



DEBATE: A/MORAL ANTHROPOLOGY

## Warning against and experimenting with morality

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The journal found two truly excellent *advocati Dei*. Their critical engagements with the articles by Kristine Van Dinther and myself keep open important possibilities for anthropology, which had to be defended, if not against Van Dinther's well-reasoned plea for a moral anthropology, certainly against my own exuberant promotion of an amoral anthropology in the ivory tower. If the Pope read HAU, he would surely reconsider John Paul II's abolition of the *promotor fidei*, which was the official title of the devil's advocate. While the undoing of the institutionalized antagonism between *advocatus Dei* and *advocatus diaboli* in 1983 made the Congregation of the Causes of Saints more amiable, it also led to more beatifications and canonizations in the following two decades than in the previous two millennia. Today, it's mostly the military and national security agencies that continue to recognize the value of in-house contrarians (or "red teams") who keep in check the at best self-congratulatory and at worst lethal consequences of group think (Gray 2015; Zenko 2015). But, at a time when anthropologists are running background checks on new eponyms to rename buildings and film festivals, we too need to maintain in the face of rampant moralism what the philosopher Gyorgy Markus described as the polemic-dissensive structure of the humanities and social sciences (Markus 1987; Scheper-Hughes 2020; Thomas 2020).

I opened "Devil's advocate" with a broad brush: I suggested that American cultural anthropology has turned into a moral-political project more invested in promoting the values of US progressives than in observing and reflecting on human life in a less ethnocentric and more value-free fashion. The American Anthropological Association's (AAA's) official announcement that it would give priority to executive sessions that demonstrate a commitment to equity and inclusion, and to an "anti-imperialist, anti-white supremacist, decolonial, anti-

ableist, feminist, anti-transphobic, [or] anti-xenophobic" analysis of power can serve as proof that anthropology is about to institutionalize its own politicization and moralization.<sup>1</sup> Of course, establishing such forms of disciplinary domination is bound to activate resistance, as evidenced in much corridor talk, text messaging, and social media chats, but in my experience expressions of annoyance have remained mostly private. It's difficult to speak up against the pressure to put one's scholarship in the service of this motley of good causes without painting oneself into a white supremacist, anti-feminist, or transphobic corner—although readers of Clifford Geertz's essay, "Anti anti-relativism," should know that, in the logic of anthropology, a double negative doesn't make a positive (Geertz 2000).

Against this background, I was surprised that all three peer reviewers of the originally submitted manuscript were fundamentally supportive. I hadn't received such overall sympathetic reviews since article submissions in graduate school when I was eager to write my way into a discipline rather than out of it (that said, I fear that the degree of my irritation with the AAA betrays that I continue to be more invested in anthropology as a discipline than I would like to admit). In a consciously international journal, one would not expect that reviewers were representative of American anthropology (for otherwise it would be the AAA leadership that didn't represent its constituents). In fact, one reviewer appeared to be based in the UK and associated the trends I'm challenging mostly with North America, even though he or she was observing offshoots among British students and colleagues. But, assuming that any English language publication will have its share of US-based referees, the support might also suggest that American cultural anthropology is more

1. "AAA Annual Meeting Theme," [https://www.americananthro.org/AM\\_Theme](https://www.americananthro.org/AM_Theme), accessed 25 July 2020.





variegated than my polemic charge allowed for and that opposition to the moralization of scholarship is more widespread than I had noticed.

### **Anthropology's economy of science: moral or nonmoral?**

The respondents, Fiona Ross and John Borneman, execute their office very well by calling into question some of the tenets of my argument. And yet they also go easy on my assault on moralism: Borneman fully agrees that the intellectual pursuit should not be subordinated to contemporary moralizing discourse and Ross finds my renouncing of moralist forms of critique at least attractive, although she doesn't fall for it. What both are more concerned about is my proposal to reassemble the ivory tower. I worry that I'm only putting on display my *neurosis philosophicus*, the persistent fear of being misunderstood, but I do feel the need to clear up some false impressions that I must have conveyed.

