bell near King's Cross in London – where some people had the idea that homosexual promiscuity was actually highly moral in principle, even if in practice it resulted in everybody getting crabs. This is further proof that morality is historically contingent.

Westermarck was also ahead of his time with his brand of evolutionary psychology, and indeed he is arguably ahead of *our* time. In recent years, many important studies on the psychology of moral life have been published. While some of Westermarck's early thoughts on the subject have predictably been superseded, others – including his ideas about incest aversion – have been broadly confirmed.² Meanwhile, only a handful of the recent studies have really seriously engaged with the historical-cultural environments in which the emotions of moral life play themselves out, which for Westermarck was actually the place to *start* the whole investigation.

At this point, then, let me go back to my fieldwork in Taiwan, and the spirit medium I mentioned at the outset. As I said, I did not find his (totally conventional) behavior as a medium especially baffling. I should note, however, that he and most of the people around him hold moral views that I do not share at all. Among other things, he thinks that it is truly terrible for an only son to fail to marry and have children. I do not agree with him about this, but I get the point that he actually means it and, moreover, *feels* it. So, sure, the content of morality varies across cultures, but there are strong continuities in the processes through which both the spirit medium and I think, feel, and ultimately are motivated to act in relation to the good.

To put my argument in a nutshell: there IS such a thing as the good, however this is to be found – as Westermarck suggested – in psychological process as much or more as it is to be found in cultural content.³

But here let me change tack and give a different illustration of the same point. Let us say that our Taiwanese spirit medium observes somebody doing something bad, e.g. sneakily taking away food offerings that have been placed in the local temple by other families, right under the noses of the gods. He thinks it is wrong for this kind of thing to be done, and it makes him angry. Note, however, one key feature of this situation: his status as the observer rather than the actor, something that will undoubtedly shape his evaluation of what unfolds. If he were instead

the actor, i.e. if he were the thief of the food offerings, it is just about possible that he would judge himself harshly. But it is also very possible that, taking everything into account, he would partly or even wholly forgive himself, e.g. on the grounds that his children are going hungry and that this is what compelled him to do a “bad” thing. We generally know more about ourselves than about others, of course, and as social psychologists have long noted this may make it cognitively easier for us to forgive ourselves for circumstantial reasons, if that is what we want to do.⁴ To frame this in relation to emotions: as observers, we may well be angry at wrongdoers, e.g. thieves, even angry enough to want them punished. But note that when we ourselves are wrongdoers, by contrast, what might provoke anger is being punished for acts that are actually excusable – that is, from our perspective.

Anyway, my guess is that some version of this “actor–observer asymmetry” will be found across human cultures, and it would certainly be interesting to test this empirically and to study how different cultural environments shape and modify it. Perhaps it is even a true universal: that is, that no matter what our culturally constituted ideas of the good may be, and whatever actions we are meant to be evaluating, one certainty is that (as I see things) I will always come out of it looking better than you. There is such a thing as the good, and it is me!

But this takes me back, finally, to my younger sister, Rebecca. We grew up in the same culture and even the same household, so in theory we should have the same outlook on life – but we do not. And I should be able to judge her generously, almost as generously as I would judge myself, because I have plenty of information about the circumstances surrounding her (good and bad) behavior. But of course I do not judge her that nicely, and perhaps it is the case that siblings on the whole do not judge each other that nicely.

In fact, it was notably easier for me to be a generous judge with the spirit mediums I met during fieldwork in Taiwan. One could say that the stakes for me in relation to their behavior were quite low, and that my emotions (the prerequisite for moral judgments) were therefore a bit less engaged. Actually, one striking exception to this was the time when they accused me – I thought rather unfairly – of having broken their rules about spiritual pollution. I found this baffling, and it made me angry, because I thought (or at least hoped) that I had behaved quite properly on the occasion in question. But the issue in that case was not that I found their morals baffling; what I found baffling was that I could be so wrongly accused!⁵ More generally, the ethnographer’s perspective tends to transform individuals into representatives of the aggregate from which they come, for better or worse. Everything is framed in relation to culturally learned behaviors and ideas, and as professional relativists, we are primed to forgive almost anything our informants do, so long as there is a cultural logic behind it.

By contrast, with my sister Rebecca, whom I know extremely well, the stakes are high and my emotions are engaged. She is basically an extended version of me, in some senses, and I could easily forgive her, but I do not. Certainly, explaining her behavior away with respect to cultural learning is NOT in the foreground of my mind. Indeed, rather than being highly sensitive to what my sister represents about

our shared culture, I am highly sensitive to the usually tiny, but annoying, ways in which she deviates from my personal way of seeing the world. This leads to me treating her as if she were from a different species, which I suppose is ok with one's younger sister. But what I think it *not* ok is for us as anthropologists to treat people from different cultures, on aggregate, as if they were from a different species. They are from *our* species, I am trying to argue here, and this means that we *do* share a view of the good with them, in process if not in content.

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The debate

Soumya Venkatesan, Manchester: Veena, you began your presentation in a very provocative way. And I am going to ask: if indeed you had opposed the motion, what would you have said?

Veena Das: I think that's a great question, because it allows me to be two persons at the same time. Two things I think I would have said if I was in fact opposing the motion, and it would not have been any of the points that either Joel or Charles so eloquently made. The first thing would have been that we know we live in *kalyug*, and good can happen and bad can happen and it does not have to do anything with us, right, it's a certain kind of play of Gods, and so, I can posit the existence of the good, without necessarily having to say that *that* is exactly the ethical. I think the whole point would be that you can have the good without it being the ethical. It's the conflation of the ethical and the good that I found extremely problematical in these presentations. And the second point I would have made is – well, if I would have been really very manipulative, I would have known that here is going to be an audience, given that it is rather conventional kind of place – these UK universities – and so most people are coming anyhow with the idea that they are going to oppose the motion, and since I really don't really believe in the good, I might as well cash in on that particular sentiment (*laughter in the audience*).

Jonathan Mair, Cambridge: I wonder if all of you could outline briefly, in relation to the arguments you made in your respective speeches, how would you define the good?

Hayder Al-Mohammad: As I don't work to a notion of the good, I don't feel I have to. I think I can bring the particular versions of the good that exist at the moment together and show that they are making several commitments at the same time. I think I can show them working to a certain history within Western thinking, and there are strong arguments against those. So it is not the good as such, I don't think there is a good, there are various versions of the good.

Jonathan Mair: So which arguments in particular . . . ?

Hayder Al-Mohammad: Well, if you take Joel Robbins's argument about how cultural values are socially shot through by value distinctions, and there's a lot of that that tends to be hierarchical, and then you have this notion of the good, and this notion has some impact on how you perform and not perform. I already have enough trouble with that, and don't need to go further with any more specifics. So I think, if I can say, there's a problem with those basic claims, I don't think I could go further.

Veena Das: So for me, that's a very interesting question, because it becomes part of what negative theologies always have to face, which is really that if you think that the particular kind of concept is not a very good concept, then how do you talk about it, so that it does not become substantialized in the very process of talking about it? And that's why I would basically refuse a definition on the ground that it would substantialize something which I think is not to be substantialized.

Joel Robbins: There are a lot of different possible definitions. So I will stick to the two that I was relying on in my opening remarks. And there were two, which is why there was the easy and the hard argument. The first argument was that the good is what people are aiming for in action, what they desire. Not what is desirable – we'll get to that – but what they desire, or want, or feel that they are trying to do, the goals of their actions. However, small those goals might be, however proximate, or however distant. The second, hard argument upped the ante a little bit and tried to define good as what people found desirable, what they found was pulling them, not just that they wanted it, but even if they did not completely want it, they felt themselves drawn to it. They found it somehow desirable because it got them into projects that they wanted to be in and it involved other people, other than just themselves. So I was working with a notion of the good that I opposed to the right on the basis of attractiveness and the desire. So the hard argument did add something like an idea of the normative that figures in one's motivations, or something like that, to a simple claim about the goals that actions aim to realize – it turns from the desired to the desirable, which might be a subset of what one might desire.

Charles Stafford: Since I started with the psychology argument, I should stick with the psychology argument, but I would note that it is, to some extent, a psychological version of the sociological points that Joel was making concerning the human drive for the good. Psychologists who work with moral emotions would

speak about two different things: first, that we are social animals, and therefore it's not surprising that things that are generally regarded as being beneficial in social relations, however defined, will be seen to be "good." Things that are harmful in terms of the general run of social relations will be seen to be "bad." In spite of variation in the content of each, some version of this is going to be found everywhere. And for me, that's the good. Psychologists also point out, second, that there seems to be another mechanism going on, which relates to, for example, disgust reactions. That's a different kind of psychological mechanism, but in terms of what we think of as good and bad it may also play an important role, and it definitely plays an important role in relation to things such as incest aversion, which involves disgust. So in that sense, the bad in some cases is actually what one finds disgusting.

