

ANTHROPOLOGY BRIGHT AND DARK

Relativism, Value Pluralism,
and the Comparative Study of the Good

Joel Robbins
University of Cambridge

Abstract: In “Dark Anthropology,” Sherry Ortner questions the critical potential of anthropological studies of ethics, and particularly of research focused on studying cultural articulations of the good. She promotes instead the study of people’s critiques of the neoliberal darkness that besets their lives. Suggesting that critical, dark anthropology is handicapped by opposing itself to the study of the good, I reconsider the critical potential of the anthropological study of difference. This critical potential has been attenuated, I argue, by relativism’s focus on the negative sides of various cultural formations. I argue instead for an approach to difference based on value pluralism and its claims about the diversity of the good. I illustrate the potential of the comparative study of the good in these terms in part by considering contemporary research on prosperity gospel Christianity and also recent work from many parts of the world on hierarchy as a valued social form.

Keywords: Critique, Value Pluralism, Relativism, Dark Anthropology, Anthropology of the Good, Hierarchy, Prosperity Gospel

How should contemporary anthropology respond to the times in which it finds itself? To offer one of many possible tentative answers to such a question, it makes good sense to consult a recent major article by Sherry Ortner (2016). One of the most important thinkers in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century social science, she has a singular track record over many decades of producing influential pieces that successfully diagnose where anthropology has been and where it is heading. One needs only to think of such works of hers as “On Key Symbols” (1973), “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” (1974),



“Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties” (1984), and “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal” (1995) to make this point. In 2016 Ortner produced another piece of this type which has been taken up by the discipline as quickly as the earlier ones had been. It is entitled “Dark Anthropology and Its Others: Theory since the Eighties.” As its subtitle indicates, the article is pitched as something of a sequel to “Theory in Anthropology since the 1960s.” The picture it sketches is one of an anthropology that has responded to the massive effects of neoliberalism in many parts of the world by turning dark, by which she means emphasizing both theoretically and ethnographically “the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them” (Ortner 2016: 49). Current anthropology, she tells us, is significantly, even if not quite solely, focused on the inequalities the neoliberal order has produced, the sufferings they have generated, and the exercises of power that those at the top of that order regularly employ to protect and further solidify their positions.

It is perhaps fair to say that Ortner’s proclamation that dark anthropology is at the center of the discipline now is not quite as far out ahead of the trends it reports as were the observations of the earlier articles I have mentioned. Ortner herself recognizes this. She notes that dark anthropology, or the world that has generated it, had by the time she was writing already been in the ascendent long enough to have produced a dialectical response, or even a “resistance” movement, in the form of what she calls, borrowing a phrase from the title of an article of mine that she otherwise does not much engage, the anthropology of the good (Ortner 2016: 58; Robbins 2013). Part of her goal in the article is to propose a new version of the anthropology of the good that she offers as an alternative to the shape that project has taken so far. For my purposes in this article, the fact that Ortner’s article both documents the rise of dark anthropology and also acknowledges the anthropology of the good while attempting to push it in new directions is quite useful. And indeed, since the publication of her piece, discussions of the anthropology of the good have generally paired it with considerations of dark anthropology, to the extent that their meanings have in the last few years developed in tandem and are likely to continue to do so. Given Ortner’s gift for knowing how anthropologists are responding to the worlds they find themselves in at any given time, the fact that she sees the relationship between these two visions of anthropology as a key tension of the current moment suggests that the time is right to move the conversation between these two positions forward. That is what I hope to accomplish here.

I agree with Ortner’s diagnosis of the anthropological times. But I do not fully share her sense of where the anthropology of the good should go from here. In this article, I want to start by laying out what I see at the most important differences in our outlooks on the anthropology of the good before going on to develop an argument about one productive way forward for an anthropology

of this kind that can also reckon in a way different than Ortner's version with some of the dark aspects of so many contemporary worlds and the ways people live within them.

In "Dark Anthropology," Ortner boils down the anthropology of the good to the study of well-being and happiness, on the one hand, and the anthropology of ethics, on the other. Even for a synoptic piece of the kind Ortner is writing, this is a pretty radical narrowing of what is a much richer arena of discussion than she gives it credit for being. But she takes seriously those few developments she does track, declaring the anthropology of well-being "interesting and important" (2016: 59) and the anthropology of ethics "another important complement to the dark turn" (2016: 59). She worries a bit that these developments bring back Durkheim and perhaps, though this is unspoken, Weber, both of whom the dark turn had put in its shadows while ushering into the spotlight her preferred thinkers, in particular Marx and Foucault, but she does not extensively argue against these currently growing trends within anthropology. Instead, she turns without much critical fuss to what she calls "a different kind of anthropology of the good: the anthropology of critique, resistance, and activism" (2016: 60). The structure of her argument strongly suggests that this is her preferred alternative (2016: 60), and the final substantive section of the article looks at three expressions of this other anthropology of the good that take the form of "(1) 'cultural critique' . . . which includes critical ethnographic writings about conditions of inequality, power, and violence in various parts of the world; (2) a range of mostly theoretical work addressed to rethinking capitalism as a system; and finally (3) a body of work on social movements that have taken shape in the neoliberal period" (2016: 61). With this enumeration of foci in place, the overall thrust of Ortner's argument that the study of critique, resistance, and activism constitute an alternative anthropology of the good is clear enough to be productively engaged in critical terms.

In the spirit of such engagement, I want to suggest that for all its strengths an anthropology of the good construed in these terms is missing something I think is important for any anthropology that wants to be, as Ortner clearly wants hers to be, both anthropological in some specific sense and also critical in a way that points to what she calls potentially effective "better ways of living and better futures" (2016: 60). For this reason, what follows is an internal critique of Ortner's approach, suggesting that there are aspects of her less favored kind of anthropology of the good that she has overlooked, or passed over lightly, that would do a better, or at least a different and differently effective job of reaching the very goals of identifying and exploring potentially better ways of living that she herself holds out as the ultimate aim of her own version of this program. My argument also addresses an important point recently made by Bruce Knauft (2019: 4), who notes that neither Ortner's article nor my own are aimed at building singular theories as much as they are at bringing to the

fore “fresh awareness and creative new emphases” each of us find percolating already in the anthropological conversation. From this point of view, my attempt to defend a particular understanding of an anthropology of the good against the different one that Ortner develops can be read as a move toward at least a bit more theoretical heavy lifting around this project.

At the heart of my argument is a foundational part of my original article on the anthropology of the good that Ortner does not discuss. This is the claim that one major effect of the shift to the study of suffering is that anthropologists are not nearly as interested as they once were in the study of cultural differences in the ways human beings live and experience the world (Robbins 2013).¹ Rooted in the now widespread academic notion that experiences of suffering are universal in their basic contours and impossible not to recognize even across cultural boundaries, the ability to set aside extensive consideration of differences between cultural formations, a topic that has become politically suspect in any case, is part of the appeal of what I called the anthropology of suffering, and what Ortner more broadly calls dark anthropology. Yet even as Ortner leaves out this key aspect of my argument, her piece also attests to its validity. For her article, as she herself acknowledges, is predominantly focused on the anthropology of North America (2016: 65). In fact, as Carol Greenhouse (2016: 12) notes in her commentary on the piece, it is “a treasure trove of references—far more than a head start for anyone interested in catching up on the ethnography of the contemporary United States.” Ortner does glance at work done elsewhere—for example in India, Brazil, and Zambia—but these detours only serve to make the point that viewed through the lens of dark anthropology, everything looks similarly gray everywhere. This ethnographic homogenization is not surprising, given that dark anthropology’s guiding theoretical traditions, those that descend from Marx and Foucault, are not much interested in cultural difference. As Arjun Appadurai (2016: 3) makes this point in another commentary on Ortner’s article, “when it comes to political critique, anthropology has never had much to say that comes from its own point of view.” This follows, he adds, from the fact that “there is still a temperamental gap between anthropologists interested in resistance and those interested in diversity and difference.” In the terms of this division, Ortner’s argument, including the brand of the anthropology of the good it recommends, stands clearly on one side of this divide, and this means that the, as she puts it, “alternative visions of the future” such study of the good is set to turn up are likely to be rather limited, and in the end pretty familiar from the Western tradition. This worries Appadurai (2016: 3; see also 2013), who suggests that “perhaps we are now ready for an anthropology of and for resistance, which takes the diversity of images of the good life into fuller account when discussing resistance, so that it becomes a matter not just of refusal but of culturally inflected aspiration.”

Appadurai's point is one that is also crucial to my own project as laid out both in my original article and here. On my reckoning, an anthropology that aids critical reflection and perhaps critical practice in just the way Ortner hopes hers will, but that also does so from what Appadurai calls "its own point of view"—a point of view I take, perhaps at this point in the discipline's history naively, always to be interested in difference—is going to have to be grounded in the study of cross-culturally variable visions of the good. It is going to have to investigate differences in how people think about the best kind of lives human beings can live. Such visions will surely shape how people define their own well-being and happiness, and their understanding of the nature of ethical life, but they are not reducible to those definitions and understandings alone. Similarly, even as such visions will also surely shape the critical and resistant practices of the people anthropologists work with, they may not be most fully elaborated in the context of those agonistic practices, contoured as such practices most often are to fit the needs of the pitched battles in which they are deployed. Ethnographers will almost certainly have to flesh out their understandings of people's visions of the good by looking not only at movements of resistance, but also at the institutions, rituals, mythologies, valued daily practices and so on of those they study. This kind of project—one we might call an ethnographically wide-ranging or thick (in the sense of Geertz 1973) comparative anthropology of the good—would require the sort of reawakened interest in the depth of cultural differences I called for in my piece on the anthropology of the good and that I tried to model in sketching the outlines of that approach. A renewal of such interest does not seem likely to follow from an anthropology of the good as Ortner conceives it.

For a concrete example of what is missing from Ortner's anthropology of the good, one can turn to one of the limited number of non-US ethnographies Ortner takes up in her article. The example I have in mind is James Ferguson's (1999) widely read book about the Zambian Copperbelt, *Expectations of Modernity*. The Copperbelt is a part of Southern Africa where local and international hopes once ran high for rapid and successful "modernization." But with the rise of the "neoliberal" order, these hopes were a thing of the past when Ferguson conducted his research there in the 1990s (Ferguson 1999: 245). In her brief discussion of his book, Ortner focuses on how Ferguson describes Copperbelt residents in the 1990s as suffering from "abjection," a sense of being thrown down and thrown out of the world economic system. Letting this stand as the whole of her account, her point is simply that here is another group from another part of the world for whom neoliberalism has caused life to descend into darkness.

Yet a deeper dive into the anthropological literature on Southern Africa indicates that there is more to say about this case from the point of view of an anthropology of good attuned to broad cultural differences in people's

understanding of what it means to live valuable lives. In fact, one gets a more rounded view of the situation just by looking at the whole of Ferguson's discussion in the book in question. Ferguson's argument about abjection only comes in the last chapter of the book, where he sums up and deepens his account of the "gloomy process of decline and [global] disconnection" that has marked Copperbelt life in the neoliberal era (1999: 236). In earlier chapters, by contrast, Ferguson also offers glimpses of the ways people on the Copperbelt were at the time of his research developing, or perhaps better put, returning to alternative models of possible good lives that are not indebted to the globally circulating market-based understandings which had underwritten their earlier modernizing project and were now fueling their sense of abjection. These alternative models included, for example, those that led to the plans that Copperbelt urban dwellers were actively implementing, by means of remittances, to pave the way for a return to rural living. The Copperbelt world Ferguson describes, dark as it is, turns out not to be one where people lack alternative futures that they feel it is worth working steadily to realize.

Even more to my point here, 14 years after *Expectations of Modernity* appeared, Ferguson (2013) published an important article that Ortner does not address that much more fully lays out a Southern African model of the good life that is utterly different from those which guide both the thinking of the intellectual wing of neoliberalism *and* that of its academic critics. This is a vision of the good life that sees it as involving people successfully fashioning webs of unequal relations of patron–client dependency in which they are less powerful than some people they are linked to while also being more powerful than some others with whom they are connected. In this model, it is such a world of relations both up and down chains of patronage that supports human flourishing. The world is going well, by local reckonings, when it takes this shape. Contrary to the declarations of independence that orient the neoliberal imagination of the good, as well as the liberal one that preceded it, Ferguson says this African model is based on a "declaration of dependence" that construes the good in a way that seems completely unimagined in Ortner's pitch for her own version of the anthropology of the good as a branch of the anthropology of resistance to neoliberalism.

And finally, if we follow up another of Appadurai's (2013) suggestions—that the religious realm is one place to find alternative versions of the good in highly elaborated forms—we can turn to the work of another Copperbelt ethnographer, Naomi Haynes (2017), to further enrich our picture of what she calls the value of hierarchy itself in traditional and contemporary Copperbelt understandings. In socio-economic terms, the people Haynes has worked with fit well with Ortner's reading of Ferguson's Copperbelt ethnography. They are much less well off or globally connected than their parents expected they would be. But rather than stuck in abjection, they spend an enormous amount

of time in Pentecostal churches that preach the possibility of gaining prosperity by religious means. There are innumerable numbers of such churches in the Copperbelt town Haynes studied, and when the hoped-for material riches do not arrive, people sometimes move from one to church to the other. But it is noteworthy that they do not give up on this kind of Pentecostalism *tout court* and they are not demoralized in the way an anthropologist might expect them to be if getting rich in neoliberal terms were really their exclusive or even most important goal. Instead, Haynes argues, what churchgoers are looking for from their participation in these religious institutions is the creation of strong relations of spiritual patronage with spiritually powerful pastors, as well as downward links to those less spiritually powerful than themselves. When they find a church that offers them such relationships, they tend to settle down and define themselves as doing well regardless of how they might be doing in the terms set by, say, neoliberal economists, development officers, or dark anthropologists. In the face of an economic system that has ceased to allow for the creation of a world of hierarchical relations in monetary terms, the Copperbelt Zambians Haynes studies have fashioned a religious world that can succeed in doing so in spiritual ones. Their own vision of the good has stayed intact through this shift; a vision in which, as Sylvia Tidey (2022: 31) puts it, people treat “hierarchy as a source of hope and a desirable social good.” From the point of view of this understanding of the good, to call Copperbelt prosperity gospel Christians wholly abject or to define their lives as completely dark would have to count as missing the point. In very broad outlines, Haynes in some sense turns around the picture Ortner derives from Ferguson’s discussion of abjection, teaching us about people who have creatively maintained the viability of their own “alternative” understanding of the good rather than settling in to lives spent in critical resistance to a neoliberal order that refuses to deliver them good lives on its own terms. If Ortner had tugged a little harder on the thread Ferguson’s work hands us, she might have found her way to this observation. But, and this is the point I have wanted to make, her version of the anthropology of the good offers no incentive to tug that hard—once it finds people living and also resisting dark lives of neoliberal abjection, its expectations are confirmed. And when this kind of anthropology finds its expectations confirmed, in very many cases its critical limits have also been reached—it can point out the darkness it has told us time and again is there, and can document how people around the world recognize that darkness and resist it, but it has fewer resources than Ortner seems to imagine to by itself illuminate ways forward by providing evidence of alternative versions of the good life not already established in the anthropological imagination.

