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Freedom

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Laidlaw, James)

Abstract

The concept of freedom has been relatively neglected in Anthropology. I explore why this has been the case and argue that freedom, especially when placed in tandem with care, is crucial for an anthropology of ethics, which is not focused on rule-based morality but rather on the ways in which people work out what constitutes a life worth living and how to lead it. I make this case both by drawing on emic invocations of freedom which often incorporate social critique, and by analysing individual ethical choices via a family of concepts, which includes freedom, regard, care and responsibility. In doing so I liberate 'freedom' from its associations with both individual autonomy and radical change, focusing much more on its relational dimensions.

Introduction

Freedom – most people can agree that it is a good thing, but when we come to ask what is meant by freedom, the answers become increasingly difficult. This is partly due to the many cognate terms associated, and sometimes interchangeable, with freedom (e.g. liberty in English) but also because words with different implications can be translated into English as 'freedom'. For

example, in Hindi, *moksha*, *swaraj*, *nirvana*, *mukti*, *azaadi*, all refer to freedom, but of different kinds. Thus, *swaraj* (or self-rule) and *azaadi* (a Persian origin word) refer to freedom in the political register, while *moksha* and *nirvana* refer to freedom in the soteriological sense, i.e. freedom from the cycle of births and rebirths. These terms are used in Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism, albeit in different ways. *Mukti* spans both the soteriological and sociological realms in lay usage.

The ubiquity and variety of freedom-concepts is simultaneously productive and troubling. On the one hand, it is clear that concepts that are recognizably about something we can translate as freedom exist in very many different contexts around the world. In other words, freedom is not simply a 'Western' or even 'modern' concern. On the other hand, it is important to keep the different meanings separate without collapsing them into a baggy notion of 'freedom' or drawing on them to speak to a strawman-like notion of 'Western liberal freedom'. Indeed, as a perusal of *Freedom: A Philosophical Anthology* (Carter et al. 2007) reveals, there is a multitude of ways in which liberal philosophers approach the concept of freedom, its definition, its boundaries and its many aspects and dimensions. There is no single uncontested liberal conception of freedom. This is something Laidlaw points out too (2014: 142).

What does this mean for anthropologists, who encounter invocations of freedom in the field, or who might want to draw on freedom as an analytical concept? I will address the second question later, but one way of approaching freedom ethnographically is to ask how the people we work with use the term. Even here, the answer is not straightforward as I have found in my research with

an English libertarian right wing organization that puts freedom at the heart of its political activism.

Members of this organisation find it difficult to articulate exactly what they mean by freedom when specifically asked. Indeed, some told me that they hoped speaking with me might help them to clarify their own understanding of freedom, something that they felt they simply took for granted. Many of our discussions ended up centring on markets free from state interference, thus placing freedom within the economic domain. All other individual freedoms were subsequently derived from the freedom of the markets. This, in turn, sets up a hierarchy of specific freedoms – to enjoy the fruits of one’s own labour, to live life as one sees fit, raise one’s children according to one’s own values etc. In other words, *freedom* tended to vanish, replaced by specific freedoms that are ranked differently by different individuals. However, the inability to grasp freedom as a singular concept does not mean that many of my interlocutors do not hold what Crowe (2009: 78) refers to as a notion of *ontological freedom*. That is, many espouse a basic propositional belief that humans are born free, i.e. with a natural right to self-determination and actualisation. They further espouse a normative understanding that this freedom should be preserved, especially as human freedom can be and is progressively restrained by various forces. Their political activism then, comprises in reining in the restrictions to human freedom in ways that ensure or promote individual self-determination by addressing extant political, economic and social arrangements.

My interlocutors are heirs to a long intellectual tradition that takes ontological or natural freedom as *a priori*. Some of them refer to Rousseau, Paine and Nozick.

This assumption, of course, does not necessarily obtain elsewhere. For instance, Saivite Hindu cosmologies posit bondage as the fundamental human condition. The soul, contained within the body, is already fettered by its very presence in the body and becomes more so as the person acts in the world. Freedom here is not a condition that can be attained in this world. The soul has to break free, through the efforts of the person, of the cycle of rebirths (Venkatesan 2014). As anthropologists, we might ask how people come to hold the ideas of freedom that they do, and what efforts they expend to achieve such freedom(s). We might also ask how certain notions of freedom can affect the ways in which one group of people might understand the lives of others.