The reason why Ross objects to my plea for a non-judgmental reflection on human life is that she wrongly believes that it presumes "an ivory tower somehow external to the world." She points to the University of Cape Town which has become a site of protests against the racial inequalities that continue to divide South African society. Neither Ross's university nor my own is an ivory tower, and I also can't help the impression that "tides of shit" are indeed beating at their walls (Langlitz 2020a). Moreover, I agree that there is no safe space for analysis when epistemic norms and forms are in question because academic institutions are sites of a very this-worldly struggle over their own reproduction and transformation. In fact, I don't believe that I played it particularly safe when I challenged the norms of a scholarly field that my livelihood depends on at a time when not only Americans are at each other's throats over the remodeling of the moral landscape. I don't presume the existence of an ivory tower, and certainly not of any vantage point external to the world. My reevaluation of the *possibility* of an ivory tower is counterfactual and can, like all normative claims, ignore a disappointing reality. But, as moral anthropologists of Van Dinter's ilk know very well, trading counterfactuals is an important part of this reality and my appeal for cutting down on moralizing partakes in this trade. The question is not whether an ivory tower exists (it does not, it is just a metaphor), but whether we take it as a regulative ideal or a term of abuse.

To contend that we can't observe the world from the beyond is trivially true, to imply that it follows that fields of knowledge production can't gain relative autonomy from other fields would be patently false. Anthropologists and historians of science have long studied so-called boundary work that constructs or dismantles boundaries between different domains of social life. Instead of presupposing continuity or discontinuity between science and society they studied practices with which people create those continuities or discontinuities under culturally and historically particular circumstances (Shapin 1992). Lorraine Daston (1995) showed how early modern moral economies of science were informed by the values of their ambient societies but quickly reworked those values, including moral values such as honesty or impartiality, into epistemic values. More appropriately, they would be called "nonmoral" economies of science. As these knowledge cultures gained more independence, they produced new social hierarchies, in which a commoner who had cultivated epistemic virtues derived from but now distinct from the virtues of gentlemen could become a more authoritative voice than an ignorant aristocrat. Pierre Bourdieu examined how, in the nineteenth century, other fields of intellectual production such as art and literature obtained semi-autonomy (Bourdieu 1995, 2017). This is the context in which Flaubert wrote that he had always tried to live in an ivory tower, but that a tide of shit was beating at its walls, threatening to undermine it. His goal was to carve out a space for writing and artistic production that did not demand conformity with the norms of a bourgeois clientele or fulfillment of a social or political function. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, we have seen a differentiation of cultural activities, increasingly organized by their own nonmoral values. The question is what to make of this development today.

The polemics against ivory towers are symptomatic of a much broader demolition of the autonomy of science and scholarship (which many anthropologists and science studies scholars have cheered on in the name of democratizing science). However imperfect their autonomy might have been, it made a significant difference to the knowledge cultures at stake. The sustained challenges to this ideal and the institutions it inspired might indicate that we are witnessing a major event in the history of science that, after four centuries, has begun to reverse course, as academic scientists are encouraged to enter into partnerships with industry, and social researchers expect of each other more and more



engagement. I wish I could get a preprint of some future historical analysis of what has been driving this push for heteronomy. Maybe it will turn out to be a good thing. But just because “the retreat is literally shit-washed,” as Ross puts it, doesn’t mean that it is prudent to break down the walls. To me, Ross’s account suggests that South African universities replicate too many problems of South African society and need more boundary work, not less. In any case, considering the sorry state of US society, I wonder if American anthropology is well advised to open the floodgates and redefine itself as a party in the culture wars. Especially at a time when a sense of indignation and resentment pervades every walk of life, observing from the sidelines and trying out alternative perspectives might prove to be more valuable than harnessing scholarship to moral-political causes. Institutionalized partisanship is the end of anthropology as a discipline that set out to undo the gulf between us and them.

### Identifications and estrangements

It must have been expressions like “observing from the sidelines” that fueled Borneman’s concern that I seek to gut anthropology of participant observation. I admit to having raised this possibility at a faculty meeting amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Since our students could not do fieldwork anyway, we might as well have used this opportunity to broaden our methodological repertoire and encourage more sedentary temperaments to conduct conceptual, historical, or comparative projects in the armchair. I don’t think there is any deep reason why anthropology should be confined to ethnographic fieldwork. On Zoom, I couldn’t hear my colleagues taking a deep breath, but we quickly moved on to more pressing business. So much for my talent for instigating revolutions.