It is fair at this point in my argument to raise the question of whether a vision of a life filled with hierarchical relations up and down chains of patron-client dependency can really count as a vision of the good worth discussing,

much less one that is currently rooted in the soil of prosperity gospel churches that so many follow the Comaroffs (1999) in dismissing as “occult economies” that provide those who embrace them with nothing but distorted views of how the neoliberal world system really works. Perhaps hierarchical patron-clientalism is so far removed from standard average Western models of the good that adopting a vision of the good life like this one, even where it may well be traditional (as both Ferguson and Haynes argue it is among those whom they study; see also Richards [1956] 1988), has to count as a form of resignation in the face of neoliberal darkness. Put bluntly, is not embracing patron-clientalism just settling for a second-class life because that is the only kind the neoliberal order allows you to hope for? Would an anthropology of the good that classifies this as an example of a cross-culturally interesting formulation of the good life not simply be joining in such a capitulation, rather than representing this model of the good as something that itself should be resisted? One might say with Ortner that one wants to find alternative versions of the good life that take us beyond those offered by neoliberalism, but also wonder whether there are limits to those one is willing to accept as genuinely good. Anthropologically speaking, these are not, or ought not be, easy issues to address, but I want to at least begin to consider them in two ways. The first will be ethnographic, and it does not really offer answers so much as deepen the questions. The second, which will open on to the last half of this article, aims to sketch an answer to such questions that would allow an anthropology of the good to expand its contribution to important critical conversations that need to take place in and well beyond anthropology about what can count as good lives.

The first answer I want to give to the question of how to reckon with the fact that hierarchical patron-clientalism might strike many anthropologists as an unworthy definition of the good is, as I noted, just a deepening of the problem. It deepens it by noting that this vision of the good life is not restricted to some historical and contemporary cases from Southern Africa. There has recently been a boom in work that considers social formations in which the good life takes the form of inhabiting structures of hierarchical relations not only in Africa (along with previous references, see Haynes and Hickel 2017; Scherz 2014), but also in India (Piliavsky 2014), Burma (Keeler 2017), Indonesia (Tidey 2022), and the academically powerful Max Planck Society Institutes, which are mostly in Germany (Peacock 2016). Clearly, we do not have to do here with a wholly idiosyncratic vision of the good confined to one geographic region at one point in time or to only a few societies. Large numbers of people live in terms of this version of the good life in societies of widely varying sizes and with very different histories. The questions I raised above gain some heft when one recognizes that it will not do to discard or critique this vision of the good by labeling it as nothing but a kind of one-off outlier in world terms.

Yet even if hierarchical versions of the good are not so vanishingly rare as to be beneath anthropological notice, anthropologists still might find them uninteresting or even repugnant for other reasons, and this observation brings me to my second answer to the questions I posed above. In the past, at least in anthropology as it developed in the United States, a deep commitment to and extensive training in cultural relativism as an ethical as well as a methodological position may have forestalled a tendency on the part of anthropologists to embrace without question their own resistances to this model, or to other versions of the good they find unattractive. But I think this attachment to relativism, at least in its really robust forms, is largely gone from the anthropological community today (Langlitz 2020b 990). For about a decade I have informally asked many of my colleagues whether they are, deep down, relativists. I have even tried to bias their answers, or at least allow for affirmative ones, by telling them before they answer that I at least wish I could be one. But despite my prompting, they have mostly answered that they are not relativists. This backing away from relativism makes good sense if you think about the kind of confidence you have to have in your own judgments if you want to join the disciplinary mainstream in declaring so much of the world dark in the thickly evaluative terms Ortner does throughout her article (using “thick” this time in the sense of Williams 1985). If not outright anti-relativist, Ortner’s argument and the kind of anthropology it represents is one that does not consider relativism as a live issue that could complicate its own frankly judgmental character (cf. Knauff 2019: 13). And if relativism really is off the table to the extent Ortner’s argument suggests it is, we have to ask how an anthropology of the good can deal with and put to critical use extensively elaborated and globally widespread visions of the good that anthropologists do not find appealing. I am going to try to answer that question in the second half of this article, where I suggest that a political philosophical position called value pluralism can allow an anthropology of the good to keep what remains valuable from relativism, while jettisoning some of those aspects of that position that make it so unpopular today.

Value Pluralism, Relativism, and the Anthropology of the Good

To find a way of working with cultural difference beyond the paradigm of cultural relativism, it would be helpful to determine what happened to so decisively put that paradigm out of play. A full answer to the question of the reasons for the decline of relativism would need to develop several points. Here, I focus on just one of these that is particularly important for the way I want to frame an anthropology of the good that goes beyond the study of resistance. This point rests on the claim that in part relativism’s loss of traction on the

anthropological imagination has followed from a much wider transformation of the values by which many Western countries organize their relations to the rest of the world. The historian Samuel Moyn (2010) has narrated this shift in his well-known revisionist history of human rights entitled *The Last Utopia*. Moyn's key claim is that the doctrine of human rights that is currently so influential was not a product of the enlightenment, the French Revolution, or even the post-war moment in 1948 that gave us the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights—a declaration that the American Anthropological Association, at the height of its relativist self-confidence, famously opposed as too individualist in tenor. Rather than being a product of any of these earlier moments, Moyn (2010: 87–88) argues, human rights as a value came to the fore only in the mid-1970s. And, crucially for the picture I am sketching here, what human rights replaced as a key Western value for organizing international relations in the 1970s was the value of cultural self-determination that had dominated the previous period of anti-colonial struggle and decolonization. On Moyn's (2010: 88) interpretation, “human rights entered global rhetoric in a kind of hydraulic relationship with self-determination: to the extent the one appeared, and progressed, the other declined, or even disappeared.” An earlier anthropology of difference and relativism was strongly, if not always perfectly, aligned with the value of cultural self-determination (Hartog 2015: 27, 111). Once that value lost its hold and the value of individual human rights had taken center stage, anthropology's turn from relativism to an embrace of universal models of suffering, and to focusing on and calling out lives lived in the face of darkness, became almost a foregone conclusion.

Making this point about the decline of relativism in a little more detail, one can note that for an anthropology that is less concerned with matters of cultural self-determination than it is with individual rights and freedoms, cultural relativism of necessity becomes a suspect position, at best in danger of muddying the newly clear waters of disciplinary judgment and at worst an alibi for political quietism. Against this background, the philosopher John Cook (1999) has helpfully identified the crux of the problem traditional relativism faces today. For Cook, one of the distinctive aspects of anthropological relativism is that it has focused on presenting ideas, values, and practices drawn from other cultural settings that authors expect their audiences to find objectionable. Its most common gambit is then to show how these ideas, values, and practices, when understood in the terms of the people who live with them, and when examined in relation to how they fit with other aspects of those people's lives, are not bad in the way audiences imagine. The hoped-for outcome of such presentations of hard cases for relativist understanding is the adoption on the part of audiences of a stance of what Cook (1999: 28) calls “moral recusal” in which people come to realize they ought not to negatively judge the ideas, values, and practices of people who are culturally different from themselves.

For anthropologists who are living in a time in which the global organization of relations between societies is so fundamentally framed in terms of the language of human rights, this kind of relativism that places all its bets on fostering a stance of hermeneutic openness and moral recusal has to seem politically weak and ethically disempowering—at the very least it steers attention in the wrong direction, toward examining challenging cases of cultural difference rather than toward documenting and exposing places where people are suffering without due recognition by others of their situation. There is little wonder then that relativism has lost ground steadily since Clifford Geertz first warned it was coming under attack in his famous “Anti Anti-Relativism” article of 1984.

Following Cook’s argument, I want to suggest that the most worrying part of relativism for contemporary anthropologists who live in the aftermath of the passing of the era of cultural self-determination as a value is the stance of moral recusal that it requires. I also want to accept that this really is a problem—that such recusal just will not work in today’s climate, where anthropologists want to be able to make judgments about kinds of life that are dark, oppressive, and undesirable. As I noted earlier, I think Ortner is right in announcing that this climate has now settled over the discipline. But Ortner also hopes to find desirable, novel alternatives to what she sees as bad neoliberal forms of life. At the core of my argument is the claim that if we want to contribute creatively to that project, and in the kinds of cross-cultural and comparative terms that mark an outlook as anthropological, then we will still need an anthropology that is prepared to be open to recognizing the value of forms of life that are not already familiar to its own critical imagination. And such openness will continue to depend on something partially akin to the relativist impulse—a willingness to recognize the value of at least some alternative ways of living that are produced out of traditions other than the anthropologists’ own. Even if anthropology feels it cannot afford a relativism that dwells on asking its audience to withhold negative judgments of other cultures or ways of life in all cases, in order to be critical in Ortner’s sense it also cannot do without an openness to possible variations in what can genuinely count as culturally informed versions of the good. What shape might this kind of openness take?

A position that fits the bill for a workable approach to the recognition of the existence of acceptable variations in definitions of the good can be found in a philosophical program known as value pluralism. The most well-known proponents of this position are Max Weber and Isaiah Berlin, though it has many other adherents in philosophy, where it is a live option for those interested in political, social, and ethical issues (for a review, see Lassman 2011). For value pluralists, it is a fact that there are different values in the world. Crucially, these values do not always work together such that by realizing one of them you can prepare yourself to realize an even higher one the way you can, for example, in contemporary Western societies sometimes pursue the value of accruing wealth

and at the same time pursue the value of living a healthy life. Instead, sometimes values conflict, so that in order to realize one of them you have to give up on realizing the other. For Weber (1946b, who discussed this kind of conflict in terms of his notion of value spheres, examples of such conflicting values would be the way you can live for beauty, as an artist, but in doing so you will likely compromise, unless you are really lucky, on realizing the value of obtaining wealth. Or you can realize the value of gaining and exercising political power, but in doing so you are likely to realize moral values a little less fully than you might have if you had put them at the top of your value hierarchy. For those who draw inspiration from Berlin (2013: 12–13), who is firmly situated in the liberal tradition, the kinds of conflicting values that often come up are classic liberal ones like liberty and equality, justice and mercy, and security and privacy. Though their taste in examples differ, both Berlin and Weber make the point that when values conflict, people cannot have it all. They will have to choose to try to realize one value fully and forgo doing so for the other. Since both values in such cases of conflict are good in their ways, Berlin calls necessary choices made between them “tragic”—even as you realize one version of the good, you lose out on realizing another as fully as it would have been possible to do so if its realization had been your primary goal.

To this point, I have treated the matter of conflicting values that cannot be made to work together from an acting subject’s point of view—talking about personal choices and the tragic losses they sometimes entail. This is one important part of how Weber approaches the issue as well, as Seyla Benhabib (2018) acknowledges in calling him an “existential” value pluralist. But we can also follow Berlin in approaching it from what might be called a more objectivist point of view. For Berlin (1998), values not only exist in cultures or in people’s thoughts and dispositions. They are also in a strong sense real things in the world—real even when they are not personally or culturally recognized. Furthermore, for Berlin there really exist in the world not just one but a number of good (or valuable) ways human beings can live—ways of life that equally promote human flourishing. But, as already noted, these different versions of the good, these different really existing values, cannot all be combined smoothly (Berlin 2013: 83). Some of them are by nature in conflict with one another in the sense that realizing one fully means failing to realize the other(s) to the same extent. Crucial for our purposes here, Berlin extends, or can be read as extending, this point to suggest that not only different persons, but also different cultural formations have to choose among these conflicting values, picking the one or ones they will prioritize and letting the others sink into second place in their hierarchies, or even into oblivion within the worlds they define (see also Dumont 1980). As the political theorist John Rawls (1988: 265) has put it, glossing Berlin, from the value pluralist point of view “there is no social world without loss—that is, no social world that does not exclude some ways of life

that realize in special ways certain fundamental values.” Or, to put this more positively, every culture can teach us about some “fundamental values” that can contribute to human flourishing but not about others, because each culture only encourages its members to realize fully one or a compatible set of them.

To finally make the point I have been heading toward in this discussion of value pluralism, the fact that as regards really viable definitions of the good every culture is incomplete is why we need a comparative anthropology of the good that is open to versions of the good unrecognized in our own traditions. We need such an anthropology because it is the only way we can learn about the livable versions of the good life that exist beyond the horizon illuminated by our own values. Since no one culture can fully realize or elaborate all the good ways to live, we can never learn about all of them by coming to know only our own culture, even if we attend both to its dominant ideologies and its resistant strains. Our efforts at critique of the darkness in our own worlds and worlds like it would be richer if we developed an anthropology of the good that was oriented toward learning about all of the different kinds of good lives human beings can lead.

I have to confess that even as I have in this article argued in theoretical terms for the importance of an anthropology of the good alert to the critical potential of cultural difference—as opposed to or at least alongside of Ortner’s preferred version that is rooted in the study of the ways people resist neoliberal darkness—I have not done much to illustrate my point ethnographically beyond suggesting that worlds of hierarchical interrelation in which people expect support from those above them and also expect to support those below them counts as a candidate for a version of the good that appears ethnographically to support flourishing lives even as it cuts against the grain of the most popular Western neoliberal, liberal, and more generally enlightenment understandings of desirable kinds of life. It might help indicate where one could go ethnographically with the program I have been sketching to say that I would class this hierarchical interrelational understanding of the good as a subset of such understandings which I have defined elsewhere as following from the value of relationalism: a high-level value placed on the creation and maintenance of relationships rather than on enhancing the powers or freedoms of individuals (Robbins 1994). Drawing from Melanesian materials, I have argued that such relationalism also comes in egalitarian forms, where relations are still primary but the ideal ones are those of equality rather than patron-client hierarchy. Setting aside all the ink spilled debating the validity of Dumont’s ethnographic interpretations, it is worth noting that he has also given us a portrait of two non-relational understandings of the good: holism, where the good consists in achieving a desired state of the social whole, and the more familiar Western individualist one in which the good consists in enhancing the ability of individuals to choose and successfully pursue their own preferred ways of living. If in fact all the versions of the good I have just mentioned can count as

robust ones that support human flourishing, then we have at least four of them to explore ethnographically, and three of these fall outside the mainstream of the tradition out of which anthropology was born. My guess is that there are surely a few more out there that are worth bringing into any serious, ethnographically grounded comparative conversation about the good.