Richard Werbner, Manchester: I want to raise some issues about anthropological interest in the common good and the public good, as subsumed under the heading of the notion of the good. We at the moment, are having to say with the rest of the world, that Nelson Mandela is dead, and we are having to think about what his life meant in respect of the public good and the common good. Veena, is there is any respect, or none, in which a life like that tells us something about the public good?

Veena Das: Let me pose the Mandela example in relationship to the Gandhi example. Gandhi insisted that he did not exemplify something like the common good that he was actually responding every time existentially to a suffering that he saw. In many kinds of ways, personages of this kind tend to take away our attention from the kind of work notions of public good and common good are actually doing in the world today. So I just take two examples – one, the entire idea of a public good as one which involves externalities has not actually related to the fact that whose externalities matter right now is absolutely at the heart of this discussions. So in medical anthropology in which I work, the diseases which have very strong externalities and on which World Health Organization would really want to put its attention on the ground that these are the global public goods that need to be protected – are those that threaten the health of the rich in the countries of the West, that have nothing to do with what affects the diseases of the poor. That's why the investment in some ways, on diseases like HIV/AIDS, when it seemed to be a great threat for the whole world, was very, very sharply tuned. The attention to diarrheal disease, which could have been cured or which could have been prevented for much smaller investment of money, receive little sustained attention. So I would say that really, yes, we can get some great men sometimes, but instead of the great men's history of what is the common good and what is the public good, we actually need to think what is it that has been done in the name of public good, so global public good, or common good, at this moment. And if we see that, then there is a clear history of power, that I drew attention to, and which is so strongly written in this kind of agenda that we need to be fairly careful of how we think of these terms.

Joel Robbins: I am partially responding to Veena's response. One option, and it is a necessary option, is to unmask, or at least become aware of the work that the public good is doing. But there may be another kind of fight which is to expand and change notions of the public good. And in fact, I think when you are talking about

global health you are talking about having a better global health that serves the good of more people. You may not be, but I think that would be a worthwhile project. So part of the question is what we anthropologists can do, and in some sense I think the good is a concept and a word we are thus reclaiming, and trying to transform in ways that we think are important, rather than to simply set aside as damaged beyond repair, in a world where frankly we will never be in full control of the terms of debate.

Veena Das: So I think that there are two real points of difference and this gives me an opportunity to go back to your earlier point. You know, it seems so simple and obvious to say “well the good is what people desire” – but how lucky for you that you think that people’s desires are transparent. I mean, take the 12th-century writer, Anandvardhan in India who wrote about desire (and this is the reason Lacan picks up his theory from Anandvardhan), is that the unconscious only speaks in half-truths, that in fact desires can never be expressed as if they were completely transparent. So I find it very lucky that in the reflexive turn, everybody knows what their own desires are; in your definition of good you know what people’s desires are – and I would really suggest that we need to make that a little more complicated. On the second question – that we must work to make global goods wider and we must do more with public health – but we’ve heard those things, we heard them from people like Jim Kim, the president of the World Bank, who say the only way to do this is to corporatize global public health. So, instead of this large question what are global public goods and how do we attend to them, how about just attending to the fact that people in slums know what they want, and that they don’t want these very large global institutions trying to monitor what is global public good. Instead they want water, or sanitation, or electricity, but they don’t even define it as “the good” – they just define it as something which is part of their lives.

Joel Robbins: You ended in a different place from where you began, because at first you said desires are not transparent, and then you told us what people wanted in the slums were pretty transparent. Just to defend myself – I never said that it was transparent – if it were, then an anthropology, at least as I am trying to conceive it for myself, would not be necessary. So I would not want to say that I think what people desire is transparent. I think it takes work, which is why we have something to do. Just to clear up that small point, which does not answer your question.

Veena Das: It is not a small point, because there is a conflation here of desire, and wish, and need, which it seems to me that no serious theoretician can actually conflate.

Hayder Al-Mohammad: I took down a few quotes – “simple and obvious facts,” “basic model of human action,” “appears to us” – I don’t know who the “us” is – “as good.” “We should do.” I mean, there is this assumption that there is a transparency about what goods are in both what Charles and Joel are saying. But what Charles at least is saying “I can locate in the psychological, if not in content, then in form and process at least.” At least we know where Charles stands. But you cannot just say “we know it is clear” and then on the other hand “I didn’t say it was transparent.”

Joel Robbins: Okay. I think there's two different things I've tried to say about transparency being conflated here. I tried to be transparent about what I meant by my arguments, and about some assumptions I think anthropologists tend to make about the nature of action, but I did not claim that every good the people we study ethnographically care about is transparent.

Penny Harvey, Manchester: I think our job as the audience is to try to articulate the ways in which the two sides appear to be talking past each other. So, the phrase that kept coming into my head is "parenting," and whether we can deal with the paradox that we might want to say that the good parent is the one who knows there's no such thing as the good. And if you agree with that in any way, the proposers would lose. The opponents are basically saying that anthropology should or could explore the normative as a situated possibility and that in that kind of notion of parenting that you should embrace there's no such thing as the good that would be a normative understanding of particular situations. So then we have an idea of the culturally constituted notion of the good that draws people in. And that seems to sit alongside a very different argument, which is that anthropology could or should be about how people get on with life, how they affirm life in the knowledge that, as Joel put it, "we inhabit worlds that are not under our control" and are not necessarily available to us, in the way that Veena is just talking about it. So it seems to me that you could hold both of those positions at once, and I'd like to suggest that a good anthropology, if we think what's the good and what kind of anthropological good are we after, would somehow be a combination of those positions, where we would be looking at what people feel they should do or what they feel attracted by, but at the same time, we are very attentive to how people get on with life, in the knowledge that they can't either know, or control it. So it takes me back to that, very kind of middle-class British notion, that the best good parent is just a good enough parent, who tries to get by without knowing what the good is.

Veena Das: Let me start by saying that I think there comes a moment when you have to state what you really think in pretty oppositional terms, and that it is useful to develop the antagonisms rather than to explore the affinities. And that's why it seems to me that your example of parenting is a terrific one. When does this anxiety arise, as to whether or not this is "good enough parenting" or whether this is "good parenting?" It rises when a certain confidence in life has already been made to disappear. It's like the conversation between Wittgenstein and Moore. Moore says "This here is my hand, and how can you deny that?" – and Wittgenstein says "But if I reached the point where I began to doubt whether this is my hand, then showing me that this is my hand is not going to answer that." So one might reframe that question and say: "what is it about the rise of expert knowledge in these cases that has made ordinary acts like parenting so untrustworthy?" Most parents get by, or used to get by, by seeing that their children looked happy, that they looked healthy. And if they did not look healthy, things were outside their control, right? In the kinds of situations in which I live in and work in, it seems to me that the question is never "Am I a good enough parent?," but really "Given

this kind of environment in which I live, am I doing whatever I can do to sustain the lives of my children?"

Hayder Al-Mohammad: In Iraq you have many cases of families that have been destroyed, you have people who are weak and vulnerable, having to look after other people. So what they do is they go to work, they struggle for other people, but nobody is doing this because it is "the good." You do not need that category to say why somebody goes out and works for 12, 14 hours a day in 50°C heat to explain why they struggle for their daughter, their son, their neighbor, their friends, or what have you. The good does not add anything to that understanding. The other thing is, you don't need a notion of value, or culturally specific categories, of "mother does this to son, son does this to father." It is very complicated, Iraqis don't know what's going on, right? So, then you can't ensure that this notion of the good is only to do with parenting. The parents are working to it, they don't need that, they are confronting other problems that they continue having to work through. So it is the situatedness of life itself, and working through that as an anthropologist, which means you don't really need this notion of the good. I don't see what that notion of being a good parent adds to explain the case I've just given. It's just redundant.

Charles Stafford: Penny's comment is a really interesting one. And I agree that the developmental perspective is indeed an extremely important one for this particular topic, and perhaps it's a shame that none of us really took that angle – that is, to think about children in relation to the good. But it does seem to me that in the end, what you've suggested sounds like an empirical question, it is the ethnographic project that we could all go out and do. And that on its own isn't really going to answer for us the theoretical question "Is there any such thing as the good?" The question is: what do you do with all the undoubtedly multiple ethnographic cases that we could come up with, be it in medical anthropology, or in the anthropology of postwar Iraq, and so on. So the question of scaling it up into a theoretical project is what I would be interested in, and I think that's what Joel and I were both trying to do in our presentations – he more sociologically, I more psychologically. What I object to in the discussion about our way of proceeding is the moral judgment that it provokes. The theoretical project we're outlining is somehow objectionable in a way that the ethnographic project is not – but why? It seems to me that this is a real problem for anthropologists, that is, the assumption that the project that stresses historical variation, cultural variation, and so on, is intrinsically more moral than the project that actually stresses, for example, the fact that we are all in the same species. To me it's just not obvious at all why that argument should be made, and yet, for many anthropologists, and particularly in the American cultural anthropology tradition, that is the default argument – for historical reasons that we all know very well. I disagree with it. Not only do I feel that my argument today is right, I feel that it is the morally superior argument.