This is what Mahmood (2001) does in her discussion of how certain feminist understandings of agency ignore the freedom of Egyptian women of the piety movement to choose ethical projects of self-fashioning because these projects embrace rather than resist what, from particular liberal perspectives, appear as oppressive. In a similar cross-cultural vein, Humphrey (2007) contrasts British and American politicians' invocations of an intuitive liberal freedom with three freedom terms in Russian (*svoboda*, *mir* and *volya*). She shows that each term not only has a very different valence and trajectory, but also that 'each contains its own Nemesis; that is, what can seem to be "good" about them in one context, or from one perspective, can seem dangerous and wrong from another.' (ibid.: 1-2). Through a careful exploration of how these terms have played out in Soviet and post-Soviet imaginaries, Humphrey shows not only that freedom is not a universal value; even in the same place, what people understand by freedom does not remain stable.

Both Mahmood and Humphrey perform what are classic moves in anthropology, i.e. the disturbance of what are held to be universal values in one place (usually 'the West') by introducing views and practices from elsewhere. In Mahmood's case, this is a certain liberal understanding of freedom and agency as resistance to power and authority; in Humphrey's case, it comprises showing that far from valorising freedom, Russians are conflicted about and even suspicious of it. In doing so, both authors challenge what might be termed intuitive understandings of freedom that obtain in the Anglosphere, whether pertaining to the condition of women or as espoused by politicians. Philosophers dispute the place of 'commonsense intuitive' understandings of freedom and similar concepts in their own explorations (see Nahmias et al. 2005); anthropologists ground such understandings in pedagogical projects, intellectual, religious and folk traditions, political and social contexts, and relational practices.

In what follows, I will place different anthropologists' work on freedom in conversation with each other, and also with related work by sociologists and philosophers: firstly, to discuss the relative neglect of the concept in anthropology, and secondly, to map out the terrain within which the anthropology of ethics has come to focus on freedom. I will show that while anthropologists have been alive to emic invocations of freedom, they nonetheless remain suspicious of its invocation. This is because freedom is too often conflated with individual autonomy, and thus putatively opposed to the kinds of things in which anthropologists are interested – the complicated caring, obligatory, or otherwise inescapable relations within which human lives are enmeshed. However, there is more to freedom than autonomous individualism

and I will argue that anthropologists should pay more attention to this concept, not only because people with whom we work invoke it, often as social critique, but also because it gives us a language to explore the complex choices, evaluations and work people put into what they identify as the good or right. I thus couple freedom with another key term in the anthropology of ethics – care.

In the old English usage, cares are ‘burdens of mind’, and caring demands ‘serious mental attention’. A somewhat later usage identifies care as an action or relation extended towards an ‘object or matter of concern.’ These ways of understanding care – as something one thinks about and attempts to do something about – bring freedom into focus in two related ways. Firstly, it moves us away from rule-following morality (but see Clarke, this volume) and into exploring how people exercise their freedom to conceptualise a project of care, which they see as good and right. Secondly, we can enquire about whether and how individuals and collectives find the freedom to enact this caring purpose and what they might sacrifice in order to do so. It goes without saying that the first freedom does not mean that the second can be exercised, effectively or otherwise. Equally, it is important to note that one can reflect on one’s individual or the wider situation and decide that no unreasonable burden is imposed on oneself or others, leaving oneself free not to act or to continue acting in accordance with established mores.

Care is an on-going activity; but working out what to care about/for, how and why and evaluating the effectiveness of care requires a reflexive stepping back from the flow of life. Such reflections help generate answers to the ethical questions: ‘how ought I to live?’ and ‘what ought I to enable?’ Freedom is a

crucial aspect of the formation and enactment of ethical purposes that are reflexive and rooted in relations of care – for the individual self, for the ‘plural I’ as Mattingly (2014) puts it, or for unknown others. Its exercise is thoroughly enmeshed in religious, political, economic and other social domains. A focus on freedom allows us to think through the relationship between individual and society in ways that take into account reflexivity, critique, and articulations and enactments of an ‘otherwise’.