Even so, I have no personal interest in turning anthropology into a nonexperiential science. In fact, the prospect of fieldwork was the main reason why I moved from philosophy and history of medicine into anthropology and it continues to be the one aspect of anthropology that I would not want to miss. Although I decided against developing the argument presented in “Devil’s advocate” by going through my ethnographic encounters with psychopharmacologists, neurophilosophers, and primatologists, the essay is very much a product of what Borneman calls “transferential relation-

ships” with people who have or could have been targets of moralizing aggression in anthropology: psychedelic researchers who value unitive experiences beyond good and evil, avowed reductionists who study human mental illness in the brains of drugged mice, evolutionary anthropologists who take contemporary forager societies as models of early humans. I observed and interacted with my interlocutors empathetically. But I always remained aware of the dark sides of empathy. It not only enables a sense of human connection but, in an observed conflict, it makes us back one party, usually the perceived victim, against the other. Empathy not only overestimates similarity and projects ego onto an imaginary alter, it also fosters partisanship and polarization. That’s why experimental humanist Fritz Breithaupt (2019) emphasizes the need to break empathetic identification. Just as psychoanalysts must analyze and loosen transference and countertransference, ethnographers need practices of detachment and literary devices of alienation. In my own ethnographic work, I saw my role as neither critic nor comrade-in-arms but as second-order observer and devil’s advocate—both roles perfectly compatible with participant observation (with an emphasis on *observation*).

Alternation between identification and estrangement also marks the theoretical engagements powering my text. I try on and take off different glasses to look at the problem of moralism, giving preference to perspectives that one reviewer dubbed “eccentric.” Each of these borrowings was broken up by some alienation effect. Theory works like a compound eye: you can only see through it as long as you keep moving, replacing one way of dividing up the world by another. The same could be said about moving through a series of “natives’ points of view.” Tying one’s own observational scheme too tightly to the observed scheme will entrench a particular blind spot. Considering that moralism is based on a firm commitment to a good/evil scheme, my objection to it is not so much in the mercurial content than in the form of the essay.

And then there is another alienation effect at play. In the very first paragraph, I wrote that I did not want to coax the reader into identification with a good author. Had I wanted to remake the discipline, as Borneman worries, I would have tried harder to win over as many readers as possible. I certainly would not have promised them a permanent vacation. However bewildered I might occasionally be by American cultural anthropology, I understand my colleagues well enough to know that they want to make the world a better place and that they



are ready to do overtime for it. I probably learned the wrong lesson from *Writing culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986): instead of giving up the anthropologist's *ethnographic* authority to restore his *moral* authority, I took it as license to experiment with literary forms, including a form that deliberately undercuts the anthropologist's moral authority. I can assure Borneman that this *advocatus diaboli* doesn't have secret ambitions of becoming pope. But as the AAA has moved to institutionalize anthropological moralism, I do want to preserve a pocket for non- and even antimoralist endeavors.

I wrote the essay in the spirit of the colloquial phrase "let me play devil's advocate," which signals that one is about to sketch a possible counterargument that one is not fully committed to. While I am rather serious about the risks of moralizing, I offered as alternative a slightly bohemian experimental approach. It looks for new ethical and intellectual possibilities in perspectives that I know to be highly unpopular and therefore all too easily dismissed in cultural anthropology and beyond. Conceiving of the essay as a series of experiments entails that some experiments are better designed than others and that we also learn from those that did not work out. So let me conclude my response to Borneman with a retraction.

Borneman tells me that the scientific literature on the devastating psychological consequences of pederasty has by now effectively foreclosed the possibility of considering child molestation an ethical project, as influential French intellectuals and a parliamentary task force of the German Green Party had done in the 1970s and 1980s. Although the devil is probably in the age ranges, I concede that empirical findings should curtail any experiment in cultural relativity. It was a mistake to present Foucault's defense of pederasty as analogous to Gehlen's defense of *raison d'état* without being prepared to find a grain of legitimacy in it. In the two cases, the experimental conditions were almost reverse. The pederasty case did not make the strange familiar but the familiar strange and objectionable; Gehlen was a former Nazi that neither I nor my presumed readers have much sympathy for, so to disrupt moralist judgment along partisan lines it made sense to take seriously his plea for institutions. The Green Party, by contrast, is the closest European relative of American progressives (and the party I have always voted for), and, since the 1980s, US anthropologists have made Saint Foucault, to quote David Halperin's "gay hagiography" (1997), one of their figureheads. While I continue to share Foucault's

happy positivism and his aversion to normative thought, his take on pederasty gave me pause. More elegantly designed, this experiment would have concluded the essay with one last alienation effect, by asking whether, in retrospect, the ramifications of Foucault's libertinage don't represent a case where ethics should give up its reservations about moralizing. Thank goodness it never occurred to any anthropological association to award a Michel Foucault Prize. We would now be struggling for a more righteous name-giver.