I say there are likely at least “a few” more versions of the good worth investigating, rather than a potentially infinite number, because of one important way in which value pluralism differs from traditional relativism. For value pluralists, not all values that a person or population might adopt are good values, and it is possible for social formations to orient themselves to values that are not good in just the sense Ortner claims that neoliberal ways of life are so oriented. For value pluralists, only versions of the good that support human flourishing count as what we might as well call ‘good versions of the good’ and it is legitimate to criticize versions of the good that do not support such flourishing. Of course, a lot hangs here on how one defines human flourishing, and I have to admit that I am not in a position at the moment to offer any precise definition that I would want to stand behind. It is my hope that the comparative anthropology of the good could be part of a discussion about how to arrive at such a definition. But however we in the end define human flourishing, it is in the nature of the value pluralist position that it does not claim that just any value human beings can invent or discover and elaborate a social formation around is bound to be a good one. The number of values that can serve the purpose of supporting good ways of life is not limited to one, but it is not completely open-ended either. Thus, for value pluralists there is no requirement to practice complete moral recusal.

In light of the point that cultures can latch on to bad versions of the good, I want to build toward my conclusion by making a distinction between two different ways we might want to think about such phenomena. One way a version of the good can be bad is, as already noted, by failing to support human flourishing throughout the social formation in which it holds sway. Again as noted above, I think Ortner takes neoliberal values of complete market freedom to be this kind of bad version of the good, just as Colin Turnbull (1972) famously took the base individualist survivalism he claimed served as the highest value for the Ik during a period of drought-induced famine to be a bad version of the good. A second way versions of the good might be judged as bad from a value pluralist perspective is if the values upon which it is based themselves could promote human flourishing, but the way it defines the realization of those values does not. This point depends on the claim that more than one practice can realize a value (Sommerschuh 2020). Just as say both painting and music can realize values of beauty, all values are susceptible to multiple kinds of realization. Culturally embedded visions of the good will always feature both values and established practices for realizing them. It is this aspect of the way

in which values work that allows for situations where good values can be tied to practices that are harder to evaluate as good.

I can illustrate the usefulness of this point for an anthropology of the good by going back to work on prosperity gospel churches in Southern Africa and drawing on Ilana van Wyk's (2014) important book *The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in South Africa*. Van Wyk depicts a prosperity gospel church in Durban that appears to be as bad as many observers imagine most of these churches generally are. The subtitle of the book, "*A Church of Strangers*," tells the part of its story on which I will focus. This church, van Wyk shows, does nothing to build community among its members—it supports no small groups, offers little by way of development projects or charitable good works, and the leadership moves pastors regularly to prevent them becoming close to congregants. Furthermore, sermons regularly focus on the claim that the demons set to block believers' access to God's bounty can deceitfully appear as people congregants might find appealing, such as those sitting next to them in the pews. Unsurprisingly, in light of this message church members mostly keep to themselves and even the relatively small number who attend the church for several years tend to have few relationships with other members. Alongside the isolating talk of demonic omnipresence, pastors continually demand tithes and other gifts to the church and sometimes back these demands with threats; one pastor even insisting that "old women who hid money in their bras for the taxi fare home would be killed or maimed en route, while parents who paid school fees instead of tithes would see their children fail or die" (van Wyk 2014: 31). Such tactics are deployed despite the fact that the tithes that many of the very poor congregants give serve to estrange them from their families, who are enraged by the diversion to the church of what little funds are available for pressing household needs. In a separate article (2013), van Wyk admits she found it impossible to like this church, and many readers can certainly understand why this was the case.

But as much as van Wyk is clear in her negative judgment of the church and its leadership, her view of the congregants, who were the people with whom she worked most closely, is different. To quote her at some length:

While 'unbelievers' [to whom she presented her work] were shocked by the meanness, selfishness and violence that the . . . [Universal Church] apparently inspired, 'strong' members insisted that this was part of their warrior ethic. I chose to write about this ethic, not to confirm secular suspicions about the . . . [church's] . . . depravity, but to illustrate the depth of their belief and the fundamentally positive social goals to which their behavior was ultimately directed. Indeed, [church] members believed that through sacrifices, 'strong' behavior and steadfastness they could reinstate God's blessings in the lives of their families; theirs was not a 'selfish' faith. (Van Wyk 2014: 35–36)

Van Wyk's argument in this regard can be read, in the terms I have been developing here, as one that suggests that the values by which church members orient their lives—values of generating economic and social security for themselves and their families—are good ones. What requires critique is the social forms through which they try to realize these values—in this case forms offered to them by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. A fully rounded anthropology of the good needs to be able to take account of cases like these in ways that allow it to identify key values in play without falling into the position of having to defend all of the ways in which people try to realize those values. If it can do this, its chances of finding alternative models of the good through fieldwork and perusal of the ethnographic record will be much broader than they would be without this point in hand.

Conclusion

One of the foundations of the critical theory of the Frankfurt school variety was an attack on what Max Horkheimer (2004) called “subjective reason,” or what is better known, following Weber, as instrumental rationality. This kind of reason accepts the often-expressed modern idea that there is no rational way to decide between different values or versions of the good. The job of reason in its subjective guise is simply to help people who have already chosen their values, or who have inherited them from their tradition, to determine the best means for realizing them in the situation in which they find themselves. “Substantive,” or what Horkheimer also refers to as “objective” reason has a different vocation. Its purpose is to give shape to debates about ends themselves, about what versions of the good life are most worth pursuing (Villa 2019: 270). The abandonment of objective reason in favor of the subjective variant was, for Horkheimer, one major cause of the darkness he saw besetting Euro-American society in the period around the mid-1940s, when he wrote the lectures from which I have been drawing.

Contemporary philosopher Maeve Cooke (2006: 3), who works in the Frankfurt school tradition, has developed a related point, arguing that in order to be effective any critical theory needs some image of the good society in which obstacles to human flourishing have been overcome. In many critical arguments, such images of the good are presented only negatively, as the background to criticisms of how life is actually being lived. But in Cooke's view they should be elaborated in positive terms, for “without some, more or less determinate, guiding idea of the good society, critical social thinking would be inconceivable.” It would be inconceivable, she explains, because it is such positive images of the good, and not simply explanations of existing “social evils,” that motivate efforts to produce change (2006: 197). Ortner seems to

intuit something like Cooke's position, for as I have noted she mentions several times in passing that dark anthropology also needs to find desirable alternatives to the unacceptable social formations and ways of life that it seeks to document. Yet in spite of Ortner's welcome recognition of the need for an anthropology that does something besides study the darkness of contemporary life, it has been the burden of my argument that we are unlikely to find robust alternative models of the good if we concentrate, as she says we should, primarily on studying how people living in neoliberal social formations resist their present conditions. Even if we follow Ortner and remain focused on the US I have argued along the lines Cooke lays out that seeking to study people's lives in their multiple expressions, as anthropology has in the past so often sought to do, will give us a fuller grasp of the models of the good that motivate their critical practice than will a narrow focus on their efforts toward resistance and critique alone.

I have also, and at greater length, suggested that looking beyond our own most usual cultural horizons can equip anthropologists to enrich substantive discussions in our own social worlds that seek to evaluate the varying models of the good that contemporary critical thought might adopt. Openness to a wide range of such models is important if critical thought is to remain a creative, and not just reactive, endeavor. At the beginning of August 2019, a book on Boas and several of his female students appeared that in the US is entitled *Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century* (King 2019). Although the book is nearly 450 pages long and is written by a professor of International Affairs and Government, it was published by a mass market press and was being sold, at least in the United States, in bookstores that do not generally carry any but the most brief and public-facing works by academics. It was widely reviewed in the popular press. This suggests that perhaps interest in the critical power of the anthropological study of difference may be on the uptick now, indicating some hope for the possible success of the endeavor to develop an anthropology of the good of the kind I have argued for here.

But we should perhaps not be over-confident in this regard. Soon after the book on Boas and his students appeared, it was reviewed at length in the *New Yorker* by the magazine's influential staff writer and Harvard Professor Louis Menand (2019). For anthropologists, the opening move of his review cannot but be depressing. After noting, in keeping with one focus of the book, how extraordinarily successful Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict were as public intellectuals, he goes on to note that the "issues around race, gender, sexuality, and 'otherness' [that they took up] are still very much with us, although in slightly altered form." But, he continues, and this is the depressing part, "when people discuss . . . [these issues] . . . they no longer solicit the wisdom of anthropologists." He then takes as the question that structures his review

that of “What happened?” to render anthropology so much less relevant to the public discourse than it was in the time of Mead and Benedict (Menand 2019: 81). I am not going to tarry with his answer, which as you might imagine talks about the limitations of traditional notions of relativism and the disciplinary loss of faith in the culture concept. Instead I want to close on the following note. If anthropologists could find a way to respond to the world in which they currently find themselves by helping their audiences understand in ‘thick’ ways models of the good life that are different from those they already know, they could contribute creatively to important substantive (in Horkheimer’s terms) debates about the best ways for people to live, making their contributions from their discipline’s own most unique point of view by stressing the diversity that exists in visions of the good that have supported thriving social lives in various places around the world. If they responded in this way, it is possible that others might once again find a reason to solicit their wisdom when they seek creatively to deploy their own substantive reasoning to define critically the models of the good they would like to guide their own lives. I want to suggest, in short, that a well-developed, cross-cultural, comparative anthropology of the good might just gain us entry once again into conversations about the best ends to pursue, where we can contribute not just our skills at documenting and cursing the darkness of our own and globally related worlds but also seek to light a few candles to illuminate the way forward for critical thought.

Notes

1. It is worth noting that Knauff (2019: 6) too, in his otherwise very careful and useful article, also seems to set this argument mostly to one side when he says that I do not offer an account of why, in Weber’s phrase, “the light of great cultural problems” moved on from cultural difference to the focus on suffering. My argument about the way universal models of suffering put those about cultural difference largely in the shade, and particularly my gesture (further developed below) to locate this shift from a move in the global core from ideologies of cultural self-determination in the era of decolonization to those of human rights in the neoliberal era, aims precisely to explain why the shift to the suffering subject happened when it did.

COMMENTS ON “ANTHROPOLOGY BRIGHT AND DARK”

by Joel Robbins

Nicolas Langlitz

The New School for Social Research

Although my own aversion to what Sherry Ortner (2016) describes as “dark anthropology” has different sources, I feel great sympathy for Joel Robbins’ challenge to a vulgar pessimism and self-righteous moralism that preferably observe human life through the lens of suffering, oppression, and injustice (Langlitz 2020b). For the human sciences, the cognitive passion of curiosity has proved to be a better advisor than the moral passion of indignation. As Tobias Kelly (2013: 214) put it: “Do the dozens and dozens of articles setting out ever new and fine-grained descriptions of the horrible things that many people have been through, add anything significant to anthropological knowledge, whatever that might be?” Curiosity, by contrast, has led anthropology in its many guises to study human differences in all their forms: the difference between humans and other animals, differences between ethnic groups and their ontologies, differences between moderns, premoderns, and nonmoderns, or the difference that today makes with regard to yesterday. I second Robbins’ plea for revitalizing an anthropological study of difference, especially of differences between people’s value orientations, even though I have my doubts about his theoretical ambition to define an empirically based criterion that would escape the pitfalls of relativism by distinguishing between good and bad versions of the good.

Ten years ago, Robbins noted that a tectonic shift had occurred in the discipline, which had redirected the anthropological gaze from cultural difference to the almost universal human suffering witnessed by an earlier version of dark anthropology (Robbins 2013). Dark anthropology *avant la lettre* was still more interested in a common humanity defined by trauma than in dividing humanity into victims and perpetrators. In opposition to dark anthropology old and new, Robbins’ “anthropology of the good” escapes both uniform and Manichaeic accounts of human life by analyzing manifold differences between people’s cultural values and how members of one and the same culture make tragic choices between conflicting values or value spheres (Robbins 2012). These choices are tragic because they are not simple moral choices between making suffer and alleviating suffering, between oppression and liberation, in a word: between good and evil, but they are choices between values and courses of action that are all good, in one way or another, and yet not commensurable with each other.

Robbins' latest article ties this line of reasoning to a larger conversation about how cultural anthropology lost its way since it abandoned its epistemic emphasis on difference and its ethical propagation of relativism. As public intellectuals, anthropologists like Margaret Mead (1928) and Ruth Benedict (1934) had put questions of race, gender, sexuality, altered states of consciousness, and other forms of otherness on the agenda. Even though these questions continue to be at the center of public debate, anthropologists are no longer consulted. Instead we witness the publication of widely read trade press books about the good old days when Franz Boas' students shaped how Americans came to see the world (Breen 2024; King 2019). Robbins hopes to restore anthropology's relevance by reconstructing its original mission of studying human diversity, more specifically by making available alternative models of the good life that people should consider as they determine how to change their ways of life in a rapidly changing world. The cultural relativism advocated by Benedict and Mead reminds contemporary anthropologists of something crucial their discipline had to offer, which got lost as anthropologists adopted the role of sitting in judgment on forms of life which they consider dark, oppressive, or undesirable. The point of Benedict's relativism was to bracket such judgment, to abandon the belief in the superiority of one's own normative assumptions, and to consider that other forms of life are equally valid. But cultural relativism cannot be confined to the Zuni and the Samoans but would also have to tolerate the evils of neoliberalism, heteronormativity, and white supremacy. That is why it has fallen out of favor. Robbins offers a way out of the dilemma of cultural relativism by promoting the related position of value pluralism, which maintains the relativist's openness to the value of at least some alternative ways of living while setting limits on the ways of life that the pluralist acknowledges as culturally informed versions of the good (whether that would exclude the values of neoliberalism or of the many patriarchal cultures on the anthropological record remains to be debated). Such pluralism overcomes the field's prevalent darkness and ethnocentric narrowing to the anthropologists' own values while escaping the overly provocative and ethically indefensible consequences of cultural relativism—and this, Robbins hopes, will enable an anthropological renaissance.

The problem that all forms of pluralism face is that they need to choose a criterion to distinguish between what can count as a version of the good and what must be regarded as an evil (an immorality, a social pathology, a life poorly lived). Robbins chooses "human flourishing" as his criterion for "good versions of the good" but admits that he cannot define flourishing. Instead, he expects comparative anthropology to provide such a definition. In other words, more research is needed and, as long as this research has not been completed, we are back to relativism: the anthropologist needs to be open to *all* forms of life and the values that inform them until she has determined a set of criteria that would allow her to exclude some of these forms of life.