Early anthropological approaches to freedom

In *On Liberty*, J.S. Mill discusses a vital question which, he says, has exercised mankind ‘from the remotest ages’ and concerns ‘the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual’ ([1859]1932:1). This ‘struggle between Liberty and Authority’ (ibid.) has made freedom a central concept in political philosophy. However, despite its focus on collective social life, Kelty points out that anthropology had little direct engagement with the concept of freedom (2011).¹ Indeed, early anthropologists such as Boas (1940) argued that freedom was a non-problem in ‘primitive societies’ where each individual is in complete harmony with his culture. Such a person does not hanker after freedom from his culture. He has no need to. The desire for freedom arises when people feel conscious of the limitations of their culture or when alternatives to existing forms of life emerge and gain partial currency. This leaves some people desiring other kinds of lives than those permissible, leaving them feeling unfree. In short, Boas’s argument is that individuals in well-integrated societies do not display a concern with freedom;

¹ <https://savageminds.org/2011/07/06/the-anthropology-of-freedom-part-1/>

the more differentiation within a social group, the more freedom emerges as a problem and a motor for change. However, as Woodburn (1982) shows in a number of hunter-gatherer groups and Stasch (2008) discusses in relation to the Korowai, the most undifferentiated and egalitarian societies are intensely concerned with individual freedom and autonomy and deploy several strategies to enable and maintain freedom of association, movement and self-determination. These studies reveal that individual freedom from others can be a key value even in the kinds of society that Boas was thinking about as 'primitive'. This does not necessarily contradict Boas, because freedom is woven into the fabric of these cultures and thus supported; the desire for autonomy is not an oppositional one.

Malinowski (1947: 78) suggests that Boas's discussion of freedom is meaningful only in a subjective sense. This is because an individual feels free when he is in harmony with his culture and does not feel free when not in harmony. Such a subjective understanding of freedom, Malinowski argues, is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it is difficult to observe subjective feelings of harmony. Secondly, it is possible to indoctrinate, as Hitler did with Nazism, people to feel in harmony with a particular culture no matter how oppressive it is, such that they feel free within it (1947: 62). Malinowski also rejects what he terms an 'intuitive approach' to freedom. Such an intuitive meaning as formulated by 'the man in the street conceives of freedom as the ability to do what one likes or to do nothing' (ibid.:45), i.e. the intuitive core of freedom is the absence of all restraint. This intuitive understanding is thus 'essentially negative and strictly individual' (ibid.: 61).

Rejecting that kind of understanding of freedom, Malinowski argues that we need to look at freedom in the realities of human action and in their cultural contexts. While he argues that the intuitive sense of freedom as lack of any restraint lies in the realm of the imagination, freedom can only be achieved through rules sanctioned by organized constraints. This is very often forgotten: by determinists who imagine that the existence of structures and constraints means there is no such thing as freedom, and by thinkers influenced by Romanticism, who imagine freedom as the absence of all constraint. For Malinowski, rather, freedom is only possible *through* rather than *from* culture (reflecting perhaps a powerful strain in liberal thought that sees freedom as possible only *within* the rule of law). Thus culture, which restrains human action, is also the enabler of human freedom. Indeed, as Srivastava points out, for Malinowski, freedom 'originates with culture, and culture defines the content of freedom' (1993: 182). This is because it is culture that provides the conceptual categories (including freedom) that direct human behaviour and define people's aspirations. Behaviour, in this understanding, should be described both as a fact *and* a value; the latter in the sense that behaviours are attuned to values, and judged in terms of values.

Srivastava identifies a productive dialectical tension between culture and freedom in Malinowski's work. This is the twin identification of culture as an instrument of freedom (in terms of security and prosperity) and as an instrument of constraints (by regulating behaviour and circumscribing possibilities). This dual role of culture means that it is malleable and open to manipulation – culture can both be deployed to deny freedom and be a means to attain freedom. Investigating this leads to the question of power – how it can be

concentrated in a few hands, distributed across a population, exercised or questioned in the name of tradition or rules or in terms of values (ibid.: 184-5). Institutions are important in Malinowski's understanding of freedom and culture. As repositories and guardians of cultural knowledge and values, institutions provide patterns and directives for action. However, institutions rely on individuals, either singly or in groups, actually to act. This may be through education or other modes of producing consent, persuasion, or coercion. Such institutions include the state, which can promote freedom and hence human flourishing or deny freedom, usually through violence. To what extent institutions promote freedom depends on who controls them, how and for what purpose. This is an ethnographic question, but how that question gets posed does depend on the analyst's idea of the content of freedom, rendering it somewhat problematic.

