

Human geography and the ethical turn: A brief review

In this review article the author identifies two distinct ethical spheres current in human geographical discourse: anthropocentric ethics and biocentric ethics. Without discriminating against either he calls for a 'true biocentric ethics' that collapses this binary incorporating the social and political factors bound up in human/human relationships integral in today's planetary ethical and ecological concerns.

It is especially in the domain of ethics that the dominating importance of the mutual-aid principle appears in full. (Kropotkin 1939:233)

The 'ethical turn' has in many ways been a move toward the quest to find/construct a normative ethical framework whilst also seeking practical ways to apply ethical behaviour. This trajectory is indistinguishable from a critical social theory that scrutinises 'right' and 'wrong' behaviour and the 'good' or 'bad' consequences of that behaviour (Proctor 1998:9). The ethical turn emerged toward the end of the 1990s as a response to a perceived value neutrality in human geography (Proctor 1998:8). Sayer & Storper (1997:1), writing nearly 20 years ago, state the case for critical reflection laying out some ground rules,

“[a]ny social science claiming to be critical must have a standpoint from which its critique is made, whether it is directed at popular illusions which support inequality and relations of domination or at the causes of avoidable suffering and frustration of needs.”

When a critical standpoint is mobilised the issue of ethics comes to the forefront in three distinctive ways. Ethics informs practical considerations and relational practices in research culture within the academic community. Secondly, the ethical dimension of a particular subject can be a significant part of any research project. Finally, ethics can travel beyond academia whereby the embodiment of ethical behaviour becomes paramount. At the outset of the ethical turn Proctor (1998:15) asked the fundamental questions “What is the place of ethics in geography?” and “What is the place of geography in ethics?”. He goes on to state that “[u]nderstanding ethics as an inextricable part of geography's ontological project and epistemological process is the first step in this direction”. In this essay I deliberately construct a binary between anthropocentric ethics and biocentric ethics and explore these two themes concluding that there is no logical reason why these two stances should be in conflict with one another¹. First I will briefly define what is meant by ethics.

¹ My use of the term anthropocentric should in no way infer a negative or deficient ethical ontology. It is merely an ethics that focuses upon human/human relationships. Similarly my use of the term biocentric should in no way infer a misanthropic orientation.

What is ethics?

Proctor's (1999) definition of ethics is framed in relation to values and morality whilst also being an independent sphere. This is an important differentiation, as attempting to pin down values will always be problematic as what an individual 'values' is profoundly subjective². Although, as some of the literature in this review demonstrates, subjectivity plays a central role, further highlighting the complex nature of ethical discourse. A generalised explanation of morality is also problematic. The modern concept of morality finds its origins in so called Victorian values and connotations concerning sexual taboos. These, in turn, are bound up in a negatively framed religiosity often rendering the discourse around morality in a secular context untenable. There is also an ambiguity due to its "wide range of scales" in any given group (Proctor 1999:3). Ethics, in contrast, is a subject that human geography has embraced and attempted to ground in tangible forms. Proctor states quite clearly that ethics, "also known as moral philosophy [can be] understood as [the] systematic intellectual reflection on morality in general or specific moral concerns in particular" (ibid). However, Singer (1993: v) aims to take ethics beyond moral philosophy when he states,

It is vital that ethics not be treated as something remote, to be studied only by scholars locked away in universities. Ethics deals with values, with good and bad, with right and wrong. We cannot avoid involvement in ethics, for what we do – and what we don't do – is always a possible subject of ethical evaluation. Anyone who thinks about what he or she ought to do is, consciously or unconsciously, involved in ethics.

Singer's statement is a call to mobilise ethics away from moral philosophy into the domain of the lived experience. As Barnett (2011:380) states "[e]thics turns out to be all about embodied dispositions [...], relations with others [...] and practices of the self". I will now turn to the first theme that has emerged from the ethical turn and that is an ethics with an implicit focus on human/human relationships.

Anthropocentric ethics

A starting point for a normative ethical framework can be found in Rawls' theory of justice (1971). However, it is in Gilligan's feminist ethics of care (1982) that one can find something more akin to a contemporary human geographical approach. This approach begins to problematize the concept of a normative ethics and instead moves toward a relational, applied

² For an emerging theory of value see Graeber 2001.

ethics (see Barnett & Land 2007 for debates concerning “normative demands in multiple registers”). One ubiquitous ethical dimension in the social sciences is any research involving children and young people. Valentine, Butler & Skelton (2001) draw attention to the ethical complexities involved in conducting research with vulnerable young people. The importance of anonymity, confidentiality and finding a suitable ‘space’ in which to conduct their research. Their paper addresses the ethical dimension involved in research methodology and is useful when considering a variety of research scenarios.

Cloke (2002) takes this further, envisaging a human geography *predicated* upon “living ethically and acting politically” identifying four ‘prompts’ to assist in this endeavor - Self criticality when doing research; moral positions justified by a desire to improve the lives of others; “[t]he recognition of interconnections between the symbolic processes of culture and the material processes of politics and economics, leading to exploration of the links between cultural domination and political economic exploitation” (ibid: 591 - 592); and finally the recognition of ‘evil’ and the cruelty and inequality it produces. This opens up a discussion around responsibility and a spiritual constellation in the moral imagination. Cloke draws upon a spirituality anchored in the Christian morals of charity, agape and the desire to prevent suffering; a desire that extends out beyond immediate socio-spatial dimensions to the ‘other’. Massey (2004) addresses the same issue, albeit from a secular position, adding an explicitly political/temporal dimension that focuses on responsibility. She states that “[w]e are responsible to areas beyond the bounds of place not because of what we have done, but because of what we are”. (2004:16). This thread is also picked up by Lawson (2007) who states that “[l]earning responsibility is hard work; it calls us to learn our privilege, take responsibility for our historical blindness and to construct in its place an accountable position” (ibid:9).