The question is how she will be able to make these determinations. Learning to understand “the native’s point of view” will hardly suffice because most proponents of bad versions of the good are convinced that their version is among the good ones, if it’s not the very best, and it is the anthropologist’s understanding of the good that is mistaken. After all, Robbins’ phrase “good versions of the good” already indicates the circularity and situatedness of the anthropologist’s own moral judgment of other people’s moralities. Maybe social research on how living according to a particular version of the good affects other people might provide more robust criteria. But these criteria will also be subject to contestation because people disagree over how much they owe to different kinds of others and how much any sacrifice they could make would affect their own sense of flourishing. Here, too, the pluralist anthropologist will have to enter the fray.

That said, I do not want to dismiss all ethnographic research on human flourishing. In my fieldwork in the anthropology of science and medicine, I have had many conversations with interlocutors about what keeps them from thriving. But often these are trade-offs that come with what could easily be considered good versions of the good: hierarchies at the workplace that reduce conflict and provide support while forcing people to operate in ways they find objectionable; the bureaucracy they have to put up with, which is inflexible but provides a modicum of predictability and fairness, or the specialization of research that makes scientists esteemed experts in their fields but curbs the free rein of their curiosity. That is to say, it is also good versions of the good that can be detrimental to human flourishing. It is no surprise that anthropologists have never been able to find any people who have fully realized the good life.

Clifford Geertz (1988: 23) once remarked that Ruth Benedict’s cultural relativism was no philosophical position but a style of writing. She wrote about other cultures to render her own provincial. She praised cannibalism as a more civilized alternative to the nationalist wars fought by her own people (Benedict 1959). Geertz placed her relativist anthropology of difference in the literary tradition of Montaigne’s *Essais*, Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, Voltaire’s *Candide*, and Horace Miner’s “Body Ritual among the Nacirema,” which present the extravagant alterity of other cultures to alienate us from our own and to make us more receptive to different forms of life. Aesthetically, Geertz (1988: 108, 112) disliked the deadly earnest and morally pleading tone in which Benedict wrote ethnography as cultural critique, presenting every people as a reproach: Why can’t we be like them? Robbins’ pluralist anthropology of difference might not amount to a philosophy, either, at least as long as it does not decide on an exclusion criterion to distinguish between beneficial and detrimental varieties of the good. For it to become a coherent theory it cannot do without this linchpin. But instead of examining it as theory, it could also be developed as a style of writing.

Rather than analyzing Robbins' prose the way Geertz analyzed Benedict's, I want to propose three features of pluralist anthropological writing. First, it needs to account for competing versions of the good, at least the ones considered good, in a symmetrical fashion. It cannot treat one with the contempt of the morally superior and the other with the admiration of the morally humbled. Max Weber's acerbic comparison of the mystic's "indolent enjoyment of the self" and the ascetic's "complacent self-righteousness" could serve as a model, which does not obfuscate that one man's good is another woman's evil (Weber 1946b: 326). Second, I would expect a mood that is brighter than that of dark anthropology. But a truly bright anthropology presupposes value monism, hoping for the resolution of all value conflicts as the highest value will prevail and subordinate the others (Marx's radiant vision of communism could serve as a case in point). By definition, a pluralist anthropology assumes the inevitability of tragic choices between competing values, so it either paints in many shades of gray or in chiaroscuro. Third, what sets pluralist anthropology apart from its relativist kin is that its tolerance is not infinite, there will be moments to write ethnography in a judgmental key, breaking with the principle of moral symmetry. In these moments, some sort of moralizing is inevitable—unless the pluralist anthropologist also considered epistemic, aesthetic, or economic values. If it was the job of ethics to warn against morality, as sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1991) put it, then he might also break the symmetry in favor of such nonmoral values (Langlitz 2020a). If the pluralist anthropologist indeed engaged in moralizing, chastising values at odds with human flourishing, he will face a stylistic challenge. These moments will be delicate because they must be reconciled with the openness that distinguishes pluralism from monism. How to marry polemics and pensiveness?

I do not hold my breath for comparative anthropology to find a definition of human flourishing that will provide a firm philosophical foundation for discriminating between good and bad versions of the good that won't say more about the anthropologist than about *anthropos*. But I hope that Robbins' plea for pluralism will help to lift anthropology out of the morass of its somber moralism and inspire less indignant and more curious forms of writing about value conflicts and human difference.

Emir Mahieddin

CéSor – CNRS-EHESS

Joel Robbins encourages us to take a step further back and to bracket our own moral and political preferences: even forms of life that we may find disagreeable or repulsive might contain 'good values', values that promote "human flourishing." 'Neoliberalism' (however unclear this buzzword has become

[Laidlaw 2016]) is a case in point: Robbins encourages us to consider the possibility that some people see the ‘good’ in this set of values—even though the same values might also be bad for the well-being of the same people. This implies the fundamental openness and existential questioning of anthropological research, and a call to fully acknowledge our interlocutors’ agency—rather than reducing them to mere victims. Robbins goes further and proposes a new “value pluralism.” He asks anthropologists to take a decision on what is ‘good’ for one social grouping at a particular moment in time. This, however, makes it difficult to understand social change and moral torment, concerns that were important in Robbins’ past work, and are surprisingly minimized in this article.

In my research on Pentecostalism in various linguistic communities in Sweden, both autochthonous (so called ‘ethnic Swedes’) and allochthonous (with backgrounds from Latin America or the Arab world), I came across many people who identified with Prosperity theology, a core example in Robbins’ essay for a moral program that may be deemed ‘good’ by its adherents and problematic for liberal anthropologists. I also met Pentecostals who attended Prosperity churches sporadically and were partially influenced by their theology, for example through listening to online preachers, and others who appeared highly critical of their doctrine, sometimes after having distanced themselves to join a mainstream Pentecostal denomination. In contrast to the South African Pentecostals studied by Naomi Haynes, in Sweden, many gave up on this kind of Pentecostalism when it failed to deliver on its promise of enrichment or when they realized that pastors were getting wealthier while their followers were getting poorer, sometimes left with a sense of guilt when failing to achieve success. It was not rare for my Pentecostal interlocutors to see Prosperity theology as a scam, an ‘unhealthy’ doctrine, even sometimes calling it a “theology of the Devil.” Thus, even according to Pentecostal ethical standards—if there is such a thing—Prosperity theology could be considered ‘bad’, or even ‘evil’.

Most of the time, people struggled to find their own moral position regarding Prosperity theology. A fairly typical story is that of Mireya, a sexagenarian Cuban immigrant who ended up stuck in Sweden at the margins of legality, and who joined a megachurch inspired by the Prosperity Gospel when she arrived in the country. Although the vocabulary used by congregants was slightly different, the ‘apostle’ of that church speaking of ‘excellence’ rather than ‘prosperity’, the style of worship and the emphasis on health and wealth left little doubt about their theological orientation. These rhetorical precautions were probably due to the fact that the Prosperity Gospel has been very controversial in public debates in Sweden (Coleman 2009), leading some Pentecostals to deny its existence, claiming it was made up by secular mainstream media to discredit Christianity. Mireya attended the congregation for several months, until one night, a guest preacher from Colombia ended his sermon with a demand from God that all those present in the assembly collect and give away their jewels of

gold. The idea sustained in Prosperity churches is that true believers cannot be reluctant to disclose their possessions, knowing that the Lord would give back even more as a reward for their trust in His power. Mireya complied with the request, although it made her feel extremely uncomfortable at the moment, as she later admitted. She had already been having doubts on the apostle's probity, fueled by the expensive seminars that were supposed to strengthen her spiritual path, and the preacher's vision on his birthday that God wanted the congregation to offer him a brand-new luxurious car. That night, after giving her jewels away, Mireya left the congregation with a bitter feeling of shame and never went back. She told me that this congregation was a fraud, and that its success was mainly based on the fact that the apostle offered to connect newly arrived illegal immigrants from Latin America with wealthy Swedish 'Latino' entrepreneurs who would offer them jobs, in exchange for tithe from both parties. I also met Swedish Pentecostals who went to Prosperity churches from time to time, attracted by their emphasis on the power of faith, or simply by their energetic worship music, while they rejected their teachings on money and health, and doubted that belief only would protect them against poverty and illness.

This did not prevent some Pentecostals who were highly critical of Prosperity theology, such as Jorge, a Uruguayan immigrant, pastor, and construction worker on his fifties, from conveying similar ideas on wealth and health, though in a less systematic version. After testifying he had been cured from cancer when he converted, Jorge told me that he had not been to the doctor for 18 years, trusting that God kept him healthy. It was very common for Pentecostals to assert that God blessed them through healing or upgrading their material condition, a decent job, an apartment, or money being among the most common requests of prayer. Thus, the boundaries of the Prosperity Gospel were somewhat difficult to grasp, which also explained that it could take time for some converts to 'realize' that they were under its influence, as this theology constitutes an intensification of common conceptions spread across the diversity of expressions of Pentecostal faith. Where did 'mainstream Pentecostalism' stop and where did the Prosperity Gospel start? The boundaries of Pentecostalism itself appeared very porous. Indeed, to add to that complexity, and not to mention the influences from the varied professional and political backgrounds of my interlocutors, I met educated Pentecostals who explicitly expressed profound affinities with Anglican or Greek-Orthodox theologies regarding sin and salvation, while others, notably those from the Arab world, continued to attend Syrian-Orthodox or Coptic-Orthodox churches after their conversion to Pentecostalism, which shaped their conceptions of ethics.

As should be clear from these examples, people's identification with the values of Prosperity theology, or Pentecostalism in general, is anything but simple. Their adherence to values appears to be flexible, unstable, punctual,

fragmentary, unsystematic, and dynamic over the course of their lives, in line with Simon Coleman's depiction of Pentecostalism as a "part-culture" and "partial culture," which permeates the lives of believers without fully conditioning them. This observation can be made with regard to many sets of values, be they categorized as "religious" or not (Coleman 2021). Indeed, on my fieldwork, it was also difficult to identify a clear-cut boundary between 'secular' or 'mundane' values and 'Christian values', a distinction that yet permeated my interlocutors' discourse. Some of them told me for example that although there were many proclaimed believers in their home countries and only a few in Sweden (where Evangelicals comprise no more than 3 percent of the population), the Swedish society was more 'Christian' in its 'core values' (stressing solidarity, equality, discipline, respect of the law) than any country in Latin America. This reminded of a quote attributed to the famous Egyptian Islamic scholar Muhammed 'Abduh, that I often heard from migrants with a Muslim background in Europe: "I went to the West, and saw Islam but no Muslim; I got back to the East, and saw Muslims, but no Islam."

The way Robbins outlines "value pluralism" entails the idea of the existence of relatively stable and discrete moral frameworks that can be thought of in isolation from one another. This idea is underpinned by the suggestion that "cultures" convey "selective sets of limited values," or to think of values as "things" that would exist out there. How do we navigate with diachronic variations and internal plurality of situated conceptions of the good coexisting in collective as much as in individual lives, considering that adherence to them may be merely temporary, fragmentary, distant, or critical? More importantly, what is to be made of this instability in assessing their contribution to "human flourishing," a notion both central and unsettling in Robbins' argument? The philosophically inspired program of "value pluralism" requires distancing oneself from any moral or ideological preconceptions through considering that values can be "good" insofar as they enable "human flourishing," whatever the social project in which they are mobilized. But it is difficult to understand the specific meaning of such an absolute notion in terms that would be suitable to a revisited relativist anthropology, as Robbins himself admits, leaving a certain opacity to his programmatic proposition. Inherited from Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology, the notion of "human flourishing" has prospered in psychology, and might convey deeply ethnocentric assessments, ending up being an arbitrary imposition of the observer. How can we integrate this notion in the conceptual apparatus of anthropology? This unknown x in the anthropological equation could be the mark of a genuine research program, but in the current arguments Robbins provides little guidance for this project: what is prosperity to some may be exploitation to others.

Should criteria of sustainability and stability be considered when assessing the worth of values with regard to human flourishing? Since they can end up

being rejected by the very people who embodied them within a fairly short amount of time, as is the case of the Pentecostals I have described, it is important to distinguish different degrees of adherence to a given conception of the 'good'. In regard to hierarchy, for example, the difference is crucial between obedience by desire, interest, constraint, and between the moments it is fully embraced, simply justified, or accepted with resignation, highlighting the possibility that a request can be obeyed with reluctance, moral discomfort, or shame, as was the case of Mireya. What does this tell us about the value of values?

Relativist or pluralist epistemological frameworks seem reductive in the face of a moral life that does not have a well-defined axiological center, presenting itself as an endless 'gray area', ultimately taking the form not so much of discrete, stable moral programs attached to identifiable social groups or territories, but rather as relational, partial, fragmentary flows, to which actors adhere unevenly or variably over the course of their lives. In the present time of advanced globalization, in which moral standpoints seem to change and shift rapidly everywhere, alongside increased international mobilities, events of unprecedented magnitude (global warming and pandemics rapidly changing the debates on local conceptions of responsibility) and technological innovations (digital algorithms disseminating different interpretations of the world at a hastening rhythm ignoring physical barriers, etc.), where are these "cultures" and "limited sets of values" located?

Beside the culturalist undertone in Robbins' epistemology, one can question both the narrative of the disappearance of relativism and broaden the analysis of the distance taken vis-à-vis this analytical perspective, beyond the rise of the discourse of Human Rights. Indeed, isn't it the unstable moral geographies of globalization that makes cultural relativism even more difficult to endorse? We have moved from a configuration in which an isomorphism between territories and moral programs could be postulated (subsumed in the notion of 'cultures'), to a world of both shared and fragmented territories across which the same moral programs can be disseminated. The ideological and moral lines and tensions that have always divided societies are more visible everywhere today, more diverse and intense than ever before. As a consequence, the expression of an impartial view on certain values and practices of distant 'others' that are also defended by nearby moral minorities, can easily be suspected of complicity with political projects deemed threatening to conceptions of 'progress' held by the social groups from which anthropologists generally come. This is particularly true of Prosperity theology: a transnational form that one can encounter in the confines of a South African township or a village in Papua New Guinea, as well as in a European capital, in congregations neighboring the Western anthropologist's university, where it may be deemed dangerous for the well-being of 'gullible' followers.