## Two kinds of amoral moral anthropology

I wrote "Devil's advocate" to strengthen anthropology's polemic-dissensive structure. Therefore, I'm pleased that the editors of HAU published side-by-side arguments for a moral and an amoral anthropology—even though Van Dinter and I are not as far apart as our titles would suggest. Her anthropology is moral in that it studies morality, but it does so in an amoral manner; my anthropology is amoral in that it approaches its objects without firm moral commitments, but it reflects on highly moralized aspects of human and more generally primate life. The lumpers among future historians of anthropology will group our respective proposals into the family of amoral moral anthropologies that resist the urge for moralization.

The eye of a splitter, however, will notice that we belong to different species of antimoralists. Van Dinter opposes moral anthropology to moral philosophy: while the moral philosopher *prescribes*, the moral anthropologist *describes* moral action. My ethnographic work on cultures of science also describes the moralization of conflicts over scientific research. Although natural scientists have institutionalized many precautions against such moralization, it is always an option and they occasionally make use of it. Of course, the ethnographer follows suit and describes what he observes. But I also share Tim Ingold's conviction that anthropology should not be reduced to ethnography (Ingold 2008). I prefer a philosophically minded anthropology that subverts Van Dinter's distinction between moral philosophy and moral anthropology.

Philosophy's engagements with morality cannot be reduced to prescriptions. Its landscape has been ragged from the start, populated by competing schools of thought. I would love to see an anthropology of philosophers. But instead of being a study *of* these people, it would



have to be a study *with* them: learning to see things the way our interlocutors do to open up new (or old, but forgotten) possibilities for human life (Langlitz 2015, 2016a, 2016b). Conducting such fieldwork among the skeptics might be a very timely (or really untimely) start (see Langlitz 2017). The anthropologist would discover a form of life that does not vociferously pride itself on knowing how we have to comport ourselves. Skeptics are people who believe, just like a now defamed generation of anthropologists, that they cannot determine the good independently of the culture to which they happen to belong. From the recognition of this contingency they don't infer the pursuit of identity politics as vocation but an attitude of reserve toward cocksure moralisms of any stripe. Skeptics serve an important function in their larger communities, which they try to save from dogmatism. Having studied with members of this school, a philosophically minded anthropologist would surely have discovered for herself an important ethical possibility that does not prescribe any moral action.

Of course, there could be as many philosophically minded anthropologies as there are philosophies (and more). What I'm interested in specifically is to prospect philosophy for tools that help me warn against morality and that open up alternative ethical stances that do not increase the certainty but the uncertainty of moral judgment, that make us more hesitant to respect or disrespect others and more willing to consider nonmoral perspectives. That said, I'm all in favor of moral experiments if the necessary precautions are taken to isolate hazardous and incendiary research materials. It would be good for anthropology to restore an experimental moment in the human sciences and try out viewpoints other than the ones that conform with a narrow subset of predominantly American progressive agendas.

Ironically, this philosophical orientation moves my antimoralism closer to the moral crusades against which I polemicize than to Van Dinter's plea for a nonmoral anthropology of morality. Nancy Scheper-Hughes's proposition for a militant anthropology that prioritizes her moral and political agenda over the quest for knowledge established a prototype for the anthropologist as "moral entrepreneur," to use Howard Becker's term, a professional discoverer of wrongs to be righted (Scheper-Hughes 1995; Becker 1963: 147–64). The figure of the devil's advocate that I sketched is also a moral entrepreneur of sorts. Of course, he doesn't innovate new rules to create new forms of deviance and new types of outsiders. Instead he innovates by tentatively valuing as bad what

many around him consider good and valuing as good what many ostracize as bad. The limitation of such inversions of morality is that they continue to look at the world through the lens of good and evil. To warn against morality *tout court* it is important to also try out truly nonmoral perspectives. For example, in *Chimpanzee culture wars* I wondered how one would make sense of a cultural comparison between human Tasmanians and chimpanzee Tanzanians, if one replaced the critical glasses of cultural anthropologists with the positivist glasses of cultural primatologists (Langlitz 2020b: 65–67). While such experiments in antimoralism will feel frivolous to moral crusaders, their apparent lightheartedness only hides genuine concern about the destructive potential of the moral nature of *Homo sapiens*.

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