Joel Robbins: Penny, your question immediately engaged me as a parent. So I started running through my own experience. But I am not really answering your question, I am answering Hayder's answer. I think in the descriptions of life that

you give us, and in your ethnography really powerfully, you've already clumped things up into a certain level of description that presumes the goods that those people are aiming at. They might not have to think consciously each time that they are doing it. And so, I nearly found myself thinking, – "I am a parent, is this a good?" and so, I think it is already stirred in the mix. I could be wrong, but that's what I think.

Hayder Al-Mohammad: I think this is really important. With reference to Joel's talk. Normativity does not mean normal, it means ought – how should I behave. So I am making a claim that there are social demands. I don't even need to turn to psychology to give you an example of normativity. The example I've got –, walking down a busy street, we often know how not to bump into one another, right? Erving Goffman says: well, it is because people look at each other, they are glancing, their bodies are communicating with each other. Then you get Tim Ingold, saying – "no, no, it's not a mental thing, it's not about vision, there's an embodied sense of where other bodies are." So they are giving you a metaphysical story about how, walking down the street, we order our bodies in relation to other bodies. That story is about normativity. Walking down the street, when I see somebody whom I might bump into, I'll open my body, I'll slow my gait to let them pass. Bodies make demands and claims on other bodies. You can go from the preconceptual, everyday forms of walking, to theoretical demands that concepts make on us. I have no argument with that. What I think Joel has to show, and Joel knows the literature on this, is that normativity does not entail the good. You have to make another move. So when Joel starts talking about – "you have this feeling, this pull of the situation" – I will give you an example. This poor guy that I was working with in Beirut, he saw a suicide bomber who was about to blow himself up and jumped on him taking most of the explosion. He managed to live for three days. That's not a question of the good that was split-second timing, situations pull you in. That's normativity. The next step is you have to show how that normativity gets you to the good.

Veena Das: I want to make two points. With Charles, for example, I think my trouble (is) that this kind of theory of the good always leads you to a place where "I am morally superior." I know you might have said it with some irony, but nevertheless that's my problem. What about having an anthropology that would leave me with those who are damned? You know, because their resources are few, their lives are sad, that they are not going to be part of the saved. I think that's one issue. And the second, I think that this idea that they are doing all this, but they don't have the theoretical conception of it, to the extent that I have any prescriptive bone in my body, I would say that idea should really be ruled out. Because it is so patronizing to the way that people live because it assumes that either it is that they do not know fully what is going on, and we do not know what is fully going on, and if these conversations that actually produce the concept, or it is they don't know what is going on, we have the superior concepts of the good and the moral, which we will then put on them. I find the fact that such good men come to that particular position . . . You know, if Joel was one of those vicious people who just wanted to

do the colonial project, then I would have no difficulty. But that such nice people, who really want the good in the world should end up with that position, I think should make us all very, very nervous.

Joel Robbins: In response to Hayder, I was saying that I didn't think in every instance you had to find people consciously articulating ideas of the good. I don't mean to say that people can't articulate this, I mean in the flow of life, they don't always have to do it, for it to be there.

Hayder Al-Mohammad: And the normative good?

Joel Robbins: The normative good – that's the right-good distinction I was trying to make.

John Gledhill, Manchester: I never liked "There is no such thing as" questions, because I always associated that philosophically with the taxon reification. In this case, we got "the good," so it depends how much emphasis you place on "the." Are you talking about some transcendental concept of the good that the anthropologist is judging that human subjects can articulate too? Or are you just asking the simple question "does the good exist in the world in way that is sociologically significant?" – to which the answer is obviously "Yes." I have spent much of my career studying social movements that have competing, diametrically opposed, extremely firm concepts of the good, which are ethically grounded. So Hayder's argument, to try to get it out of the window, isn't helpful on that front. But then we get to Charles's problem of the individual. Within these movements, which normally commit what others regard as barbarities, there are always some individuals who refuse to commit the barbarities when it comes to the crunch. What anthropologists study are social situations, so that's part of it. But we also know that, as judging, moral beings, our ethics is situational as well. I normally oppose to lynching and torturing rapists, but if it was my sister, I don't know how I would react. This is why I am in sympathy with some of the things Veena was saying. These are the things anthropologists study, and these are the things that bring anthropologists of a more engaged type into these really difficult dialogues, which are not philosophical, or about the ethics and the abstract. They are about trying to convince flesh-and-blood human beings to do something else in a very precarious position, from the point of view of enunciating any kind of alternative perspective which one assumes, being anthropologists, would at least have some dialogical rather than foundationalist kind of basis. It is all those levels of problems that very easily disappear, but at the root of them is the fact that there are these extraordinarily powerful claims to the good existing out there, in the world, that do real and very often terrible things to human beings. And we can – as engaged, activist kind of people – make all kinds of arguments about the social good, the long-term consequences, the health of society, however we choose to frame it, but again those has to be engaged in those specific social situations, those specific historical contexts, they can't be discussed in a lecture theater in a decaying part of Manchester University.

Charles Stafford: I think that's a very interesting, well-put comment. Obviously, the positions Joel and I were taking do indeed have a problem, as Joel explicitly acknowledged in his presentation, with the reading of the good, given that

“the good” can in fact be so bad in the real world. Which is something we know, but it bears repeating. Rita Astuti and I have recently become interested in the problem of human cooperation, something that psychologists are studying extensively. And there you have different versions of exactly the same issue, which is that you start talking about this wonderful capacity that human infants have to cooperate. They share, they point out information, they follow gazes, so that we can perform joint actions together, et cetera, et cetera. It’s an amazing capacity, and people like Michael Tomasello argue that this is what makes human cultures and societies possible. We are quite nice to each other, compared to other species, we help each other a lot and so on. It’s kind of a nice story. The problem is that exactly the same skills and capacities are used all the time for terrible ends. First of all patterns of cooperation in human societies are often very coercive. So, people are cooperating not so much because they have psychological instincts for that, but because they have been bullied into it. And then, of course, our instincts often lead to us cooperating to do absolutely appalling things. So for us in that work, we are not assuming that cooperation leads to something wonderful; and in this debate we are not at all arguing that everything people do is wonderful, we do not think that is right. It’s a cooperation and coordination problem in real human history that often leads to bad outcomes. So I can only agree with the point, but I think it does not really work against the position we are arguing for here.

Hayder Al-Mohammad: I don’t disagree with Joel that a lot of what is going on in the social is either explicit, or implicit, I am very sympathetic to Aristotle’s book 6 and 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that Joel Robbins is talking about. I haven’t got a problem with that. But I don’t have to grant the notion of the good that these social groups are talking about any sort of metaphysical security. That’s what Joel has to do, that’s what Charles has to do. Yes, these categories have normative force. I need to bring normativity back to this side of the table, because if Joel takes normativity, by just saying normativity means the good, then I am finished. But there is no legitimate reason for me to accede that normativity equals the good. There is a normative force in what you are talking about and it’s not that I don’t think these movements are aiming toward ends. But as an anthropologist, I try to unpack that, within a sort of different context, history, tension, or what have you. So yes, they have normative force, they have normative power, but I just don’t have to grant it metaphysical security. My opponents have to, not me.

Veena Das: I completely agree that in all human societies that we know of, in different kinds of ways, there is a certain sense that to belong to a particular culture is also to be able to critique it. I am saying that critique is not necessarily made from some perspective of “the good,” it can come from various kinds of ways. And second, the way I conceptualize it in my work, is that there is an enormous amount of work which moves from making the actual everyday into the eventual everyday, so the category of the social includes the actual, but it also includes the eventual. And social movements are only one way by which that could happen. It is also quite interesting that once having invested so much on the idea that social movements are working for the good, when these particular notions collapse, it then

looks as if there is no recognition to the new kinds of projects which people may be coming out with. So there is this whole idea that now social movements have given way to this bad cultural production and people don't want to be engaged in social movements of the kind we all were comfortable with – this is a symptom of the fact that when you analyze that in the framework of the good, you are then going to be quite indifferent to the fact that the emergent forms, which are already always in existence, might take this form but might also be ready to take completely different forms. The reason why the subaltern movement's major opposition came from the Marxist-Leninist party was precisely because what they were saying was not recognizable within the party framework of what was considered to be good.