The theme of responsibility is also central to Popke (2003) who conflates our idea of subjectivity with responsibility. Essentially, all individuals are reliant upon all other individuals in a network of inter-dependent relationships, therefore, it becomes imperative to co-operate. Although Popke (ibid: 313) refers to this concept as communism, cultivating “an ethics of hospitality”; I would instead liken it to anarchism and Kropotkin’s mutual aid.

Popke (2004) follows this ‘anarcho-communist’ route from a more anthropological perspective as he discusses the Zapatismo movement in Chiapas, Mexico. Taking a similar

position to Massey and our responsibility to those who are ‘not-like-us’, Popke highlights, “ways in which the Zapatistas articulate a new type of ethical subjectivity and an alternative political imaginary, through which we can reinvigorate a responsibility toward distant others”. (ibid:302). This continues the discourse around responsibility and subjectivity introducing the non-exclusively anarchistic concepts of socio-spatial autonomy and community, a discourse also expounded by Pickerill and Chatterton’s “autonomous geographies” (2006:1).

The studies I have looked at so far have been concerned with relationships and ways of relating outside and in spite of the omnipotence of capitalism. Whilst it concerns itself with the ‘Other’ it is often without specificity of economic relationships. However, there is also a body of work that aims to map the (un)ethical nature of capitalist relationships and the consequences involved with ‘modernity’ and ‘consumerism’ (see e.g. Cook et al 2004; Barnett et al 2005; Popke 2006, 2007).

The papers that I have chosen here a part of a much broader body of research and I do not have the space to include each and every one. Instead I want to now turn my attention to another theme in human geography that has ethics at its core but is explicit in its encompassing of the ‘more-than-human’ (Whatmore 2006) in its field of exploration.

Biocentric ethics

Whilst the previous articles that I have reviewed have not explicitly sought to exclude the non-human they are, nevertheless, anthropocentric in their approach. In contrast to these themes is the body of work on animal/non-human geographies that seeks to move beyond focusing purely on the human. Donna Haraway’s influential concept of *companion species* (2003; 2008), situating the human in a multispecies (see Kirksey 2014) community, has made a major contribution in moving the discourse toward a more biocentric ontology. Often referred to as the ‘animal turn’ Buller (2015:1) states

There is no animal geography without ethics. The very coupling of the words gives rise to an ethical endeavour; an acceptance that animals have a geography, a making visible of animals within our human geography and scholarship, an acknowledgement that our relationship with animals has consequences.

This non-human orientation is also evident in the cognate disciplines of philosophy (see e.g. Barad 2003) and anthropology (see e.g. Hurn 2012; Blancherette 2015). In this ontological

project humans count as just one species in a vast, complex ecological network (see e.g. Whatmore 2002). This is an ethics not born “solely out of pre established codes of moral behaviour but rather responsive to [...] the co-presence and mutual corporeality of non-human others” (Buller 2013:5). Popke (2009:85) also recognises this stating that “we are entangled, in ethical and political ways, with a panoply of non-human cohabitants”

Garner (2002) provides a critique of moral pluralism and the moral orthodoxy of the liberal tradition which has excluded animals from modern political thought. In essence, animals have a moral standing that is inferior to humans and so can be exploited if the needs of the human outweigh the suffering of the animal. The discursive debates concerning the moral orthodoxy aim to problematize and challenge this position. Questions around animal rights and personhood abound; as DeGrazia (2006:51) states “[t]he world does not divide neatly into persons and nonpersons”. Srinivasan (2015) presents one such challenge concerning the accepted assumptions around animal welfare in human-street dog relationships in Bengaluru, India and how the practices are framed as not only being beneficial to the street dog but also preferable. Essentially, Srinivasan’s position challenges assumptions that originate in human exceptionalism; and in light of “significant species extinction [...] it has become increasingly urgent that we interrogate human exceptionalism – the human subjugation of, and assumed superiority over, other animals and the rest of nature” (Schrader 2015:2). Once the boundaries of the human/non human binary are dissolved the question then becomes *where do we draw the line if there is in fact a line to draw?* Schrader (2015:1) proposes an ethics of care “that combines an intimate knowledge practice with an ethical relationship to more-than-human others”. Schrader uses the example of mutated leaf bugs from Chernobyl asking “[w]hy should compassion or our capacity to care be limited?” (ibid:7). This proves to be controversial to her audience as it is assumed that the suffering of leaf bugs is incomparable to that of the humans. Schrader attempts to resolve this by diffusing assumed temporal and material boundaries. This is life at an atomic level over an infinite time scale; caring for the bug is caring about life full stop.

Conclusion

There is an implicit tension between a more anthropocentric and a biocentric ethics. This binary can be collapsed into a universal ethical geography predicated upon care and responsibility, an ethical geography that seeks to place ethical behavior at the heart of *all* our relationships and interactions involving ‘others’ whether humans, animals, plants or even

inanimate objects. For an anthropocentric ethics to be vital it must connect human suffering to wider ecological processes. Moreover, a true biocentric ethics would not exclude the human but rather acknowledge and incorporate the socio-political factors bound up in human/human relationships.

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