Anthropologists are probably no less relativist than they were in earlier days, but the social conditions for the exercise of cultural relativism, and critique in general, have changed, possibly making both provincialism and relativism out of date. In sum, they are relativists in different ways and on different issues, and it is also doubtful whether there was a golden age of relativism for which we should nurture any nostalgia. Rather than a desertion of cultural relativism in general, it could be argued that a spirit of “inconsistent relativism” has always reigned over anthropology (Terestchenko 2022). Pretending to promote a universal moral standard transcending local conceptions of ethics, relativism is flawed with intrinsic aporia and insoluble contradictions. As Robbins notes, this approach was never politically neutral, having emerged as a counterpoint to discourses postulating a hierarchy of cultures. It has not completely disappeared either, as it is still claimed as an axiom by some colleagues studying Islam, or ontologies, for instance, who use the ‘other’ as a locus of instantiation of their moral critique of modernity. The risk remains of making ‘the other’ a fetish, and the anthropologist a ventriloquist. Even though Robbins tries to carve a way out of such fetishizations of cultural otherness when encouraging an analytical sensitivity seeking the “good” in forms of life that we may find repugnant, it is not certain that this morally noble endeavor will free anthropology from the epistemological failings of relativism: namely the reification of cultures and values, and the idea that humans adopt and live in harmony with such values without questioning them.

Erica Weiss

Tel Aviv University

If anything, Joel Robbins understates his case. Anthropology has hampered itself in recent decades and needs to recover its interest in difference in order to offer something that actually utilizes our discipline’s epistemology, rather than regurgitating critical theory, as is typical of “dark anthropology.” Philosophers used to read anthropologists to be inspired, and now anthropologists have sadly managed to reverse the creative flow. Salvaging something from cultural relativism, provincializing¹ our own definitions of the good is critical if anthropologists are to make a credible contribution to the world, and in doing so, recover their relevance.

Robbins observes, then and now, that people who are represented by anthropology as victims of Western imperialism or neoliberal oppression often do not see themselves primarily in these terms, but rather as actively shaping their social realities and pursuing the good. There is an even broader point within this observation: people *in general* tend to understand themselves in positive terms and to understand their lives as part of a project of pursuing the good.

Anthropology is often critical of power and the bearers of power, appropriately so, but it is essential to recognize that these groups generally understand themselves and their contribution positively as part of a project of the “human flourishing” that Robbins invokes. Among Silicon Valley tech brokers, bankers, and cryptocurrency traders, “effective altruism” informs the way many make decisions explicitly oriented towards “maximizing good,” despite accounts that adherents have established a highly toxic and sexist culture (Alter 2023). The “good” can be a very dark place. But as an empirical discipline methodologically interested in the emic perspective, self-understanding matters even if we do not accept these moral claims at face value. In my own research, when I challenged my critical assumption that some people “want” peace and others “oppose” it, and started to realize that everyone actually wants peace and just have profoundly divergent visions of this good, it represented a major breakthrough in my understanding and my research, without requiring me to accept all the incommensurable claims being made.

Robbins also undersells the way the anthropology of the good provides an ethical orientation to the discipline beyond its role as social critic. He touches on the value of openness, but I think the case can be made more strongly. Dark anthropology moves forward from a place of moral certainty while an anthropology of the good asks the anthropologist to remain open to understanding things differently, to question certainty, and to hold out the prospect that they may be wrong. This reflects the value of humility, which is among anthropology’s greatest virtues. In my last years of high school in liberal/hippie upstate New York, I loved the ideas of the Johns Locke and Rawls and thought that if individual freedom is protected and society is blind to difference, justice is served. I took an anthropology course by accident and my mind was blown, a process that accelerated greatly when I began my own research. I changed not only my stance but also my own self-understanding. Who among us has not been changed in some way by their work?

The humility required of me by anthropology allowed me to recognize the flaws in my political ideology, to change, and to explain this transformation publicly in my writing. I take this to be what Robbins refers to as the critical potential of cultural difference. I understand this as a kind of professional ethics like that of a lawyer or doctor, but which here uses something akin to a teleological suspension of the ethical, that is a postponement of the normal rules in order to allow for a greater good. But this is not moral recusal by any means! Suspension of one’s ethics is not a rejection of them, but a temporary freezing of them to allow for a process of discernment. The greater good to be gained here is not only knowledge production (though that is a significant good in its own right), it is also the potential for moral edification that we can attain from being open to difference. Perhaps this diverges from the apparent moral recusal of cultural relativism, though I am not sure that this was ever

the intention. My understanding of relativism has always been a moral project against the ability of those with power to enforce their own ideas of the good throughout the world.

Seeing the anthropology of the good as an ethical approach in and of itself might also correct the confounding moral reductiveness we see in anthropology today. Dark anthropology has positioned the typical subject of anthropology as a victim. “Studying up,” studying those with power, has become recognized as an important compliment to this project. But this does not break the dark paradigm. Anthropologists are still expected to maintain a strong ethical position vis-à-vis their interlocutors, as either advocates or critics, either ‘for’ or ‘against’. We deal with pure victims (Fassin and Rechtman 2009) or repugnant others (Harding 1991). No doubt ‘for’ is still the dominant stance as we see in calls for collaborative anthropology and activism that rarely address any potentially negative moral implications of such engagements. As someone who often works with well-intentioned Israelis, that is people trying to do the right thing while being deeply complicit in a system of oppression larger than themselves, and while often maintaining significant moral blind spots, people often give me blank stares when hearing about my research. Though people sometimes find a more elegant way to phrase the question, I am frequently asked whether I consider my interlocutors “good” or “bad.” It is ironic that a discipline that so prides itself on nuance and context has managed to divide the world into “baddies” and “goodies,” the forces of oppression and those who resist them; as a discipline we should be able to address moral complexity beyond a binary model.

This brings me to Robbins’ suggestions for how to address the critical function of an anthropology concerned with difference. Must an anthropology of the good presume that everything people claim is good, is in fact good? I never thought it did, but in my experience teaching his original 2013 article, “Beyond the Suffering Subject,” few concepts have been more misunderstood than the “anthropology of the good.” Most often, students understand it as a kind of personal Rorschach test to see if they are more ‘optimistic’ or ‘pessimistic’. Frankly, Robbins has only himself to blame for choosing one of the most common words in the English language, and a highly polysemous one to boot. As ‘good’’s main slippage in English is between its descriptive and normative meanings, the use of the term adds to the ambiguity regarding how the approach should function critically. But here Robbins addresses this ambivalence with the concept of value pluralism.

Value pluralism, he suggests, would recognize that people have different ideas of the good and pursue different paths to achieve it, without relinquishing all critical capacity. But reading this account, I have some doubts. First of all, I think it may be telling, and concerning, that the examples Robbins gives as potentially conflicting values are mostly universal and unobjectionable ones, for example beauty. What about particularistic values? What about the

glorification of God, or even more challengingly, the solidarity of the Jewish people (or any other ethnic group)? Referencing universal values makes the exercise of value pluralism feel like playing with the color/light balance on a digital picture, filters give different feels, but ultimately we are limited to a small and stable set of common parameters. Is value pluralism for anthropology restricted to those extremely broad values that can be counted as universal? Is that what is meant by “fundamental values”? If so, what is to be done in value pluralism with particularistic values, which are often placed well above universal values in many versions of the good?

The other area of concern I have is Robbins’ claim that “only versions of the good that support human flourishing count as what we might as well call ‘good versions of the good’ and it is legitimate to criticize versions of the good that do not support such flourishing.” An ungenerous reading of this condition would lead to the conclusion that little has changed, that the critical gaze of dark anthropology has just been displaced by one small degree of separation from direct moral judgment and brings us right back to ethical universalism. After all, determining whether or not a version of the good supports or hinders human flourishing from my own perspective is hardly different than applying my own critical judgment to another way of life, and hardly recovers any of the openness or humility of cultural relativism. From this ungenerous reading, the anthropologist could not avoid making accusations of false consciousness against those who hold ‘bad’ versions of the good.

But I believe there is a more generous reading that might avoid some of these problems. Robbins admits that “a lot hangs here on how one defines human flourishing,” and my suggestion is that anthropology’s role should be to present ‘critique’ from the perspective of those directly affected by a specific version of the good (which only occasionally includes the anthropologist). Robbins uses the example of Ilana van Wyk’s work on the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in South Africa, a hard-sell prosperity gospel church. He claims that the social forms through which they seek to realize their values require critique, but doesn’t explain his process to come to this conclusion. I suggest that if there was consensus and satisfaction within this community on their methods, then such critique from the anthropologist’s perspective alone would be difficult to justify. But the church’s practices are already deeply embattled locally. Van Wyk’s book explains the stormy critiques from both the enraged family members (whom Robbins mentions) and also local press and pundits whose criticisms of the church are sometimes articulated in problematic ‘civilizing’ discourse and embedded in colonial history. Thus, the hypothetical anthropologist is not rendering judgment in a vacuum, but entering an already existing local debate regarding whether church practices support or hinder human flourishing. This means that the anthropologist’s judgment will not stand alone but rather meet (suppress/amplify) other ‘sides’ of the controversy in ways that have ethical and political implications which may not

be entirely predictable. What is the positionality of the anthropologist inter-loper ruling on the matter of human flourishing? Do they enter the controversy by joining a side? Or worse, do we imagine them to be the impartial referee reaching an authoritative judgment? To my mind the objective of anthropology should not be to define human flourishing, but rather attentiveness; listening to the objections and claims of those who are harmed by a specific version of the good. This would be critique from an anthropological point of view, that is attuned to different visions of the good, as well as to the ways people fail each other in the pursuit of human flourishing.

Even after the difficult task of defining human flourishing within the complex webs of relationships and local struggles, the next question posed by Robbins (whether a version of the good “does or does not” support human flourishing) throws us back into the realm of binary distinctions that has so hampered dark anthropology. Making this an either-or choice precludes looking at the ways values are implemented in action in ways that have multiple effects, unfolding over time. Abdellah Hammoudi refers to the idea of “practical articulation,” describing the concrete way people act in context and in motion, highlighting the creativity, indeterminacy, ambivalence, and improvisation of actual life (2009: 51). Following this, we can recognize that the actual implementation of values is rarely reducible to yes or no on the topic of human flourishing, something I have frequently seen in my own work. For example, at a meeting of ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jews and Palestinian members of the Islamic Movement, I witnessed agreement to extend mutual tolerance on the basis of both groups’ monotheism. This act of tolerance for monotheists is simultaneously one of intolerance for those who are not, potentially including Christians (because of the Trinity, in case you’re wondering) who are a minority in the region. Does this suggest a shared version of human flourishing? (No.) How many situations will similarly fail to fall into a binary of supporting human flourishing or not? (Many.)

The idea that we can distill baseline values and then decide conclusively whether they support human flourishing betrays anthropology’s appreciation of the social complexity of ordinary ethics and social action. It also offers a false promise of moral clarity based on moral heuristics that undermine the anthropological value of humility. To be clear, I believe that we need the anthropology of the good today more than ever. But I am highly skeptical regarding the way value pluralism seems to bring the anthropological project back to a position of bird’s-eye judgment that characterizes normative philosophy and dark anthropology alike, as opposed to going deeper into the anthropological point of view in order to reach its critical potential.

Notes

1. Provincialize as developed by Dipesh Chakrabarty, 2000.

Comment on Robbins*Corinna Howland—Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington*

It is a real treat to witness the long-anticipated next installment in the ‘light’ and ‘dark’ debate! What has been particularly stimulating about this exchange is how each author engages the parallel work of description and evaluation—taking the pulse of the discipline as it is, while making a clear case for what it ought to be. Robbins’ latest rejoinder is no exception. Here, he explores some tensions between his anthropology of the good and Ortner’s so-called ‘dark’ anthropology of neoliberalism, colonialism, and capitalism. This not only strengthens and extends his own position, but also seriously engages dark anthropology’s difficult relationship with a strong version of moral relativism. Consequently, he makes a case for a disciplinary stance of ‘value pluralism’. This is a relativism-lite approach borrowed from moral philosophy which recognizes difference *and* allows for the possibility of critical reckoning of the “dark aspects of contemporary worlds and the ways people live within them.” Robbins’ piece merges the two seemingly incommensurate programs of cultural relativism and critical analysis, making a compelling argument for the ongoing relevance of attention to moral diversity for a critical and progressive discipline. I agree with Robbins on the continued importance of articulating non-Western visions of the good life for a critical anthropology and I am buoyed by his hope for renewed disciplinary relevance. I especially appreciate his intellectually generous treatment of aspects of Ortner’s program. I am also somewhat troubled by the vision that this presents of the discipline as it is and ought to be: specifically, an intellectually narrower and ethnographically simpler approach that nevertheless serves laudable, urgent, and necessary moral-political ends. To be clear, the contemporary (re)politicization of anthropology is a project that I support, even as it raises ongoing questions which are less readily resolvable than they appear here or in Ortner’s version of a moral anthropology.

While Robbins details some key differences between dark and light anthropology, his main intellectual move is to identify underlying, shared ‘positive’ values and goals, namely to end suffering and figure out forms of human flourishing (see also Howland and Powell Davies 2022). Most would be hard pressed to see this as anything other than an unqualified ‘good’, but this universalizing claim should invite further inquiry. Good for whom? Or, taking up Robbins’ own premise, what kind of “tragic” choice is entailed in this particular vision of ethical practice? Endorsing progressivism as a shared ‘good’ has the corollary effect of contracting our intellectual scope, from the broadest possible remit of ‘what does it mean to be human?’ to a more circumscribed emphasis on moralism and critique (what’s good, what’s right, and what’s just in cross-cultural ‘light’ perspective, or in ‘dark’ mode, how might we call out and prevent

what's bad?). It is clear from Robbins' wistful treatment of the place of relativism in anthropological history that his concession here is a largely pragmatic one. Yet in backing away from a stance of refusal, he may have inadvertently agreed to throw a central intellectual lodestar out with the moral bathwater. As Robbins has noted, moral and intellectual ends are not so easily disentangled, especially in a climate that equates relativism with "political quietism." And while I respect his efforts to smuggle a version of hermeneutic openness back into the discipline through a culturalist anthropology of the good, this is perhaps too partial an engagement with a much richer intellectual tradition that encompasses a wide-ranging set of questions about humanity alongside a multiplicity of moral stances (see also Knauff 2019). If we are to vigorously pursue the path of righteousness, let's continue to be explicit about what other 'goods' we are setting aside.