Andrew Irving, Manchester: I've got a comment and a question. The comment is to Hayder, and his selective use of Kant. In Kant's *Logic*, he sets out four questions. The first question is "What can I know?" the second question is "What should I do?" the third question is "What can I hope for?" and the fourth question is "What is a human being?" Kant suggests the first question "What can I know?" you answer in the realm of metaphysics, which is what you've been saying, in part. The second question, "What should I do?" you answer in the realm of ethics, the third question "What can I hope for?" you ask in the realm of theology and religion, and the fourth question, "What is a human being?" you answer in anthropology. But then Kant goes on to say that in fact, you answer all questions in anthropology, because the first three relate to the last. And this sets up his anthropological project, and his anthropological project is formulated around a very simple statement, which is "What nature makes of man, and what Man, as a free-acting being, makes of himself" – with the caveat that this is an unfinished mortal being with incomplete knowledge. But the implication there, for Kant, is that nature is not fixed, that human beings can change their nature, and this was a radical question at the time which Foucault took up in his thesis on Kant's anthropology. So, anthropology for Kant is a moral project, it's about moral improvement of human beings, and so at some level, there's an aspiration to goodness there. So you are telling half the story of Kant, you're not giving the full story. But the question is for everybody – I was wondering what people's positions would be if the notion was "there's no such thing as the bad?" What would your positions be? I'll let Hayder answer first.

Hayder Al-Mohammad: Yes, it is selective, but I wanted to make the point that my problem with what anthropology is doing with the notion of the good is the feeling that you have to fill that gap – that the good is such and such. That's not the move that was being made by Kant. Kant and others are struggling as to how you can have a notion of the good – so for Kant if you positivise what the notion of the good is, if you give it content, then ethics becomes heteronomous: I find the reason for all the good outside of myself. So Kant's problem is: I've got to maintain a situatedness of moral reasoning, and I don't have to appeal to external principles, in content, but only in form. So I would even be happy with that notion of the good, if my opponents were working to that, as a provocation toward something rather good, but which we don't know. The problem is, I think, and not just

Charles and Joel do it, others do too, which is to take the even bigger step and say “here’s the good and here’s the good and here’s the good.” And once you do that, we have already got the warning bells not just from Kant but from Herder and from others of that time in philosophical anthropology, which is to say, don’t substantialize the notion of the good, do not do it, you’ll turn people and this into a mere mechanism. So that’s what I was trying to do with that. But on the issue of the bad, I’ll have to think about that, so I’ll maybe come back.

Charles Stafford: I can answer that. Which is to say that I don’t know. Because, I am being honest here, I think most of my life I’ve been an immoral nihilist, so in that sense there’s no such thing as the bad because actually it is all totally meaningless anyway, it does not matter what anybody does. In recent months, however, I read Derek Parfit’s book, *On What Matters*. He makes a consequentialist, if you like a revised utilitarian argument, to say that many things do really matter. There is good and evil, and he gives a very compelling argument why that is so. And basically, because I am one of these people who believes the last philosophy book he read, I converted from a nihilist to Derek Parfit’s consequentialist utilitarianism. The next book I read, I may change again. But I guess one point is that when we are posing these questions there is an issue whether these are philosophical or anthropological questions, and whether it makes any difference which one they are. And obviously in practical terms, it *does* make a big difference, because as an ethnographer, I don’t really want to believe just Derek Parfit’s book, I want to go to a fishing village in Taiwan and think about it in the context of life and probably come to answers that actually Derek Parfit would not like that much. One point is that he relies heavily on trolley experiments, and so far as I know, nobody in Taiwanese fishing villages cares at all about trolley-experiment-like problems. It is just not what they are doing. So minimally, I would want to, as an anthropologist, go back to Parfit and say “Okay, I am convinced, I am a consequentialist utilitarian now, but could you please read my ethnography of moral life in this village and then we can have a conversation?”

Andrew Irving: So what does that boil down to? Are you for or against it?

Charles Stafford: Actually, honestly, I think I am still a bit of a nihilist.

Joel Robbins: Part of what motivated me initially to start thinking about the good was a sense that the anthropology I had grown up in, which is not all of anthropology, had changed on me. And the anthropology I had grown up on had a certain moral nihilism to it. But it was called relativism, and there was a positive doctrine there and now I think that’s changed. I think anthropologists have done a whole lot on the side of the debate that they think some things are bad and I am not sure that one could convince people otherwise now, and I am not sure I would want to. But I think that if you are going to be that sure about the bad, you also have to begin exploring the good. Which turns out to be a lot harder, because it is plural, and this is what drew Kant to care about “the right.” Because the good was too plural, and you could not base an ethical system on that. So I am just going to say that in the background of my concern with the good is a sense that we have become comfortable that we know some things about the bad, and I think that drives us

toward also having to begin to work on the good, whether we figure it out completely or not.

Andrew Irving: So you're still with Charles on that?

Joel Robbins: You're right. I am with Charles, because I think this gets to habit and formation, and all of that – I really was socialized into an anthropology that said there was no “bad,” and I feel strongly the arguments that would make you want to give that up. I could give you a longer argument, which is really not fair to everybody else here, but I think if you can get the good in the frame, you can have “a bad” and still do a productive kind of anthropology that is attentive to a very wide range of different ways people want to live. But I think you've got to get “the good” in there to preserve that attention to the fact that people do sometimes want to live in different ways than others, when you feel more secure in “the bad.”

Veena Das: I think putting either good or bad into this sort of a framing, “there is no such thing,” would make it hard for me to think that I would say “yes, there is something called bad.” It is not clear to me that these are productive terms at all. It is true that I've worked a lot with where you directly face perpetrators who killed. I also hanged around a lot with so-called terrorists. So in some ways it seems to me that when I encounter something like real evil, or what registers on me as something I can't cope with, is a certain stuttering of language, in the way that Val Daniel describes it. It's not at that point a question of does the bad exist or does the good exist. So it seems, from my perspective, this whole form of thinking is very, very conventional. So philosophically, I really do go along with Wittgenstein, that there is a sense in which all ethics is a form of aesthetics, and our forms of life grow criteria. So to that extent, I don't understand this question of the opposition between the good and the right, because I see that right is something where the criteria tell me in a certain sense, that this word really can be extended in this way, it can be projected in this way but not in that kind of way. It's not a single form of reasoning that I apply, or a categorization that I apply and say, “this is ABC type of good, and this ABC type of right.” I think we really need to be much more daring than settling on such things that somehow, people have settled on something called bad so we should have something called good. Because at that point, you know, as Wittgenstein would say, “my spade is turned,”⁶ it is not like I can then say “oh yes, now I can categorize this” and to say “these are the forms of bads that people look at.”

Flavia Kremer, Manchester: I wanted to ask you to unpack how the good and the ethical relate to each other. In the beginning of the debate, I was against the motion, because I conflated the good with the ethical, and I thought very much in the same ways as Charles was arguing, in terms of the good being in process and contextual. So I thought about the ethical dilemmas, and the decision anthropologists have to make in order to, there's no full ethical science or knowledge, but to do good, to at least try to go for the good. But then Veena was saying that the good and the ethical should not be conflated. So I would like to see what you have to say to that, to unpack that.

Veena Das: I think fundamentally it's also the point that Hayder has been making, which is that there is a certain way in which the normativist idea that within a particular form of life – not according to particular rules, but how criteria are grown – we do have a certain kind of sense in which we relate existentially to ways which we define as normative. Not because we are striving for it, but because that's where human action tends. Joel was talking about his socialization, you have to remember that philosophically I come from a kind of tradition within which the theory of social action is completely different. I don't mean the Indian anthropological tradition, I mean the Indian philosophical tradition. In which you can be there at the beginning of action, but you can never be there at the end of action. This is what makes Gandhi say, "I will go on this salt march, even if there are only four people with me. And we will see if others will join or not join in – the matter is beyond me." This is the point he would repeatedly say, "The matter is beyond me," right – the world has a saying in that. So, in that sense it seems to me that the notion of normativity is first, far more complex than the simple idea of the good, and if people thought that in proposing it, either Hayder or I would basically make some silly arguments like "we can't prove the existence of the good" or some kind of metaphysical argument, I would want to say that we come strongly anthropologically from the kinds of fieldwork we've done, from the kinds of traditions that we come from. And if we indeed we were to diversify the way that anthropology is done, we would minimally have to say that the motion has to be supported, for the fact that minimally it at least gets rid of extremely simplistic ways with which we think we can solve the problem by having something like "the good" positioned in it.