Malinowski's *Freedom and Civilization*, as its political prelude shows, was aimed at protecting freedom from totalitarianism. It is shot through with the spectre of Nazism. This makes it as much a political tract as a scholarly study. A reviewer from the time decries the book as neither analytically rigorous nor anthropologically convincing (Cook 1945). Notwithstanding this, Malinowski's definition of freedom as 'the conditions necessary and sufficient for the formation of a purpose, its translation into effective action through organized cultural instrumentalities, and the full enjoyment of the results of such activity' (1947: 25) is translatable into anthropologically interesting questions about freedom. We can ask what purposes are deemed suitable and supported within a particular social formation, and further what freedom exists to form and realise dissenting purposes.

Positive and negative freedoms

The relationship between freedom, constraint and purposes is one that has occupied other scholars too, including the political philosopher and liberal theorist Isaiah Berlin. Like Malinowski, Berlin was concerned with freedom in the long shadow cast both by the Second World War and the Cold War. Berlin argued that 'almost every moralist in history has praised freedom. Like happiness and goodness, like nature and reality, the meaning of this term is so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems to be able to resist.' (1969: 121).

In his famous 1958 lecture 'Two Concepts of Liberty', Berlin traces the ways in which liberal thought has developed two antithetical notions of liberty, each of which has profoundly different implications for the ways in which lives can be lived. To coerce a man is to deprive him of his freedom, Berlin says, but further asks, 'freedom from what?' His answer to this question delineates two senses of freedom – the positive and the negative.

The negative sense of freedom is involved in the answer to the question 'what is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?' (Berlin, 1969:121-2). Being free in this sense is not 'being interfered with by others. The wider the area of non-interference the wider my freedom.' (ibid: 123). In terms of the role of the state in constraining individual liberty, Berlin suggests that the questions to ask are 'how far does government interfere with me' and 'what am I free to do or be?' (ibid.).

But, Berlin argues, some baseline conditions need to be met before negative freedoms can be thought of: 'to offer political rights, or safeguards against intervention by the state, to men who are half-naked, illiterate, underfed and diseased is to mock their condition; they need medical help or education before they can understand, or make use of, an increase in their freedom' (ibid.: 122). How these are to be assured, of course, is a matter of continuing debate, often with regards to taxation (Venkatesan 2020). Further we might ask about how certain initiatives may be conceptualised as restrictions of a person's negative freedoms and nevertheless be welcomed as promoting a larger good, or opposed as unwarranted. A contemporary example is the ban on smoking in enclosed public and workspaces. Supporters point to the freedom of non-smokers to inhabit these spaces without putting their health at risk; detractors, such as some of my libertarian interlocutors, see this as a threat to their freedom to enjoy the same public space and pre-emptively campaign to prevent a similar blanket ban on e-cigarettes. As anthropologists we may ask how such initiatives are conceptualised as freedoms or the lack thereof, and form the grounds for political activism and policy.

If negative freedom may be characterised as 'freedom from', positive freedom is characterised by the term 'freedom to'. On the face of it, the freedom to be a particular kind of person, do particular kinds of things etc. seems to engage with the individual as his own master. However, Berlin shows that this is not a simple case of reframing negative freedom or 'freedom from' more positively as 'freedom to.' Indeed, it has darker connotations – even potentially leading to tyranny and authoritarianism.