Adopting an overt disciplinary stance of value pluralism could also subtly shift attention away from ethnographic complexity (another possible 'good' of cultural relativism), in favor of abstracting goods to be evaluated and critiqued from multifaceted human value systems, and even more complicated human lives. Robbins observes that "every culture can teach us about some 'fundamental values' that can contribute to human flourishing, and not about others." This ethos is readily apparent in his case studies, which primarily canvas sites where value-talk is common and explicit—specifically, institutionalized religion, moral philosophy, and to a lesser degree, hierarchical relations. But what of the 'darker' side of social life, specifically immorality and the problem of evil? I have written elsewhere, with Tom Powell Davies and others (2022), about how a tacit emphasis on the positive aspects of people's ethical lives has sidelined ethnographic consideration of the negative, bad, troubling, problematic, and detrimental aspects of social action and interaction. Yet these are all-too-common concerns in the moral worlds of our interlocutors, which are in turn more fragmented, morally questioning, and morally questionable than anthropologists have tended to acknowledge (see also Yan 2014; Csordas 2013). Dwelling in the complicated engagements of our interlocutors with the 'negative' side of ethics, my colleagues and I have attempted to directly address some of this fragmentation and moral dis-ease, which has led to unexpected insights: for example, highlighting the centrality of immorality for social action, and demonstrating how an a-moral stance is preferable in some cases (both for epistemic and for ethical reasons). We have further illustrated that the good is not always a clear-cut or realizable possibility, and its pursuit can be deeply unsettling, with unintended consequences (see for example Powell Davies 2022; Angé 2022; Yan 2014). The discipline is arguably at its best when it is challenged by these sorts of unpredictable ethnographic realizations. I worry that adopting value pluralism as a flagship moral stance would discourage anthropologists from seeking out and emphasizing those facets of social and

cultural life that don't fit with either a critique of social injustice and/or a specific program of progressive moral change.

To be fair to Robbins and to Ortner, no approach should be expected to capture everything. However, their debate, and Robbins' current efforts in bringing these two strands of thought together within one framework of value pluralism, represent a programmatic vision for anthropology's future, even as they speak to emergent tendencies rather than grand theories (Knauft 2019). This invites critical attention to what has been inadvertently overlooked. What is absent—yet also arguably part of both disciplinary and ethnographic *zeitgeists*—is a more cynical, uncertain, several-shades-darker-than-Ortner mood: the product of fragmented, violent, and increasingly unlivable worlds plagued by climate change, genocide, state repression, and carcerality (see, e.g., Carey 2017; Archambault 2017; Olsen and Csordas 2019 among others). Given this context, can an anthropology that focuses on the good, whether in its light or 'dark' iterations, fully express what it means to be human? And is an articulation of the good life all we can or should offer up in these particularly bleak times? Some of the most radical political projects within the discipline (e.g. refusal, abolition, burning—see for example Shange 2019; Jobson 2019) instead fully embrace rage and despair. While abandoning overtly positive possibilities and liberal ethics, these authors have maintained the kind of descriptive witnessing that a more 'traditional' program of cultural relativism has historically provided, deploying this as a politics of solidarity in darkness.

Yet in Robbins' emerging program of critical relativism, the description of human lives is no longer understood as an end in itself. Rather it is put in service of a specific mode of evaluation and critique: identifying alternative ways of being that we might take up, argue against, and ultimately have to decide amongst. In less experienced hands than Robbins', this may amount to a chocolate box selection of possible human goods. I am not alone in finding this image discomfiting. One can detect a hint of wariness in the way he approaches dark anthropology's "thickly evaluative" impulse earlier in the article. However, by the conclusion he has set this aside, instead arguing that value pluralism allows us to make critical assessments of the way that people choose to realize particular values, and of the impact their values have on the well-being and flourishing of others. We should instead continue to lean into this disquiet and ask some further questions about the stance of moral certitude and relationship to our interlocutors that would allow us to make these kinds of assessments of them. Indeed, the older stance of moral recusal may well appear politically impotent in the face of urgent suffering, but it did not require us to make a final call on the correct path/s to the good life. Anthropologists have not always had a straightforward relationship with projects of moral and social reform, so while Margaret Mead's enviable position as the doyenne of the sexual revolution may be an attractive prospect (King 2019),

we should equally keep our failures top of mind. I am reminded of the Vicos experiment in Peru in 1952–65, where anthropologists embarked on an ambitious modernization program to end *hacienda* farming, only to find that some of their efforts had the unforeseen consequence of entrenching gender inequalities and further marginalizing poorer smallholders (Lynch 1982). There is some virtue in not being too quick, either to judgment or to action.

Robbins' work ultimately represents an important corrective to a project that has lost the thread of difference in its efforts to critique. Yet I can't help but wonder if in trying to square the circle between a universalizing dark anthropology and a culturalist anthropology of the good, he has shifted away from some of the more useful elements of a relativistic approach (the animating question, what does it mean to be human?, and attention to ethnographic complexity) and resurrected some of its less desirable ones (moral certitude) in the process. Both his and Ortner's programs have a settled analytic frame, whereas I would have liked to see a more robust engagement with the contingencies of ethnographic enterprise and the incommensurabilities of relativism and critique, description and evaluation, light and dark. These to me feel like live, potentially unsettleable issues about the relationship between intellectual, moral, and political aims and ends. They also feel closer to the pulse of an increasingly fragmented and morally complicated world than either a light or dark culturally relative anthropology of the good alone could capture. Taking heed of recent ethnographic forays into immorality and 'the bad', we would do well to dwell further in complexity and contradiction, even and especially as we take up an explicitly political stance. Nevertheless, I admire Robbins' optimism and openness to other visions of a valuable anthropology, and I look forward to learning more from a critical, comparative, and self-reflexive anthropology of the good.

Bruce Knauft

Emory University

Robbins' article on value pluralism in relation to an Anthropology of the Good raises to new heights important issues he and Sherry Ortner previously developed. In the process, his presentation also exposes the risks of an assumedly neutral objectivism—the tacit assumption that “the good” is “out there” in the worlds of other people independent of the ethnographer's own sense of what is good or bad.

If both Robbins (2013) and Ortner (2016) attempt to counterbalance Dark Anthropology through an Anthropology of the Good, the dominant trend in anthropology for the past 10 years and more seems decidedly in the other direction: the tidal force of Dark Anthropology seems stronger than ever. As

discussed elsewhere (Knauff 2019), this is reinforced as well as reflected in national and global developments that seem reactionary if not deplorable from the progressive liberal perspective dominant in Western anthropology, such as: the deepening attraction of political autocracy across large parts of the world, including in the US; the increase of international and internal war; the spiraling further increase of national and global inequality; and the national and global resurgence of racism, sexism, and xenophobia. In this context, a re-energized emphasis on an Anthropology of the Good would seem all the more important and called for. And I think it is and should be. But it's important that this initiative reflect newer developments in our field, as described below, and not risk uncritically reinscribing received assumptions about objective judgment in relation to cultural relativism.

Pretty much throughout, Robbins tends to assume an ethnographically value-neutral perspective in which “we” as anthropologists can objectively unearth, document, and describe “their” values, especially their values of goodness. Of course, the relation between “their” attributions and “ours” raises thorny issues. But to my mind, these seem deepened rather than resolved by parsing the issue into further presumably objective categories, including the “‘good’ good” versus the implicitly “‘bad’ good.” From Weber to Geertz to Dumont and onward, the value neutralism that underlies stronger versions of cultural relativism tends to assume an independent and valid objectivism by the professional observer or analyst rather than the deep imbrication of value-articulation in the ethnographic process itself. In this context, conceptually connecting an assumed objectivity of others’ values to “the good” and then on to “human flourishing” risks introducing our own unexamined and objectively unadmitted values.

Ethnography in recent years is becoming not just more participatory, activist, or “engaged”; it is increasingly co-constructed through organically connective relations that transform the generation and voicing of what used to be called “ethnographic data.” The value-interaction of the ethnographer with his or her or their interlocutors (aka “informants” or “research subjects”) is increasingly a collaborative process of reciprocal engagement and reflection. This is represented in newer ethnographies not just as a brief preamble about that author’s subject position before launching into the work’s “real findings”: it is increasingly the zeitgeist of the work as a whole.

In this sense, what Robbins describes as the radical narrowing of cultural relativity in favor of a value-undernuanced Dark Anthropology is at once true and in part beside the deeper point. When its assertions and practical challenges get up close and personal in ethnographic experience, and when these are openly presented in ethnographic writing, I think most anthropologists are quite on board with the nuances of relativism. It is rather the more objectivist assertion of relativism—the assumption that cultural differences are objectively

“out there” irrespective of our position and perspective with respect to them—that is more deeply questioned or rejected.

What we have increasingly in cultural anthropology are intersecting value pluralities in ethnographic and ultimately in authorial negotiation. From this perspective, a Geertzian comparative anthropology of the good—even as buttressed by more theoretical heavy lifting—is both laudable in principle and insufficient in ethnographic practice. I agree wholeheartedly with Robbins that “we need a comparative anthropology of the good that is open to versions of the good unrecognized in our own traditions.” But in terms of method, to do this primarily through the conceptual lens of Western analytic categories, philosophical arguments, and theoretical forays risks obscuring the underlying value judgments of any lone wolf author vis-à-vis the more diverse experiences and wider audiences that Robbins calls for.

For instance, the assertion that human rights discourse dates most effectively to the 1970s rather than earlier leads to analytic and theoretical assertions that, however revealing (and contestable), move as much away from as towards the concrete ethnographic process by which human rights, on the one hand, or the perception of cultural difference, on the other, are found and negotiated.

Take for instance an imagined ethnographic engagement with Hamas in Gaza prior to and then in the wake of, October 7, 2023. One might find “the good” here as Hamas’ assertion of Islamic agency and value against the harm visited by Israel in dispossessing Palestinians of their ancestral lands since the 1940s; the squeezing of the displaced population into a highly packed and destitute refugee area for 75 years; the Israeli restriction, blockading, and then full curtailing of Gazan economic viability and employment possibilities; and, since October 7, the killing more than one and a half percent, 40,000 of 2,300,000 people, by the Israeli state. (As a rate of homicide, this rate, it may be noted, is significantly higher than the higher estimates of the rate of killing among Europeans during World War Two, including the Holocaust.) Even if viewed as a forced collective suicide of Gazans by Hamas leadership, that leadership might view their own actions as the deeply good pursuit of good fundamental Islamic values in the face of overwhelming oppression—much as kamikaze pilots or first-wave Marine assaults confront likely or even certain death as life-sacrifice for a larger good.

From a Zionist point of view, of course, the values and assertion of goodness have very different registers, justifications, and consequences, including the value of resisting the indiscriminate slaughter of its people, the perceived divine right of Jews themselves to the land from the Jordan River to the Sea, the barbaric brutality and scale of the October 7, 2023 killing of Jews, including relative to the size of the Israeli population, and the perniciousness of an enemy leadership that uses the civic populace as sacrificial human shields for its own power and authority. In this context, completely eradicating Hamas is

the pursuit of larger good, including, at least in principle, the peace of people living within the borders of the Israeli state.

Whether such alternative visions of “the good” promote “human flourishing” can be asserted and contested in various ways, including the greater ethical priority of a religion, a state, or a people against which the flourishing or survival of individual persons is less important. Though Robbins raises the issue of how “cultures can latch on to bad versions of the good,” his conceptual parsing of this issue seems to deepen rather than lessen the question of how such conceptual assessments should be made in actual cases, much less what kinds of evidence, options, or objections by people themselves should be represented and taken into account. Such engagement would deeply facilitate Robbins’ call “to expand . . . important critical conversations that need to take place in and well beyond anthropology about what can count as good lives.” As the stakes of this are raised, the value assumptions or projections of the ethnographer become increasingly material and important. In the absence of considering these, the brightening of anthropology through an Anthropology of the Good raises the colonialist specter of Whitening a Dark Anthropology while “objectively” projecting onto others its own Western values—including what “the good” and “human flourishing” are taken to be.

I don’t want to overstate this. To do so would merely encourage a yet Darker Anthropology or, even worse, disavow anthropology altogether, just “let it burn.” My point, rather, is that an Anthropology of the Good should be able to pursue value pluralism in an increasingly experiential way. This entails working through the complexities and conundrums of our own values vis-à-vis the people we study. It can also entail considering the competing values that various segments of our erstwhile “study populations” exhibit and embrace, including women versus men, those with less rather than more privilege, those from different ethnic or racial or religious vantage points, and so on.

These issues are sharpened by considering the necessary figure-ground relationship between the “Good” and the “Bad.” This includes “our” attributions of goodness and badness as well as “theirs”—and, perhaps most importantly, the synergy or disjunction between our attributions and theirs. As the case of Hamas and Israel illustrates, practically engaging the question of good versus bad can more effectively force us to consider our own values and attributions vis-à-vis those we find in or attribute to others. Without such considerations, we risk a murky blurring in which our “brightened” or “whitened” values are projected as the lens through which their own should be viewed, while “badness” (at least in anthropology) tends to be a tabooed attribution when it comes to favored subjects of study while being reserved (per Ortner) for agents or authorities of neoliberalism or some other regime of oppression and disempowerment, however this is defined or attributed. As this illustrates, Brightness and Darkness in anthropology can both carry straightjackets of prior Western

assumption. But we can begin to address, negotiate, and employ these as a proactive “teaching process”—both to ourselves and our students—if we more explicitly and openly consider how our values have intersected with those of others in the process of ethnographic engagement.

This leads me to Robbins’ lament at the end of his article that anthropologists are given little purchase as public intellectuals; that we need to “find a way to respond to the world . . . by helping . . . audiences understand in ‘thick’ ways models of the good life that are different from those they already know.” A more reflexive and experiential engagement with value pluralism could do just this—connect us with wider audiences by not just objectively describing but subjectively conveying how we discern and engage plural values, including as held by or revealed to the ethnographer him/her/themself in the field. As fieldwork exposes us to ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are really different from what we’ve known or expected, our own spontaneous value judgments and feelings tend to emerge more strongly—what around us seems really wrong, especially good, and so on. The figure-ground relation between the heightened awareness of our own values and those of the people we study can draw our listeners and readers into the rich experience of ethnographic engagement. This experienced human side of value pluralism is also what makes ethnographic accounts more interesting and engaging for a wider audience, something that the thick conceptualization of academic writing often fails to do. In practical terms, trade press books as well as those used increasingly in basic anthropology courses privilege if not demand experiential connections that draw readers inside ethnographic experience.

In practical terms as well as ones of method and concept, then, plural values engaged and expressed vis-à-vis one another as an experiential process—including in relation to the openly discussed values and projections of the ethnographer him/her/themself—can greatly facilitate and strengthen an Anthropology of the Good. This can also deepen and make more reflexive our appreciation of relativism without asserting or assuming a categorical valence of “goodness” that courts either moral recusal, on the one hand, or assumptions of neutral objectivism, on the other.

Cheryl Mattingly

University of Southern California

A few years ago, there was a call to “burn anthropology down” circulating among anthropologists in the United States. This proposal was heatedly discussed and debated. (Depressingly, it is not clear that many people outside the discipline would have mourned anthropology’s disappearance, should it have self-immolated.) Robbins offers a counter-proposal. He brings a fresh look to

some of anthropology's classic aims in revitalizing ways. More precisely, he tries to save a certain version of the discipline that he finds valuable but increasingly difficult to justify in the contemporary anthropological—and broader academic—climate. This is anthropology's longstanding comparative attention to cultural difference.