Joel Robbins: I think it's a good question. I would just say that as I was thinking about what I was going to say today and working on it, I was unsure whether we would talk about the good in terms of ethics or not. It's not the only way to talk about it, but is certainly one way to talk about it and, except in the part where I was really reading a little bit of my colleagues' work on Jainism, I wasn't particularly talking about ethics. But it's a very fair place to go with the question and one of the main places to go. But I don't know if it's the only place to go.

Karen Sykes, Manchester: I believe Alice Munro is going to receive a Nobel prize for literature. Munro's brilliance doesn't lie in how she crafts the story, it's in what she says. And when we think about what she says, perhaps it's very interesting to consider that she has put forward something very different than a novelist might have, or previous winners. Because, when you go deeply into the tales that she tells about Southwestern Ontario that I know rather well, the stories show us that people seem to be living at great distances or shoulder to shoulder with each other, not necessarily having any common purposes, in fact working at greatly different purposes to each other. And yet, people have intense, powerful effects on each other without intending to. And it's that kind of anthropological project that is actually more demanding of us than trying to understand collective action toward a specific goal, or understanding how to reframe the practice of anthropology, but grabbing that horizon of the discipline itself as a place where almost

inscrutable everyday seems to be having very intimate and intense effects on human lives. And that would probably be, I think, an ethical anthropology. What I'd like to figure out, is then, is the proper title for Joel's paper not "Beyond the suffering subject: towards the anthropology of the good," but "Beyond the suffering subject: towards the anthropology of atonement?" And taking that cue from just the very last lines of Munro's short story "Dear life," she says, "All around us people say I will never forgive him, it's unforgivable, yet we do it all the time and it always is." So, could we go further with the next project in ethical anthropology, by asking not about the good, but about atonement?

Joel Robbins: It is a complicated question. Because there's partially the question of how much people are in relation to each other, and how much they know to each other, and how much they act in relation to each other. There is also the fact that we haven't talked about many specific practices. I mean I sort of talked about practice in general, and we all kind of did. And atonement would be the kind of practice where presumably if you wanted to check if people were very self-consciously thinking about the good, that might be a place. If it's a different kind of an atonement, a kind of atonement for a past anthropology, that wasn't my intention at all. My intention in that article was to affirm what anthropology is already doing, and to say that there are other things to do as well, and the part I was focusing on was this cluster of things I thought could fall under "the good." So it wasn't an attempt to atone for the past anthropology. That's a different project, one I am not saying isn't important, but it wasn't the project of that article.

Marilyn Strathern, Cambridge: The arguments seem to me so well distributed that it's only for the form's sake that I am actually addressing the opposition, though possibly my comment might help them. I don't have a younger sister, I do have younger brothers. I would take issue, I think, with the fact that the kind of radical divide one experiences is a question of individual variation. I think it's rather a fact that the embodiment of a potential for radical divides is there absolutely next door; I could have had a sister and that divide could have been with her, not necessarily with my brothers. This runs through all kinds of social arrangements, as we know. The point I just wondered if the opposition could reflect on, not now to respond to, but when you come to do your summing up, is the extent to which your argument rests on finding good embodied in particular persons. We had reference to Nelson Mandela of course, who is in everybody's minds at the moment, and again, Penny's question about good parents. And just something to reflect, if it is useful, on the difference it would make if the questions had in fact been whether it's possible ever for an anthropologists to describe a person as good.

Charles Stafford: Your point about sisters and brothers is very good. And obviously one of the frustrations of this format is that it is not possible to give an ethnographic account that would actually show that Joel and I are aware of that point, which is a deep and important point, and it would be nice to be able to really make that here, and explore. On the issue about individuality versus collectives and so on, there's one point I would make, and I think it is an important one: it's not right that the people who are supporting the kind of psychological approach that I

am advocating here believe in individuals per se, any more than anthropologists. It's just not true. Their work is not about individuals, actually. Their work is about relations. It's about joint intentionality, it's about joint action, it's about coordination of goals, intentions, et cetera. It's all framed in that way. So I think it's a terrific question, but I think it should not be used to necessarily push back against the kind of approach that I am advocating here.

Joel Robbins: I noticed in my own writing that this is a paper that speaks in terms of persons and their actions. And I think if the question had been "what good is to study the good?" or "what might anthropology do with the good that's not bad?" I would have talked more – and this goes back to my answer to Andrew's question a little bit – about what it would mean for anthropology to represent kinds of goods that are very well developed in some places and not perhaps very well developed in the places where our audiences tend to come from. I think there are different models of the good that are distributed socially in different ways, and that if we know what the bad is, at least the question is still open about what the good is, that that is clearly plural, and that one thing an anthropology could do is document kinds of good that our imagination hasn't taken in yet. "Our" meaning whoever anthropology's readers are. But it is true that when trying to answer the question, "is there such thing as the good?" or in trying to say such thing as "the good," I found it hard to look without a frame of persons and actions. It's a point well taken, and I didn't find any way around it, in any case.

Rodolfo Maggio, Manchester: To what extent does the motion and the way it is designed, allow us to make a specifically anthropological point? The "such as" expression is very strong and has powerful bearings on the way in which this motion can be defended or posed. It reminded me of the "just" word in the previous debate, *Ontology is Just Another Word for Culture*, which had important bearings on the conclusion of the debate and the ways people positioned themselves against or for. But because Joel and Veena decided that they wanted to address this issue, I formulate my question in two versions. So the first one is for Joel and Veena: please outline the reasons you think this motion allows us to make a specifically anthropological point. And the second version is for Charles and Hayder, could you please tell us, if you could choose another motion to address the issue of the good, what would that be, and why?

Veena Das: Well I think for me, it is not a question of what other motion could that be, but an interest in thinking about something that would look very obvious: how would anyone oppose the idea that there is good? You go to politicians, they say "oh, we must strive for the good," you go to the business ethics schools, they say "we must strive for the good," et cetera. For me one of the things anthropology does well is that it destabilizes the settled questions of the world. And this whole turn toward the anthropology of the good – (speaking to Joel: forgive me, it's not just about the title, but about the impact) – was actually falling, from my perspective, into extremely conventional ways, of thinking about the world that seemed to have become much much more complex. So you know, much around the same time, I was reading books by psychologists, but of different kinds to those Charles

mentioned, which tended to show that preferences were never constant, that depending on how you presented a particular proposition, people could give answers that were completely contradictory at different points of time. And the conclusion that was moving toward, and which is now a very interesting move, has been to say, we know that the poor don't have consistent preferences. It was about people, but it moved into the poor, we know that the poor don't have consistent preferences, we know that they change their preferences, et cetera, et cetera; so now the role of the policy makers is not the aggregation of preferences, but a certain paternalism. So under the neoliberal framework, there was a very interesting way in which paternalism was introduced, precisely in a certain sense, by assuming, and repositioning the notion of the good. So increasingly to me it seems like there are such complexities that require much more daring thinking, then, you know, settling for the kind of given categories in geographies of knowledge which move around the good, bad, ugly, indifferent. So you then wonder why, as anthropologists, we cannot think about challenging ourselves much more on these questions. So I won't give you another motion, but this is what attracted me to this motion.

Joel Robbins: I had already gone on record, and Veena had already read it, saying that I thought the good could do something different in anthropology than what other things were doing at the moment. So we knew we had a disagreement that we could work through, which is important in a debate.

Charles Stafford: Following on from Penny I would like to answer a question like "Are human infants good at birth?" – because I think that's a question that is ethnographically extremely interesting, but it also opens up the possibility of figuring out – supposing they are good or bad, in some sense, where does that come from?

Hayder Al-Mohammad: "Does the normative entail the good?" – that would be the question I would like to ask.

Ivan Rajković, Manchester: It seems to me that there is a tension in your presentations between so to say moral reasoning and moral engaging, or reasoning about what is good and engaging or orienting oneself about the good. So on the one hand, Veena Das was speaking among other things, about ideologies of the good, and Joel Robbins was speaking about moral reasoning, or reasoning that is governed by some kind of overarching aims. And on the other hand, we heard about moral engagements that are quite situated in Al-Mohammad's case, and feelings, in Charles Stafford's case. This is a crude division between reasoning and engaging, but I think there is something there, a tension between these two, and it is an old one. What I am wondering if this division responds to different levels, different scales of social action in your presentations, or different amounts of agency people have. So, what I am asking is how can the answer to our question can be qualified with respect to social arrangements we are describing, and to the freedom people might or might not have. I am particularly thinking about Elizabeth Povinelli's recent writing about division of ethical labor: she writes about the growing division between those who can reflect upon the ethical substance so to speak, and those who run their lives according to it, or perhaps are that

substance. And we anthropologists, philosophers as well I suppose, could be the prime example of those who reflect upon it, and I am speaking about the level of elevation from circumstances you have to have in order to reflect on it in the first place. So what I am actually asking is how different definitions of the good relate to different life circumstances, or who can afford what kind of moral philosophy.