For Berlin, the difference between the two hinges on the way in which the self may be conceptualised. He suggests that positive conceptions of freedom posit a dual self – a higher and a lower self. In positive terms, the higher self is identified as the real self – that which acts in the individual's best interests over time and which works or should be made to bring a baser less reasonable self under its control. Such a real self may be conceptualised as wider than the individual – as a social whole, perhaps the nation, a class, an ethnic or religious group, or a race. The collective will, in the name of this real self, may be imposed upon recalcitrant individuals to force them to realise their own higher freedom that accords with that of the wider collective. In Berlin's words,

'Once I take this view, I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf, of their 'real' selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the true goal of man (happiness performance of duty, a just society, self-fulfilment) must be identical with his freedom – the free choice of his 'true', albeit often submerged and inarticulate, self' (ibid.: 133).

Berlin suggests that this paradox has often been exposed – 'we know what is good for X person even if he himself does not realize it now, although he will one day when his rational self comes to the fore'. Interestingly, this is the way in which Humphrey's (2007) discussion of *svoboda-mir* freedom, i.e. the freedom that comes from subordination of the individual to a collective 'we' defined by the Soviet state, appears. We can also place this in conversation with Malinowski's discussion of freedom as the conditions that make it possible for people to realise and enact purposes within culture. When the purposes are

dictated by 'the culture' with all the force of authority, tyranny may ensue. This is perhaps why Malinowski himself ends up both subscribing to the notion that freedom stems from a given cultural authority, and a notion of individual liberty especially with regards to freedom of conscience (see Bidney 1968: 16).

In an addendum to his 1958 lecture, Berlin turn his focus to the question of desire and freedom. 'If, he argues, 'I could increase freedom as effectively by eliminating desires as by satisfying them, I could render men free by conditioning them into losing the original desires which I have decided not to satisfy. Instead of resisting or removing the pressures that bear down upon me, I can "internalize" them' (in Carter et al ed. 2007: 122). Returning to Humphrey (2007), we can ask how the Soviet state sought to suppress desires for freedom in senses other than those it authorised. Such a question does not have to be restricted to totalitarian states or even to states. An ethnographic case will serve to ground this discussion.

The self-described right-wingers among whom I am currently conducting research, are clear that their political activism is geared towards the promotion of negative rather than positive freedoms. Indeed, negative freedom is an emic term – one that some of my interlocutors themselves use – which forms the base for a larger project (a smaller state, individual liberties, free markets and lower taxes). This entire project is couched in ethical terms, i.e. it seeks to answer the question of how we ought to be able to live as individuals in a larger polity. This involves, among other things, the reining in of what they see as 'the nanny state', which they argue illegitimately forces people to make choices deemed healthy (serving a higher or better self) through punitive taxation of tobacco, alcohol and

sugar. Their argument is that no one should force, directly or indirectly, someone to be healthy by constraining or directing their actions. It is up to individuals to restrain themselves for themselves if they want to do so. Here, freedom is closely tied to individual choice, and the assumption of responsibility for the choices made. However, some of my interlocutors question the legitimacy of some choices, usually those that go against free market principles. Thus a prominent free marketer argued, to general support, that risk-averse persons who wanted the choice of an utterly safe state-run bank, should be financially disincentivised by making such a bank, should it ever be permitted to come into existence, extremely expensive to use. In other words, choices that do not favour free markets should be rendered, ideally, undesirable or at least unfeasible. Leaving aside the apparent inconsistency of punitive charges being allowable in some cases and not in others, what this reveals is the hierarchical valuation of freedom, such that desired freedoms that do not impinge on the free market ideology are more acceptable than those that do.

Ethnographically, we can enquire about the mechanisms by which wishes or desires in relation to freedom are shaped, or indeed, some desires eliminated, e.g. how do people come to believe that free markets will guarantee their personal freedoms? Why is what some people describe as 'a caring state' described as a 'nanny state' by others? Questions such as these open up projects of pedagogy, of political activism and of invitations and injunctions within the larger social setting that naturalise some desires and smother others. They also open up the complex relationship between negative and positive freedoms, and the ways in which concepts such as responsibility, autonomy and the individual are configured in, particularly, ideological projects that seek to grow the negative

sense of freedom. We could then ask how such projects intervene in the political sphere and manage or negotiate with dissenting understandings that, for instance, distribute responsibility within the body politic, focus on relational rather than autonomous individuals, and/or desire a more interventionist state. We may also place freedom in the positive and negative senses in conversation with republican freedom, which requires the absence of any structural dependence on arbitrary power or domination (Lovett 2018). What counts as arbitrary, and what as reasonable or even natural? And, for whom?