While Robbins might seem to be returning to an earlier era, I believe he is pointing in an exciting forward-leaning direction that has interdisciplinary implications. After all, other academic disciplines have been pressed to rethink their canons to be more inclusive of non-European and non-Western contributions that have long been overlooked. Even philosophy, which has arguably been particularly resistant, shows signs of change. Recent scholarship in world philosophy that is explicitly comparative—including a comparative ethics—seems to be gaining momentum (e.g. Ishihara and Tainer 2023; McCarthy 2010). Anthropology is an obvious conversational partner for this comparative exploration.

"Anthropology Bright and Dark" builds upon an earlier and highly influential publication, "Beyond the Suffering Subject" (2013), in which Robbins began to sketch what an "anthropology of the good" might look like. The 2013 piece articulated a vision for anthropology that has inspired new conversations and debates within the discipline. "Anthropology Bright and Dark" continues to elaborate the stakes of an anthropology of the good. He puts it in conversation with Sherry Ortner's work, particularly a 2016 publication in which she depicts anthropology's critical focus on the global spread of neoliberal power as "dark anthropology." He largely agrees with Ortner that this vein of analysis has prevailed in the discipline for many decades, even if that is less true than it once was. The longstanding theoretical dominance of "dark anthropology" has had an unfortunate consequence: "anthropologists are not nearly as interested as they once were in the study of cultural differences in the way human beings live and experience the world."

Robbins makes a substantial contribution to his earlier work as he articulates his own vision of a comparative approach to the good: "value pluralism." There are many things to commend in Robbins' focus on the ethical as a key site of difference across cultural landscapes as well as his concern about the way diverse communities can become homogenized through a "suffering subject" globalizing lens.

First, in arguing that attention to cultural difference enlarges the conversation about ethics by bringing diverse perspectives into view, Robbins is making more than an empirical claim. His assertion relies on an a priori assumption that all people, in all social communities, have values and versions of their life that they prefer and that these are important. All groups have some "high-level values" or "deep" values that are not merely strategic (in

the manner of means to ends) but are ends in themselves. These “good life” values and aspirations do not just exist in people’s heads; they are materialized in various ways, including quotidian ones. “Good life” orientations are substantive, particular, and, to quite a great extent, empirically available for inspection. Because this is a universal feature of the human condition, it is an excellent candidate for comparative analysis. But, on my reading, it is a relatively content-free universal that does not imply any particular vision of the good life. To the contrary, it is the kind of universal claim that demands cultural particularizing to flesh out, a cultural specificity that anthropologists are well situated to provide. Robbins’ pluralist approach is especially helpful in resisting a simplified reductionism in which people are presumed to be abject or suffering if their material circumstances are impoverished by Global North middle-class standards. I would add, speaking from my own ethnographic research, that such attention is even more important when studying people in truly bleak circumstances, people who *are* suffering from the structural conditions they face. In this situation, it is all too easy to overlook the ways they are also cultivating visions of the good life, have aspirational projects and hopes which they try to realize in various ways.

A second valuable contribution is Robbins’ argument that without a robust comparative anthropology, a vital resource for critique is lost. We can fail to recognize that we live in a pluralist aspirational world in which multiple visions and versions of the good exist, including some that we (the anthropologists) may not have imagined or may not have recognized as being candidates for a flourishing life. Comparative studies provide a necessary basis for critical reflection on my own values. Investigating other people’s (people-not-like-me) visions of a good life—including visions that do not accord with my own—is a crucial resource in discovering the limitations of my ideals and beliefs about human flourishing. While this is not a new argument in anthropology, Robbins voices it with a certain urgency because he worries that we are losing a crucial vantage point on our own ethical presumptions.

This especially matters for anthropological scholarship that focuses upon and critiques forms of oppression. An unfortunate byproduct of the very success of the anthropology of suffering has been that it comes to carry an “of courseness” with it, becoming invisible as a conceptual framework—as just one perspective on the world (Robbins 2013). But obviously, as Robbins points out, any social critique anthropologists bring to bear is always based upon some implicit notion of what a good or better or more just life would look like. If this remains implicit for the scholar, then it leads to a parochialism in which “my” good life is projected onto everyone else. Rather than leaving the topic of social suffering behind, Robbins’ proposal can bring nuance to critical social theories of marginalization and oppression.

For example, Robbins contests Ortner's emphasis on political resistance as the most important expression of the good. In highly oppressed communities, it is certainly true that life can appear overdetermined by structural forces. It may seem that the only possible agentive move, the only value worth valuing, is overt resistance. While not discounting the importance of this, any equation of flourishing with recognizable forms of protest offers a far too constricted picture of ethical life. To remedy this, Robbins turns to a Geertzian vision of thick description of cultural forms and practices: "Ethnographers will almost certainly have to flesh out their understandings of people's visions of the good by looking not only at movements of resistance, but also at the institutions, rituals, mythologies, valued daily practices and so on of those they study." In other words, by looking carefully at just those cultural affordances which have traditionally been a central focus of anthropological study.

I agree with much of what Robbins argues. However, my own approach to the study of difference comes primarily from a critical phenomenological direction that introduces notions of difference (or otherness) that do not easily equate with Robbins' concept of cultural difference. I will try to briefly sketch what is at stake in this contrast. As is well known, all philosophical phenomenology relies upon close description to investigate structures of experience and consciousness as these emerge in intersubjective relations with others and with the world. Phenomenologists presume that close attention to experience will surprise and perplex us; it will disorient our taken-for-granted presumptions about the world (what Husserl [1936] (1970) calls our "natural attitude"). In this sense, experience itself contains the seeds of its own criticality, at least when carefully reflected upon.

In philosophy and anthropology, what is now called "critical phenomenology" is one outgrowth of this original project of disorienting common sense. Most significantly, rather than focusing primarily on transcendental (i.e. universal) features of experience as in classic phenomenology, critical phenomenology foregrounds what Lisa Guenther (2021) calls "quasi-transcendentals." These are historical realities which come to take on the quality of naturalness, functioning as transcendentals (i.e. biological or existential universals) within particular social formations and life worlds. Close investigation of experience can expose the quasi-transcendental status of structurally oppressive categories of social difference (like race and gender tend to be). It can de-naturalize them, which is important for critiques of structural injustice. The notion of identity difference is deployed by critical phenomenologists to consider how "social othering" justifies practices of oppression and violence against minority communities (Weiss et al. 2020).

But phenomenology also attends to an otherness that speaks to an irreducible singularity, something that cannot be captured by the notion of one's social

identity or membership in a collective community: alterity (Waldenfels 2011). This form of difference speaks to the limits of all social categories, the way that experience can exceed or elude any concept or category that tries to name it. If there is one thing that phenomenology is primed to illuminate, it is the uncertainties and uncanniness of lived experience. It reveals how close attention to experience has the potential to throw our own categories of knowing, our own conceptual certainties, into question. It foregrounds the perplexity that can attend a particular situation in a sticky way, eluding any ready explanation or summing up. Such a particular presents a “difficulty of reality,” as Cora Diamond (2003) puts it, that remains, in some sense, irresolvable, concept-resistant. Rather than seeing this as an interpretive failure, phenomenologists argue that encounters with the limits of our concepts are the very situation that a radical criticality demands. This includes social identity concepts.

Otherness, in this sense, challenges the reductionism of social typification and disorients presumptions about stable categories of social personhood. Otherness as singularity is a cornerstone of a critical phenomenological ethics inspired by Levinas where it provides a relational contrast to the violence of social othering (Guenther 2013; Mattingly 2022). Although the theoretical concept of “the other” in critical phenomenology does not look the same as in Robbins’ notion of cultural difference, I do not see this as a problem. On the contrary, it opens the possibility of generative conversation. I’ll briefly suggest what this dialogue might offer.

Phenomenology’s articulation of alterity could help address one limitation of Robbins’ scheme. His version of cultural difference can encourage overly typifying accounts of communities and rigid cultural boundary markers. He might seem to be resuscitating the classic anthropological penchant for speaking with a certain confidence and certainty about the “we” sensibilities and practices of entire social groups. I believe a more nuanced and capacious version of social difference that also speaks to the singularities and alterities of experience would strengthen the version Robbins has offered (Leistle 2017; Zigon and Throop 2021). There is a growing literature that demonstrates the generativity of a phenomenological approach to studies of the good life. A recent collection on aging and the “good old life,” for example, brings Robbins’ comparative pluralism into conversation with phenomenological anthropology (Mattingly and Grøn 2022).

But Robbins’ framework also has something to offer critical phenomenology. Much of the scholarship in critical phenomenology in both anthropology and philosophy has focused on the negative features of social difference. Social difference categories generally designate the workings of oppressive quasi-transcendentals that further structural injustice in the name of what is only natural. But Robbins highlights the beneficial gifts of social (or cultural)

difference. Cultural life worlds generate different quasi-transcendentals and a comparative, pluralist ethics allows us to explore the values they variously promote in a way that can prompt critical reflection and the de-naturalizing of any one scheme.

I conclude with an illustration. Edouard Glissant (1997) thinks about the Black Caribbean experience with concepts (and values) like opacity, errantry, fugitivity, creolization. He insists on modes of thinking (especially a poetics of thinking) that have been discredited in Euro-American theorizing. I have considered Glissant's framework in conversation with a critical phenomenology of alterity and singularity (2022). But one might explore Glissant's poetics from the angle Robbins has offered. If it is the case that some societies articulate and amplify values that are not present or diminished in other societies—as Robbins suggests—this might help us explore why these concepts and frameworks have arisen in Black scholarship of the Americas.

A pluralist, creolizing vision of community reflects strong values that are accentuated in New World Black communities for clear historical reasons. It makes sense that opacity, as a rejection of typifying social certainty, would be highly valued because of centuries of racialized violence, one where cultural life was born out of cultural and physical devastation, what Glissant calls an "abyss." From this unpromising place, new cultural forms were created that intermixed languages and traditions. If this cultural creativity has often gone unnoticed or been able to thrive only in spaces hidden from a dominant colonial and postcolonial gaze, it also makes sense that creolization, errantry, and fugitivity would be prized as expressions of ethical and cultural flourishing. If dominant Euro-American models of concept formation in the Academy diminish Black experience and thought, this helps explain why so much Black scholarship explores and valorizes poetic and imagistic modes of thought and expression (Moten 2018).

Glissant challenges European universalisms which, he believes, are illusions of "transparent" knowledge of cultural others. He sees universal proclamations as a disguised imperial attempt to grasp the Other through collective typifications and global social hierarchies. If we take Glissant seriously, this has an important implication for Robbins' scheme: the ethical minimalism he suggests via Rawls might introduce another troublesome universalism through the back door. Any universal picture of the good needs to be continually interrogated—and interrogated precisely through voices like Glissant's, who insists on the cultural "right to opacity." Universals, as we know, have been enormously dangerous, ethically and politically. Rather than subsuming cultural and contextual particulars within the universal, perhaps it is more fruitful and more ethically worthy to consider universal claims alongside claims to an opaque particularity as part of a permanent, unfinishable dialogue.

VALUES, VALUE PLURALISM, AND THE JUDGMENTAL TURN: A RESPONSE

Joel Robbins

University of Cambridge

I want to thank all the commentators for their thoughtful responses to my article. Even more than usual, this piece represents ideas that are still unsettled in my own thinking and these comments have helped to push them beyond where I left them in the article. Several themes cut across two or more of the comments: worries about values as an ethnographic object of study and as a theoretical focus; problems with the value pluralism/relativism distinction; and concerns about the difficulties and dangers of trying to arrive at a workable definition of human flourishing. I focus on these issues in my response. But before turning to them, I begin with a broader topic of debate that in one way or another appears in all the responses. This involves the potential roles anthropology might play in today's world; how, as Erica Weiss puts it in her response, anthropology can "make a credible contribution to the world."

At the foundation of my article is a strong sense that contemporary anthropologists very often pass judgment, and expect to pass judgment, on whether the lives of the people with whom they work are going well or not. Although this observation was in the background of my original piece on the anthropology of the good, it was not fully discussed there (Robbins 2013). This mainstreaming of judgment is necessarily the case if anthropology is to be, as so many now seem to want it to be, a "critical" discipline. As Roy Ben-Shai (2023: xiii) notes, "critique" is a way of thinking "that consists in evaluating something or passing judgment." Nicolas Langlitz (2020b 989), in an article that helped inspire my own, similarly talks of anthropologists widely endorsing "the project of critique that tells right from wrong." In a critical mood, then, anthropologists cannot but judge the lives of those they study (even if they rarely find the people they work with most closely to be at fault for living lives that are not going as well as they could). In response to this now widespread judgmental impulse, Langlitz urges a step back from the critical project, following Niklas Luhmann in urging the development of a "moral hypothermia" that would allow anthropologists to "attend to" the people they study "from a nonjudgmental angle instead" (Langlitz 2020b 997, 1000; I would add that even as anthropological judgments often have a moral tinge, to pick up another point Langlitz makes both in his comment here and in his article, they can also be based on economic, political, vital [e.g. health], and other values).

I am sympathetic to Langlitz's argument, but in my article I took a different tack, leaning into the current climate of ready critique to see what might be

possible by way of reshaping anthropologists' judgmental practice in ways that would allow it to more readily draw on what I take to be anthropology's greatest strengths, rather than rejecting such practice outright. This is why I insist that my critique of Ortner's (2016) dark anthropology argument is an immanent one—worried not so much about her ultimate goals, including their judgmental aspects, but about whether she has chosen the most effective anthropological means of reaching them. This is experimental from my side—the commitments I came to anthropology with are closer to those Langlitz argues for and I am often still uncomfortable with the judgmental turn of contemporary anthropology. But my sense is that as far as anthropology is concerned, the horse of judgment has already left the barn, which means that there is not much point in resecuring the door. Instead, as I have argued at greater length elsewhere, I think that the most important argument to make right now is one that asserts that if anthropologists are going to judge the lives of those they study, they ought to train themselves in how to do so self-consciously and by means of criteria that are explicit and open to debate (Robbins 2020: chapter 3; see also Turner 2022: 127). They ought to think more about how people, including themselves, make judgments in general, and about the role ideas of the good regularly play in grounding such judgments (a point brought out strongly by the work of Maeve Cooke [2006] that I cite in the original article). My claims about the comparative anthropology of the good are meant to contribute to this project of making the grounds of anthropologists' widespread practices of critical judgment the subject of disciplinary discussion, and to the related one of helping such judgments take a form that can lead to discussions beyond the field and thus constitute part of anthropology's "contribution to the world."