Joel Robbins: I am going to discuss reflection in my final summation, so I will leave this question till then.

Veena Das: I think this question of scales is really interesting, as to whether at different scales of social life one might think of these very differently. I tend to think much more in multiscale terms, so that I am very interested not in thinking of global health institutions as transcendent categories that stand above something like a social flux of life, but the manner in which these scales run into each other. A lot of my work has focused on these multiscale kinds of effects and I think, very briefly put, the whole notion of the good and the bad actually reconfigures at the global level in terms of the capacity to tell a success story, which is not a question about “is it bad or is it good, but have we been able to tell a success story?” Which explains part of my pessimism: when you see all these projects that have been implemented at various kinds of levels, having conceded that you would have to ask that question at every scale ethnographically again, it seems to me that if the imperative is about telling a success story at the global level, then it’s *that* which we should be paying attention to, as to what are the ways in which these success stories have actually been crafted.

Nayanika Mookherjee, Durham: Joel and Charles, I was particularly surprised when both of you evoked the idea of the emotions. Charles, you raised the idea of moral emotions and Joel raised the idea of alternative notions of the good, the attractive notions of the good – something that draws people to it, makes it the good. Going back to the point that Veena started with, I am also thinking of Sara Ahmad’s work on the cultural politics of emotion, what creates certain emotions to be emotional has a certain history and specificity and economy. I would like you to say why you raised the emotional question, because for me, that completely weakened the case for the opposition.

Charles Stafford: I am not arguing for the idea that humans have “evolved emotions” in some simple sense that stand outside of history. Humans are never not in history, they are never not in particular relations with others. That is obviously true. However, this doesn’t mean that, if you look at thousands of empirical cases from around the world and through history, you don’t find patterns. This is exactly the Westermarck project; you find patterns, and really it is an empirical question, are there patterns there or not? If there were no patterns, then you could say – ah, there is the evidence that human emotions are totally culturally and historically constructed. But if there are patterns, and these are easily found, then you have to explain why those patterns are there, so that is really the position that I am taking. I am not making a universalist argument for human emotions, I am saying that if there are patterns, these require some explanation that makes sense. That’s what I would have argued for.

Nayanika Mookherjee: That is coming down on the side of authenticity of the good, surely.

Charles Stafford: Well, I stressed from the outset that I don't think there is "a good," because clearly, definitions of the good vary across cultures. What I am saying is that the *process* of people engaging with the good shows strong patterns across cultures and that's because we are in the same species – I apologize for saying so! I mean it's the right question, completely, I accept, and I think that it's the notion that explains the nervousness of anthropologists, including Veena and Hayder, with the kind of argument that we are making here.

Joel Robbins: Maybe in a slightly different voice than Charles, I am going to applaud your question too and say, exactly. I mean, I don't think anything I was arguing precluded that, but wouldn't it be a part of your ethnography of the emotions and how they've come to have a particular set and how they fit together with other things, to attend to the emotions that people think are good ones or that lead them to the good and the ones that don't? I actually would think that you would have trouble doing an anthropology of the emotions in the terms you talked about without bringing something like that in, or it would be the lesser for it. But it doesn't in any way preclude doing exactly what you said.

Veena Das: Very briefly, I think my disquiet is not that if you went about it would you not find patterns, but in the very formulation of how would you do anthropology of emotions. Well, you wouldn't. Because emotions don't exist somewhere out in the world independent of practices within which they are embedded. And, of course, if you do the kind of work in which you go around asking people what good emotions are, what bad emotions are, you are going to get a story. But unless you recognize that this is an artifact of your question, it seems to me that we are in troubled waters, because you have assumed in a certain sense, a domain called the anthropology of emotions, for which then you devise certain kinds of methods. But you have not first examined what kind of object an emotion is. And for me this was very clear – I am sorry to come back to one of your papers, Joel – but when you say that we need to know where are values, and then you say here are exemplars, and values are really showing in all those exemplars. Well you know, we say "Where is your pain?" but we don't say "Where is your suffering?" And so really, in a certain sense, that question assumes that we know what kind of an object it is that we are talking about.

Jonathan Mair, Cambridge: At this point that I am deciding where to cast my vote. In my mind, on both sides there are three kinds of arguments: there's a moral argument, a theoretical argument, and an ethnographic argument. The moral argument for the proposition is that saying that there is a good might lead us to say that some people don't have it, some people are bad, and that would be a bad thing. The moral argument for the opposition is either that we have to recognize we are a species, we have things in common and that's good, or that in order to recognize the difference in morality between cultures and to respect that, now that we have accepted that there is evil, we have to admit the good into that. So these are both moral arguments, and I can see some force in them. But ultimately, in terms of

deciding whether there is a good or not, thinking about whether it would be good that there is one or not seems to be tangential to that question. The theoretical question seems to be, on the proposition side, that ethics doesn't require a notion of the good, or ethics shouldn't be conflated with the good. On the opposition side, it seems to be that ethics requires a notion of the good, and again I can see the arguments on both sides, but maybe that comes down to a question of definitions, and I know that's something that lots of people have discussed today. So finally the ethnographic issue that will determine where I cast my vote. It seems to be that ethnographic argument of the proposition side is that some people are just too involved in the struggle of everyday life, the immediacy of making decisions, to think of the good in an abstract way. And the ethnographic argument of the opposition seems to be that we can ethnographically and psychologically show that some people do act in relation to desires and moral emotions, and that they act sometimes in relation to conceptualizations of those desires and moral emotions. I'll now ask a version of the question to both sides. The question to the proposition, then, is that – Hayder gave an example of a struggling member of a family who is vulnerable, but goes out and works in order to do things, they don't think about whether it's good; Veena gave an example of subalterns who were not acknowledged as being good by social movements and Marxists because they did not have a conceptualized idea of that. So your conclusion seems to be, on the basis of those ethnographic examples, that there is no good because it is not necessary to explain what these people do. But can you defend the thesis that these ethnographic examples of where concepts of the good are not important, should lead us to abandon an effort at finding a good for every ethnographic case? And the version of that question for Charles and Joel, is that given the prevalence of everyday ordinary ethics, the immediacy of ethical life, isn't it all very well to speak about an anthropology of the good without putting it into practice? But just what would it look like ethnographically methodologically, in situations where people maybe do have concepts of the good, but that's only really a part of the picture?

Hayder Al-Mohammad: Part of how you pose the question points to the work of Jarrett Zigon, James Faubian . . . that morally we are too absorbed, that we cannot reflect on it, and hence you don't have ethics. My point is that we are morally thrown, that the absorption is part of the ethical story. Just because in the absorption you are not reflecting on it consciously, doesn't mean it's not an ethical story. That's not my version of things. I am saying that we are sort of ethical all the way out. So for me the abode where ethics dwells is not in judgment, mental reflection or what have you, it dwells in life and existence and intentionality – and I'll talk about it at the end. That's a very important thing to do, to try to dethrone the versions of what we are getting from certain anthropologists that ethics is a mode of reflection, has to be made conscious, has to be conceptual, has to be intellectual, and so on. I am saying you want to talk about the embodied, engaged, absorption, that's part of the ethical itself.

Jonathan Mair: But not part of the good?

Hayder Al-Mohammad: Well, I don't have to dethrone the whole notion of the good, I have to attack what my colleagues here are proposing, and what they are proposing, it seems to me, is resting on the notion of normativity. My problem is, every time you propose a notion of the good, I think I can show you a problem with it. With this particular version, I think I can show a pretty quick jump from normativity to the good, and I think ultimately that if I can show you that, then you should not vote for them.

Veena Das: I want to put these two together and ask what anthropological research is about . . . And part of my argument, which is a theoretical answer, is to say that when in my ethnography I have met the kinds of things Val Daniel met, or what I've described, where for example people who escaped being brutally killed and burned alive were reenacting the scenes in a spirit of a carnivorous kind of thing – that is the victims enacting it – I don't sit down and think "Is this the good?" "Is this the bad?" I am really reduced to a certain kind of stuttering. And it seems to me that it is again as Wittgenstein said: if you were to say "I think that's a goldfinch," and I say "No that's a red robin," we can debate about it, whether I am right or whether I am wrong; but if I say that "there is a goldfinch," and you say "but have you thought whether the world really exists?," we've really come to the end of criteria. So I do think that the bigger question for anthropology is whether the notion of the good as it has been presented to us is in fact too timid an answer to the enormously difficult issues which anthropologists are facing now. And the second point I want to make is I am completely with you that I would take the ethnography and what does it mean for an ethnographic project as the decisive question because my theory would grow out of my ethnography, and there it seems to me that there is no way in which the decision to say that – or the kinds of arguments that have been presented, in terms of the notion of a fidelity to the event – a notion that people know that there are desirable things that they want, seem to me to be conceptually so riddled with problems, the moment you begin to think about them, that I am very much hoping that even though viscerally you might feel that there must be something wrong in saying that there is no such thing as good, intellectually we should probably not be so cowardly and take the idea that indeed, very difficult questions requires us to think very innovatively and very daringly.