Sustained attention to these different approaches to freedom, and the political practices on the ground which seek to realise them through various forms of delimitation, persuasion and pedagogy complicates the rather straw-man like invocations of liberal Western freedom often found in anthropological writing, showing them to be multifaceted and the product of different intellectual and political traditions.

Of course, the concept of freedom is not confined to the political domain. It is also raised in soteriological terms within various religious traditions. Berlin distinguishes spiritual freedom from the kind of freedom that may be denied or curtailed by an oppressor or tyrant (2007: 122). This is because spiritual freedom is a form of positive freedom that is neither granted nor withheld by another. Rather it is achieved by, in Foucauldian terms (1988), technologies of the self. However, such positive projects of spiritual freedom are not devoid of relations with others. Laidlaw (1995), Cook (2010) and I (Venkatesan 2016) show how whole communities can be engaged in supporting individual projects of positive freedom. That is to say, one person's project of realising spiritual

freedom can commit others who support such a project to constrain themselves or others from acting in certain ways even if they want to. This is particularly evident in Laidlaw's description of lay Jains and their alms-giving practices to renouncers (2000).

While all members of a given religious group may recognise and support someone's attempt to achieve spiritual freedom, such projects may not be recognizable as such from other perspectives. Thus from a certain feminist standpoint, the women's piety movement in Egypt about which Saba Mahmood writes and which I have already discussed, can be seen as oppressive rather than freeing. For rather different reasons, proponents of both negative and republican freedom, may also find this movement problematic; the former because of the way it headlines a positive sense of freedom, and the latter because of the gender subordination that is intrinsic to it. But, Mahmood's detailed descriptions and analyses not only open up anthropological discussions about freedom, they can also open up new directions in long standing philosophical discussions about what freedom might look like outside the traditions within which these debates normally take place.

Unfreedom

An issue that seems to arise persistently in relation to freedom is that of the 'natural' or pre-social freedom of individuals. Whence does this idea come? Both in Hindu Saivite ontologies (Venkatesan 2013) and in Jain thinking (Laidlaw 2002), the very understanding of the embodied soul as being unfree, underpins the quest for spiritual freedom. Life then, in Nietzsche's vivid words, is treated as a wrong path that one has to walk along backwards (in Laidlaw 2002: 326).

Conversely, in the Euro-American tradition, it is more common to find a 'natural' notion of freedom, which is progressively constrained as the individual grows into social life. Such a notion of natural freedom might comprise ontological freedom, i.e. a propositional belief that individuals are born free; or it might refer to the uniqueness of individuals and the pressure to conform to social rules or laws, leading to loss of freedom. While most thinkers are agreed that some form of social life is necessary for human survival and flourishing, the political and philosophical interest lies in asking what is gained and lost when humans come together in lasting associations.

The two disciplines that are most concerned with social life, anthropology and sociology, have approached this question of natural freedom differently albeit in ways that, until recently, have neglected freedom itself as an object of study. Indeed, Bauman goes so far as to describe sociology as the 'science of unfreedom' (1988: 5). Bauman argues that sociology inherited from its inception a common-sense understanding of freedom, i.e. the inherent and natural freedom and uniqueness of individuals. This putative natural freedom was understood as constrained and regulated by particular social arrangements. Sociology's main concerns, then, became a) to account for the regularities in human behaviour notwithstanding putative 'natural' freedom; and, b) in a more normative vein, to explore (or even put forward) the conditions required to prompt the actions of free individuals in a particular direction (ibid.). While these concerns have yielded important insights, interesting questions about freedom as an ideal, an outcome, or an idea that drives life-projects fall by the wayside (ibid.).

In anthropology, the concerns about social order and direction that Bauman identifies for sociology remain, but anthropologists, in general, are less committed to a putative natural freedom. Thus Boas argues that the question of freedom does not arise in well-integrated 'primitive' cultures; Malinowski, explicitly repudiating Rousseau's claim that man is born free, argues rather that man achieves freedom through and from culture, which gives him mastery over nature (1947: 33-4). Indeed, as Strathern (1985) points out, what has concerned anthropologists is social order and control – i.e. the mechanisms by which individuals are regulated by the larger collective and regulate themselves in accordance with social rules and norms. An extreme version of this is the idea that what is right and good for society is right and good for the individual.