I will come back to the issue of potential contributions to wider debates below, but I turn first to the concerns shared across a number of the responses. Even if one thinks, as I do, that "values" is an important object of study, it is impossible to miss that it is not, and has not been for a long time, a feel-good topic for most anthropologists. Surely in part this follows from the fact that those who currently talk most loudly about values in the public sphere tend to be promoting ones which anthropologists do not in their personal lives endorse. In these responses, however, the stated reasons for a discomfort with values are more intellectually substantial: they include the assertion that those who study values treat them as "out there" in the world even though they supposedly do not really exist in this way, and that a focus on them leads to an abandonment of ethnographic complexity.

Emir Mahieddin makes the first point most explicitly, noting that I encourage anthropologists to think of values as "'things' that would exist out there." Bruce Knauft makes a similar point when he argues that I assume that "'the good' is 'out there' in the worlds of other people independent of the ethnographer's own sense of what is good or bad." Despite these warnings, I am happy

to own this point. I do think values are “out there” in people’s experience, rather than being only things they subjectively will into being moment by moment. They are out there in institutions that are set up to realize specific values or sets of values, and they are out there in the ways people feel they can talk to and understand each other, as well as in other aspects of social life. Cheryl Mattingly, in her response, makes the same point when she notes that values “do not just exist in people’s heads; they are materialized in various ways, including quotidian ones.” This does not mean that values do not also exist in people’s heads, and that, as Mahieddin insists, in individual lived experience they can sometimes be fragmentary and in flux, but it does mean they are also socially “objective” in ways that are less evanescent than Mahieddin and others assume (I have discussed both the objectivity of values and their complex appearance in people’s inner lives in detail in Robbins 2022; for a useful discussion of how this issue has been debated in the tradition of existential philosophy, in which the “sedimentation” of values was an important discovery that attenuated Sartre’s original “radically free to choose any values at every moment” position, see Webber 2018. Recognizing this “objective” quality of values might help Mahieddin grapple with the ways his interlocutors regularly assert a distinction between secular or mundane values and Christian ones, even though he cannot himself find precisely where they draw the boundary. Maybe for his interlocutors asserting the existence of the boundary is more about expressing a value that is out there in their worlds and sedimented in their personal experience than it is about finding a single neat way of segregating the two realms. Studying the conversational deployment of this distinction as part of a project of value realization may tell us more about migrant Pentecostals in Sweden than simply asserting the flux-driven incoherence of the things they say. Likewise, Mahieddin’s discussion of Mireya, a Cuban migrant who leaves a Prosperity church in anger after giving it all of her gold jewelry, could benefit from some consideration of what she thinks a good life for herself might be. Even if her views on these matters are under construction in her current situation, such an account would tell us more about her than that she moves from church to church in what comes off in this brief telling as a somewhat aimless fashion.

The second criticism of values as a focus of study a bit ironically allows me to offer a concrete example of what a value that is “out there” looks like in naturally occurring social interaction. This is the criticism that, as Howland puts it, focusing on value pluralism could “shift attention away from ethnographic complexity.” Mahieddin similarly worries about reductivism, and there are at least hints of this concern in both Knauff’s and Weiss’s responses. This worry about complexity trips lightly off so many pens here precisely because complexity is a key value out there in the shared worlds anthropologists work, sometimes fitfully, to construct among themselves. Its assertion as a good

thing requires no argument. I myself deploy it against Ortner's version of the anthropology of the good, suggesting my own approach allows for thicker ethnographic accounts than those focused only on studying resistance to darkness.

Of course, encouraging anthropological readers to consult their attachment to the value of complexity as proof that values do "objectively" exist in social worlds does not itself put paid to the charge that studying them is a straight path to thin ethnography. In response, I would point out that my article does not pretend to be an ethnographic one, so the fact that it is not as ethnographically dense as some might want ought not to be a surprise. But would any study of people's values and the relations between them necessarily be ethnographically slight? I would hope that is not the case with my own ethnographic monograph (Robbins 2004—which Mahieddin, at least implicitly, credits with some attention to complexity), nor with the many more ethnographically engaged articles on values I have published since it appeared. Nor is it clearly the case in the work of others who focus on values (e.g. Dumont 1980, 1986; Ecks 2022; Haynes 2017; Iteanu 2013; Sommerschuh 2020). Given, however, that my purpose in my original article is to think about how anthropologists might be able to rethink their judgmental impulses so they can speak in novel terms to a broader public, it should be noted that to do so successfully one often has to move beyond simply asserting the banal truth that the lives of everyone, including the people we work with, are too complex ever to be exhaustively comprehended (Keane 2003). To make any points that might land with readers outside of one's narrow specialist circles, one has to have ways of getting past this observation, and my claim in this article is that talking comparatively about values could be a productive way to do this.

The next argument from my piece that a number of the respondents take up is the suggestion that value pluralism might provide a better foundation than relativism for an anthropology that has already plumped for taking judgmental stances because it points toward the need to lay out criteria for the judgments one makes. One assertion arising in a number of the responses is that anthropologists have not, as I submit they have, largely abandoned relativism. Knauff argues that most anthropologists are relativists in their interactions with people during fieldwork, while Mahieddin offers that anthropologists are still relativists but that the "social conditions for the exercise of cultural relativism" have changed in ways that make it more difficult to express. Along these lines, I would add that in methodological rather than metaphysical terms, most anthropologists probably do remain committed to relativism, though one wonders if their expectation that they will ultimately make non-relativist judgments about the quality of the lives led by the people they are studying renders this methodology a bit more difficult to deploy rigorously than it once was. The key point to make here, in any case, is that a consistently held relativism does not support the judgmental turn of recent anthropology, so that anthropologists who

embrace that turn and have not given up on relativism are risking an overall incoherence of outlook.

As regards relativism and value pluralism, I should also address a misunderstanding that comes up explicitly in one response. Corinna Howland, in her otherwise very thoughtful discussion of my article, styles value pluralism as “relativism lite.” It is crucial to my argument, however, that value pluralism is not a form of relativism at all. When I first began to study value pluralism, I made a similar mistake, imagining it as a “relativism of the good” that insisted that at the very least there is more than one good way to live. But framing value pluralism in relativistic terms in fact traduces one of its primary points (James Laidlaw, personal communication), which is that while there are a number of good values that really exist and that are equally suitable as guides for living, there are also some values that are not fit for this purpose. This is not a form of relativism precisely because it holds that some values are not defensible even if some groups of people organize their lives around them and develop rationales they find satisfying for doing so.

This brings me to the final point that comes up in many of the responses: the issue of how, or even whether, to define human flourishing such that it could be used as the criteria for distinguishing between “good” values that support it and “bad” ones that undermine it. I admitted in the original article that I do not at this point know how to define human flourishing in an anthropologically useful way. None of the respondents missed this admission, and my inability to define the term remains as stubborn now as it was when I first made it. Indeed, as Will Rollason (personal communication) pointed out to me, maybe “human” is not even the right unit in relation to which to define flourishing—it could, for example, be relationships that should flourish, or societies, or, as many people say these days, the planet as a whole. Moreover, two of the responses have convinced me there are further concerns around defining flourishing that I had not considered. As Langlitz rightly points out, until a definition of this term is in place, value pluralism ends up being a lot like relativism in that all values would have to be considered at least potentially good until we have criteria to argue that some are not. I think this situation may well be healthy, in that it keeps the anthropological openness to the widest possible range of difference in place, but I do now recognize that until we develop criteria by which to reject some values, we are in practice back to something like relativism. Weiss makes an equally powerful point, which is that if we ever stabilize criteria by which to judge whether specific values are good or bad, we would risk falling back into a primarily dark anthropology that searches mostly for places where bad values hold sway. In light of her comment, I recognize that this possibility cannot be completely foreclosed, but as I have suggested since my original article on the anthropology of the good, I would hope that learning how to attend to the good, and values in general, would help prevent calling out the

bad from becoming the only card in the anthropological hand. Indeed, addressing a concern of Howland's about the value pluralist anthropology of the good I recommend, a comparative study of the good should be able to improve our study of "the bad" as well, leading us to become as open to pluralism in the latter domain as we would be to finding it in the former.

My argument that one could use flourishing as a criterion for sorting good from bad values raises one final worry for several respondents. The most straightforward statement of it is from Mahieddin, who puts forth that I ask "anthropologists to take a decision on what is 'good' for one social grouping at a particular moment in time." This shocked me when I first read it, as I did not consciously mean to make this point, and could not find any assertion quite like it on rereading my text. But other respondents too are worried about the possibility that the value pluralist position I am arguing for might become a platform from which anthropologists could seek to impose certain values (most likely, they expect, their own) on others, or would at least lead them to judge others as missing a mark they really ought to hit. Again, I did not see myself as making exactly this point. Focused as I was on my sense that anthropologists already judge how the lives of those they study are going on the basis of the anthropologists' own taken-for-granted values, and wanting both to broaden disciplinary discussion to consider other kinds of values not drawn from anthropologists' own social traditions and to push for explicit consideration of how anthropologists argue for the legitimacy of various values, I did not keep an eye on the possibility of this other reading of my argument in terms of a justification for value imposition—a move I do not like any more than the respondents do. How to address this potential weakness? I think the answer to this question is related to how one answers Weiss's question about how anthropology can make a "credible contribution" to the world. I thus now return to this topic in concluding my comments.

I began my article with a question: "How should contemporary anthropology respond to the times in which it finds itself?" These responses have challenged me to develop somewhat, though not abandon, the answer I originally offered. The image that guided me as I wrote, admittedly not articulated in my article beyond a hint contained in the late discussion of Horkheimer on objective reason, was that anthropologists working from a value pluralist position could provide information about some of the various values by which people have organized their shared worlds that could then be used in wider public discussions about what can count as good lives. These discussions could take place in the anthropologists' own communities or in those they study or elsewhere. But crucially, and this is the most important part of my thinking that I did not lay out, these conversations would not themselves be anthropological ones. They would, as I follow Wendy Brown (2023: 10, 17) in pointing out, be political ones. This is so because in the contemporary world politics is the key

domain for the “articulation, justification, contestation, and pursuit of values” (Brown 2023: 17). The vision of anthropology’s “credible contribution to the world” beyond its own disciplinary borders that shaped the horizon of my thinking when I wrote this article was thus that anthropologists, speaking *as anthropologists*, could provide such political processes with an understanding of the different values that have organized “flourishing” human and social lives in various places, and perhaps about some that had not, but that their contribution *as anthropologists* would stop there—beyond such provisioning of material for debate, one would have to appear in these discussions, if one wanted to appear, as a political actor among others, debating with other political actors about best ways forward and offering reasons for the positions one takes (Robbins 2010 offers an early attempt to lay out such a vision of potential contributions a value pluralist anthropology of human rights might make to debates beyond the discipline; see also Goodale 2022). The image of the anthropologist *qua* anthropologist as legislator was thus not one I intended to endorse, though I now recognize that I did not state this clearly enough.

If a key claim of my article is that providing information about possible values that might be of interest not only in disciplinary projects of ethnography and theory building, but also in wider perforce political discussions about how to pursue the good, then a key question to ask is that of how such provision could be accomplished. This brings me to Langlitz’s point that perhaps a value pluralist anthropology ought to be developed first and foremost as a kind of writing. I agree. I think that ethnographic writing that moves people not only to tears or rage, but to feel the pull of values they have not been attracted by before (as well as the push of values that have not repulsed them in the past), is the kind of writing that would most successfully teach people about such values. In order to write such ethnographies, anthropologists could attend among other things to situations in which people try to make others, including others in their own communities, feel the draw of the values to which they subscribe. I have tried to offer some examples of such writing in articles about ritual (2015), exemplary persons (2018a, and, perhaps most importantly, one focused on how the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea crafted an elaborate performance aimed at leading visiting representatives of a mining company to feel the pull of the value of cultivating relationships, one they take to be more important than that that of succeeding in one-off profit-making market transactions (2018b). Mattingly’s (e.g. 2014) work has been notably successful in achieving this goal of leading people to feel the pull of values that may be new to them, and she points toward this in another way here by helping us understand the force of Edouard Glissant’s (1997) account of Black Caribbean concerns with “opacity, errantry, fugitivity,” and “creolization,” and their increasing prominence in Black scholarship, as based on his promotion of these phenomena precisely as values. These comments on effective value pluralist ethnographic writing are,

I should add, based on a claim, widespread in both continental and analytic philosophy, that it is emotions that are the organs of value perception (Scheler 1973; Tappolet 2016) and that values are, as Brown (2023: 58) puts it, “passionate attachments.” Thus, it is important for anthropologists to write in ways that offer readers the chance to feel the draw or the push away from the values they describe, rather than only to appeal to values their readers can already be expected to hold (as the anthropology of suffering tends to do).

Even as I know that the study of values is a hard sell in contemporary anthropology—a point the majority of these responses confirm—I think the time is now right to pursue it. Brown’s (2023) book that I have cited, which is a generative reading of Max Weber’s vocation lectures, is entitled *Nihilistic Times*. The overall arc of her argument is that in the current dispensation, at least in the Euro-American world, we live in times in which most values, maybe all but those most narrowly related to personal gain, hold little force in the political sphere—offering no resistance to purely transactional approaches to social life, and doing little to steer people away from acting on their worst inclinations in the public realm. In times like these, learning to recognize how values shape social life and facilitating conversations around them is crucially important. Devon Johnson (2021: 120), in a recent book entitled *Black Nihilism and Antiblack Racism* (2021: 120), argues that the only effective way to successfully displace antiblack racist values is to propose what he calls “strong black nihilist” values created by a “valuing against value structures of whiteness which render black values inherently meaningless.” Johnson calls this “strong” nihilism because it asserts its own right not only to decry antiblack racist values as ungrounded in any metaphysical truths, but also to see in this observation an opening to propose new values that themselves will also not be so grounded (hence the nihilism), but that should nonetheless become the subject of debate and possible adoption in people’s efforts to orient the shared worlds they create (hence the strength). By understanding opacity, errantry, creolization, and fugitivity as values in this sense, Mattingly illustrates what such a conversation about adopting new values can look like. Weiss (2022) elsewhere offers something similar by exploring differences between non-liberal and liberal understandings of peace among peace activists of a variety of backgrounds in Israel-Palestine, though in this case, recalling another part of my original argument, what is at stake is more the issue of what counts as realizing the value of peace than the value of peace itself. This line of argument leads to the following concluding point: if the only way to argue for the modification or abandonment of any given value or set of values is to argue for different ones (since people generally act only in relation to values), then an anthropological study of values that is developed in relation to a position of value pluralism and that teaches its audiences about the range of values humans have promoted in various times and places ought to be able to make

“credible” contributions to reckoning with the “nihilistic times” in which so many anthropologists and other people today live. It might even allow the field to find again the kind of footing in public discussion that I mention in the conclusion of my article.

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