Joel Robbins: I am going to keep this really short, because I don't think we can actually broaden this out at this moment in this debate, but just to say that I don't think the good is only the matter of ethics. I think even in the Western tradition, minimally it is about beauty, and truth, and probably everywhere it moves in a number of different directions. We haven't spelled any of those out, they haven't been part of our debate, but I want to get that on the table finally because it came up in what you said too. And that would give you a window into some, but not all of those other things going on. When you say ethnographically, when the good is going on, you meant the ethical is going on, but other things can be going on too. And then of course the bad could be going on, if it exists.

Charles Stafford: Just really quickly, I think if you do an ethnography of "ordinary ethics," if we are going to use that expression, which is something I've tried to

do in Taiwan and China, what you find is that a lot of the everyday behavior of ordinary people is antinormative in some sense. So if we link up some points here, that's why I brought into my earlier discussion the case of me being unhappy about being punished – by some of my informants – for breaking their norms. I felt that it was terribly unfair that such a thing should happen. And obviously that's where the real struggles are, this is what happens in the actual flow of life – it's that constantly there are all of these things we are meant to do but we don't do, and by some definition that's what ethics is really about. When it comes to our feelings about judging others and our feelings about ourselves being judged, I think that's what we observe when we do actual ethnography on these topics.

Final summaries

Hayder Al-mohammad

I just can't impress upon this room just how important the conflation of the normative with the good is. I have no intention of trying to win this debate on technicality, but I think one of the big messages we can send to anthropologist today is sort of: details do matter, distinctions are crucial, and they are explanatory burdens on people to take up in these sorts of debates. The explanatory burden is not on me, I don't have to show how normativity entails the good. My big strategy today was to try to show that really Charles is a psychologist, but he came out and said it. So I've been really bit quiet on Charles. For me the big problem is with Joel, because I think Joel and I are on the same territory here, and it is very clear to show where the distinction is. Is action, all action directed? You know what, I may even say yes to that. But what Joel Robbins is showing, and he is not saying all social action is directed toward the good, but clearly some action is directed toward the good. I am okay with the story of the directionality of social action; what people tend to call that is practical intentionality, it has a term, it has a relatively long history, we have ways of talking about the things that Joel already talks about. And as ethnographers, we can ethnographically engage with these issues in situ, immanently, but the burden that I feel that Charles and Joel have to take on, is why do they need these transcendent category, what does it add to normativity. And just to restate what normativity means: oughts, social demands from preconceptual, pre-theoretical demand to actual categories, concepts, making, forcing us, claiming us to do such and such. For all of that, that's normativity. The next step is to show how that normativity is the good. There's a story that needs to be told, that's extra to that normative story. And if doesn't need to be told, if normativity itself is the good, they need to tell that story, because in analytical philosophy, and in ethical theory, the claim has always been that if I can show you normativity, I can give you ethics. The next jump is to the good. Maybe I misunderstood what's going on, there is an opportunity for them to restate it, but there is an explanatory burden on them, the explanatory burden is not on me. And just to give you an example of what the story of normativity does: in the philosophy of biology – and I am not talking

about Deleuze or what have you, I am talking about boring, analytical philosophers, right – the sociology of biology, Evan Thompson, right, Lenny Moss' *What Genes can't do*, molecular biology – they are all saying, from Aristotle and Aristotle's biology – that yes, biological life makes demands on other biological life, cells makes demands on other cells, normativity is shot throughout the whole of the natural order. That's not my argument. But that doesn't mean that nature itself is ethical, it doesn't mean that nature itself is the good. There is a clear precedent, a historical precedent of a distinction between the normative and the good. So when Joel makes a claim that you have this experience of being pulled out to act in such and such, and that's the good, what I am saying is *that* story is about normativity, it is not about the good. They must show – because I can engage with those examples, I can give you the description of it, and I don't have to refer to a notion of the good. If you are going to add that extra category, you have to explain why this category is necessary, and I am sorry that this is a sort of boring, technical thing, but again and again I pose the issue, and it sort of hasn't been taken on. So I think that it's crucial that the normative/good distinction is dealt with. Thank-you very much.

Veena Das

I have to say I learned really quite a lot from the questions. But I do want to go back and say: first, we really need to ask – what kind of talk does this talk of the good release in the world? What kind of effects does it have? And for me, it's not inconsequential that part of the effects that it has had is to abrogate a certain right to theorize within anthropology on the ground that events that happened in American anthropology must have their shadow in other places too. So the fact that this kind of theorizing can be done on the basis of the fact that we are talking now about the anthropology of the good, recalls for me very traumatic events, I must say, in which it was precisely the kind of notion that we really can wipe away the specific histories through which anthropology was done in other places. Most substantively, it seems to me, that the second issue that probably actually follows from the first is a particular picture of the good, which relies on a picture of the ethical, in which the ethical consists in the moment when we stand apart and reflect on the ongoing ways in which life is practically lived. And the problem with that particular formulation is again in an implicit hierarchy and dominance that it builds in which people might be ethical, but they don't really know they are ethical. It reminds me really of the Pope saying, "Oh yes, there are some Hindus who can be saved, because unknown to themselves they are good Christians." And it seem to me that what is really at stake over here is the right to think more deeply about what it is that allows the kinds of ethnographies that have been produced, which I again want to emphasize, do not rely – differently, I think, from what Joel thinks – on the notion that there is something called human, and we can directly connect with that human. Actually what they tend to show is that our notions of the good,

our notions of what it means to be human, are actually severely questioned, at those particular points, and at that particular point, it seems to me, that to simply say that we can give you a laundry list of what constitutes the good, and we can also enumerate what constitutes the bad, simply does not address the kinds of ethnography that many anthropologists have been looking at. So, I want to think about how even within philosophy, if you think about Cora Diamond for example, you know, her essay *The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy* is actually arguing that the particular parts to which moral philosophy is accustomed, actually become silent even in the face of something as simple as the fact that Mrs Costello is wounded by the fact that she has this rawness of nerves about the fact that animals that she can imagine as companions are actually eaten by others. There's no theory of the good or the bad that will actually attend to that kind of rawness of nerves, and I am really asking that we think more theoretically, more deeply, before settling on the kinds of concepts that the notion of the good and the notion of the bad evoke. And my last point is, that the picture of the good, namely this idea that we cannot do ethnography unless we have some idea of the good, is an extremely reified notion of the social. First, people have done in those circumstances, and second, it seems to me that this very reified notion that people's sociality is a certain form of realizing the good which we know and we can actually conceptualize seems to me to be a very impoverished notion of how we do ethnography, what does doing ethnography mean, and you know, for those of us who weren't doing ethnography coming from the West and looking at this Other who must be this exotic Other, we were looking at the Other who could be me, right? And under those circumstances, I think to wipe that an entire history of anthropology, even if it was one done in peripheral places, would seem to me to be something which, you know, very enlightened audience over here would really like to resist. The last point I want to make is, look, anthropologists are not economists, and they are not doing what psychologists doing their research in their laboratories do. Anthropologists are people who have unsettled the world, right? They unsettled the world by what they have brought to light, they unsettled the world by the concepts that they have questioned. So in some ways, I wish this was a revolutionary move – by positing that we are going toward the anthropology of the good, I wish that it had done that kind of unsettling, but to me it seems that it goes back to the kind of moralism that people like Austin tried to resist, the kind of moralism that Wittgenstein tried to resist, and the kind of moralism that even if it is postulated as if stands against the moralism, has the great danger of ultimately reinstating the notion that indeed we can control, we can sanctify, we can sanitize the world, because we know what we can think about the good and the bad. And so I'd ask you to strongly – or at least moderately support the motion – in lieu of the fact that your notion of what is at stake for anthropology is the more important question than the idea of whether there are more votes here or more votes there. Thank-you very much.

