Call for Papers
Centre for Ethnography, University of Toronto Scarborough
January 2016
- Extended Deadline -

On the Immanence and Imminence of the Ethical:
Anthropological Reflections on Ethical Time and Presence

This workshop emerges from the confusion that many speakers and writers have with the words ‘immanence’ and ‘imminence’ (for definitions, see appendix below) and our realization that both concepts offer compelling entry points for an anthropological account of ethics. The question is raised as to whether these are contradictory or complementary, and whether consideration of the imminent quality of the ethical might help resolve concerns raised in response to discussions of its immanence. Indeed, the very scene of mishearing (misrecognition) affords a common instance of ethical life from which the ethical proceeds.

If ethics is immanent “it is not objectified and does not stand apart from politics of the everyday” (Lambek 2013: 19). Such an “ethics of immanence” calls attention to any “illusions of transcendence” that “separates a mode of existence from its power of acting” (Smith 2007: 67). Applied to ethics, a notion of immanence invites us to think in terms of act(s) and inter-acts. As Keane (2010: 65) suggests, one mandate of anthropology is “to encounter people in the midst of things,” meaning that one could “think about ethical experience as an irreducible component of the politics and pragmatics of ordinary life”. And yet, taken to its logical conclusion, in so far as it rejects as illusory all claims to transcendence, such a view seems to call into question the very notion of an ethical subject, the “doer,” or as Nietzsche put it, the “‘being’ behind the deed.” Are there ways of thinking about the (ethical) self that do not presuppose (or smuggle in) a transcendent ethical subject, a free moral agent, a sovereign individual? If ethics resides in (is immanent to) the hurly burly of ordinary action, what provides the sense of continuity across occasions?

Imminence, in the sense of the impending (and possibly inevitable) but as yet unrealized, offers an orthogonal view that can be usefully counter-posed here. Although as anthropologists and ordinary persons we are most at home looking retrospectively, it is clear that in “in the midst of acts like deliberating, making excuses, and offering justifications instigated by the demands and expectations of social interaction” (Keane 2010:68-69), ethics is unfolding and never fully realized or accomplished. One act flows into another, an action inspires a reaction or a counter-action and so on. But more fundamentally, the meaning of an action is never definitively fixed. Understandings are provisional, good enough for the circumstances, and so on. And in the temporal unfolding of actions, what happens next shapes what is understood to have happened before. Acts and circumstances placed under one description are re-described under another. In that sense, ethics is
not only immanent (rather than transcendent) it is also imminent (rather than yet realized). And insofar as the act, situation, or event can be re-described or re-thought so will what is imminent to it (impending, anticipated, threatened...) be transformed.

It is within this context that various objectifications and, perhaps more pervasively, subjectifications, are occasioned. These attempts to arrest the temporality of ethics give it some determinate form, as a specific act (a good deed, an eloquent speech etc.) or a specific subject (a kind neighbour, a brilliant orator etc.) that can be talked about, recorded, classified, in short can become an object of knowledge.

To understand ethics as immanent is critical (necessary), but it is not comprehensive (sufficient). Immanence is not of itself distinctly or distinctively temporal (linear). What the question of imminence brings to the ethical is its stark temporality, elucidating the moment, or the anticipation or certainty of the moment, when the immanent becomes actual or eventual.

This workshop will discuss these matters and how we may recognize both the intrinsic and the contingent, the possible and the inevitable in ethical life and time, both in theory and as made evident in our ethnography.

Submissions: Please email a 250-word proposal to Marie Meudec (marie.meudec@utoronto.ca) by November 8th, 2015.

Submissions are welcome from faculty and advanced doctoral students. It is anticipated that the workshop will take place over two days at the end of January. Depending on the level of interest or consistency with other proposals we may not be able to accept all submissions. Length of individual presentations will also depend on the rate of response.

Names of organizational team (and confirmed participants): Girish Daswani, Naisargi Dave, Michael Lambek, Marie Meudec, Jack Sidnell, Donna Young

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Appendix (as taken from http://www.oxforddictionaries.com)

Immanent
1. Existing or operating within; inherent
2. Present as a natural part of something; present everywhere
   - (Of God) permanently pervading and sustaining the universe. Often contrasted with transcendent

Synonyms
1. Inherent, intrinsic, innate, built-in, latent, essential, fundamental, basic, ingrained, natural
2. Omnipresent, ubiquitous, present everywhere

Imminent
1. About to happen

Synonyms
Impending, at hand, close, near, approaching, fast approaching, coming, forthcoming, on the way, about to happen, upon us, in store, in the offing, in the pipeline, on the horizon, in the air, in the wind,
References