Joel Robbins

I am in a slightly tricky position and I'm going to take a certain route through it, which is, hmmm . . . Veena has really flattered me by reading my work very carefully and raising disagreements. And reading more than one piece – how often does that happen? Although of course, you know the old joke about somebody with two watches that has no idea about what time it is. You wish people would read one at a time. Anyway, it's enormously flattering, and her criticisms are important. They didn't come up in the discussion very much, and I am going to assume that's because people are not thinking these prior works are the heart of the matter. I do have answers to some of the things that she's talked about, though they may or may not be answers that would satisfy you. But I am not going on dwell on defending my written work, which I assume many of you haven't read in any case. I'd certainly be happy to do that later. But what I would like to take up now is what I take to be a more general argument about the good in Veena's remarks, that the good either makes us miss very important things, including some bad things, but other kinds of things too, or that studying the good precludes us from studying the conditions that make the good meaningful to us, regardless of whether we think it's meaningful or not to the people that we study. And I think that the question of the existence of the good has been clouded by both of these kinds of questions. In saying this, I mean the good could exist and we can attend to it or not, and our attending to it could wreck our ethnography or not, or make anthropology more timid or not, or any of those things, but that wouldn't bear on its existence. But to the extent that I have wanted to argue that you do better ethnography when you attend to the good, then I would also go on to argue that I don't think studying the good precludes studying any of these other things. You would certainly have very thin soup if you only studied the good. But I also want to say is that you are going to have thin soup if you don't attend to it at all, to what people take to be the good, and if you don't allow that to direct some of your attention in the field. I also would add on this that I do think that the anthropology of the good does have a critical vocation, I think at this moment in anthropology it is about enlarging our sense of what there is in the world that we want to attend to and recovering a certain critical force for the idea of difference that made anthropology important in many places at many times. And so, I actually think the study of the good does have a critical vocation, and it allows us to bring into debate and discussion things we miss if we don't focus on it. So that's the answer I'd like to give toward Veena.

Hayder has set up a really clear topic for debate, which is the issue of the normative. I'll get to that. I do want to question the notion that there is no good in everyday life that everyday life gets on without a notion of the good. I also took a shower today, and if you asked me why, I would give you an account of why I did that. And if I asked Hayder why, outside in the coffee line, I think he would give an account of why he did that. And I think people are always capable – not always, not every moment, but very often – capable of giving accounts of what

they do and very often, those accounts include what they think what they do is good for. And I think, as ethnographers, we learn a tremendous amount from those accounts, that those are often what open us up to what the kinds of things going on around us are about. So I think that the good is there is in everyday life. I think for some people, this is back to that very penultimate question about the sort of division of ethical labor, some people are positioned such that they are constantly giving accounts and thinking about other people's accounts, and some people wait to give an account until they are asked to account for themselves. But I do think that people can account for themselves and when they do, they do so in terms of the good. And now we get to the normative and the good. This is truly challenging, and this is a real debate. And I wish I controlled the philosophy well enough to get on Hayder's level with it, but I'm going to do the best that I can. I used "the good" and "the right," and I took a lot of care to define them both. So you can take or leave my definitions, but I've said over here on the side of the good are a bunch of things about desire, and goals, and attraction, and over here on the side of the right are a bunch of things about obligation, command, imperative. And that is certainly one way to make this distinction. I think what the normative is, is the framework in which things have to be done in order to appear to others. I think we are locked in the normative socially because otherwise we don't appear to our fellows and we can't get anything done if we don't do it in normative ways. That can feel very coercive... but I think that in what we want to do, the things that we take up, the normative project of doing things correctly, or in the right way, are things that we are often driven to do by something more than just wanting to meet these norms themselves, we do them, because of our sense of the good, what we want to accomplish. So I think that we engage the normative out of motivations that are not themselves always given in the normative. I would point out that in writing the little piece that I began with, I reread Durkheim's *The Determination of Moral Facts*. In this piece, Durkheim said these things are always mixed up, the normative and the good are always mixed up, but the proportions of the normative and the good in play in any moment shift. Some things we do mostly because they are normative, some things we do mostly because they are good. And it is good that the good is not the normative, because this is how change and critique can ever come up. Thanks.

Charles Stafford

Having said a moment ago that I was a nihilist, I now would like to clarify that a bit. And perhaps this actually proves that there is such a thing as the good, because I actually do care about what you think of me (*laughter in the audience*), which of course a nihilist should not do. Among other things, I care what you think about my relationship with my sister Rebecca, so I want to stick a footnote in here, which is to say that I have a wonderful relationship with my sister Rebecca, I am actually having a reunion with her on Friday! But I do believe, as I argued in my presentation, that sibling relationships are an extremely interesting phenomenon to

examine if we want to think about the good. Siblings are representatives not just of humans on aggregate, they are also of course representatives of particular societies – that is, of the good as defined in the particular social order that they’ve come from. And yet in another way they are not: when we actually have to deal with siblings there are many opportunities for us to have conflicts with them in spite of our shared cultural background. What I was suggesting is that – as with cross-cultural comparison so it is with siblings – there is not “a good,” if by that we mean a particular content that everybody could agree on universally. Therefore, the only good that we can hope for here is related to process, that is, a human *way* in which we approach moral and ethical problems of various kinds. One thing I really want to stress is in response to what both Hayder and Veena have argued – at the end quite forcefully, and obviously the arguments they make are very compelling ones for anthropologists, it’s an argument about the morality of anthropology, so it’s very difficult for us to just dismiss that. So I really want to stress again that the kinds of things that Joel and I are trying to push for here, it’s not some sort of crude universalism; in particular it’s not normative. I just don’t accept this critique at all. On the contrary, I think if you look at ethnographic work that either Joel or I have done on ethical and moral life, it’s all about conflict, absolutely, that’s what’s there, that’s the nature of human moral life. The struggle for the good is often a struggle precisely over the normative – that’s the ethnographic material that we all get back to as anthropologists. I also reject the claim that this is a nonhistorical or antihistorical approach that we’ve put up, that we are ignoring, if you like, the complicated history of anthropology in coming to the position that we’ve come to. On the contrary, I am trying to stake a moral claim for the position that I am taking here, actually. I am saying that the morality of our argument is indeed better than the morality of the argument that Hayder and Veena are putting forward. And I think this is a very difficult position for anthropologists to get their brains around, but I mean it. I sincerely mean it. And I hope you are going to support me in that. On the question of moral reasoning versus moral engagement, this really important and interesting question that was brought out, which I think in a way really gets to the core of a lot of things that we’ve been talking about today – there’s very interesting work by Dan Sperber and his colleagues on moral reasoning, anthropologists should read him on moral reasoning if nothing else. And the point he makes is that humans are not very good at reasoning in general. It is surprising how bad we are at reasoning, in fact, and this raises the question of why we have this capacity to reason at all. And the argument is that human reasoning, including moral reasoning, is not there for a private psychological reason as it were – “I am going to arrive at the correct decision or correct moral position” – it is because reasoning is there for argumentative purposes. Moral reasoning is fundamentally argumentative, thus relational, therefore it is totally social, it is never individual, it is absolutely in history. So in fact the “individual” processes of moral reasoning and the social activity of moral engagement are actually completely articulated. It’s a false distinction to make in the first place. So this is yet another example of a way in which the *process* of getting at the good is a

“the” – even if the content of the good is not a “the” – and in case you didn’t follow that, it means you have to vote with me!

The Vote

For the motion: 31

Against the motion: 43

Abstentions: 7

The motion has been defeated.

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Notes

1. See Lindberg (2008).
2. See Wolf (1995), and Wolf and Durham (eds) (2004). A good starting point for exploring recent debates in the psychology of morality is the home page of Jonathan Haidt, which contains links to a number of his publications: <http://people.stern.nyu.edu/jhaidt/>
3. I might note that the really interesting question is the articulation between psychological process and cultural content, but the length of this presentation means that I have to leave this question to the side for the time being.
4. For an interesting, and critical, overview of some of the literature, see Malle (2006).
5. Stafford (2010).
6. If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.” – Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

Author Biographies

Hayder Al-Mohammad is an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His work focuses on the impacts of the 12-year sanctions, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

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Jonathan Mair is lecturer in the Department of Religions and Theology, University of Manchester. He has conducted research on contemporary Buddhism in Inner Mongolia (northern China), Taiwan and the UK and he has written on the category of “belief,” the anthropology of ignorance, and Buddhist ideas of political authority, among other topics. From 2012 to 2014, he was Mellon-Newton Fellow at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Cambridge University, where he led an interdisciplinary project under the title “Speaking Ethically Across Borders.”

Joel Robbins is professor of social anthropology at University of Cambridge. His work focuses on the study of religion, cultural change, morality, and values.

Charles Stafford is Professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics, and a specialist in the anthropology of learning and cognition. He is also the publisher and editor of *Anthropology of this Century*.

Soumya Venkatesan is senior lecturer in anthropology at the University of Manchester. Since 2008, she has organized the annual meetings of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory at Manchester.