This brings us to Durkheim. A founder of the discipline of sociology and profoundly influential in anthropology, Durkheim conflated morality and society so completely that: 'It is impossible to desire a morality other than that endorsed by the condition of society at a given time. To desire a morality other than that implied by the nature of society is to deny the latter and, consequently, oneself.' ([1953] 2010: 18).

Here, morality begins with membership of a group – society, which is greater than the sum of the individuals who comprise it. Members' understandings of themselves, their capacities for thought and action and, thence, sense of right and wrong/good and bad come from society itself. This renders moot the person's freedom to work out and enact the good or right. Rather, people garner praise for, or censure for not, performing moral acts. The moral act is aimed at the good of society and has a two-fold nature – it is simultaneously obligatory and

desirable, i.e. individuals who are shaped through and through by society, are both compelled by, and want to do, what society deems moral. Freedom, here conceptualized as the freedom of the individual to move outside his self and above his nature, is achieved through society and not against society. In other words, the individual submits to society and this submission is the condition of his liberation – it is society that helps him both define and reach his full potential. Further, because for Durkheim, individuals do not constitute in themselves a moral end, no act which has individual perfection from a purely egotistic point of view as its object can be deemed moral. In other words, society constitutes both the ground of morality and the ends of morality.

Before I move on to Laidlaw's influential critique of Durkheim's conflation of morality and society, I want briefly to place Durkheim's understanding of freedom in conversation with Malinowski's. Even though both scholars agree that individual freedom is only to be attained through culture (Malinowski) or society (Durkheim), Malinowski's bibliography in *Freedom and Civilization* does not include Durkheim. Perhaps this is because here Malinowski is most closely concerned with political freedom, and thus with political systems that decrease freedom (totalitarianism) and those that increase freedom (democracy): the latter are to be promoted, and the former to be challenged. His focus is the state and its promise and dangers. Indeed, the book ends with a list of suggestions for a federation of nations along with the partial abrogation of state sovereignty (1947: 334). Durkheim's interest is in society. While he recognizes that society to a certain extent invades and violates the individual, this is not a matter of concern because his interest is not in freedom, individual or political, but in how the individual takes society's ends as his own ends such that socially derived

morality is not only an imperative but positively desired. In other words, both Durkheim and Malinowski endorse freedom in a positive sense, with society and (the right) culture determining human flourishing.

Freedom and ethics

While Malinowski's *Freedom and Civilization* was more or less ignored by anthropologists (Srivastava 1993), Durkheim's valorisation of society has continued to influence anthropology to the extent that James Laidlaw argued two decades ago that inevitably anthropologists who are interested in morality end up studying society, more or less ignoring ethics: 'Durkheim's conception of the social so completely identifies the collective with the good that an independent understanding of ethics appears neither necessary nor possible' (2002: 312). This, he suggested, restricts the focus to collectively sanctioned rules, beliefs and opinions. Discussions about morality then focus on answering questions about moral rules: how and by whom are such rules formulated? What function do such rules serve? How are they enforced and transmitted over time? By whom are they challenged? Who decides what is in breach of a rule? What are the consequences of breaking rules?

While these questions are important, what is left out are the ways in which people (not only as individuals but also in their relations) reflect on and work out what the right things to do is, and what constitutes the good, in their view. This latter, Laidlaw insists following Foucault (1988), must take into account the possibilities of human freedom – always located in particular social milieux and exercised in relation to these, and having at its heart the person's ability to reflect on and cultivate the good. Such a good may be entirely focused on the

individual's quest for self-perfection and realization. It does not have to have societal benefit as its primary motivation, e.g. in soteriological religious projects aimed at liberation, or the pursuit of artistic authenticity or scientific truth (although Durkheim would argue that these too indirectly aim towards social good, 2010: 17). It neither has to be bound by a system of rules of conduct, nor be obligatory or desirable across a social group of which the individual is a member. In order to allow a space for a striving for the good that is not wholly tied up with society and which takes into account reflection and freedom, Laidlaw draws on Bernard Williams (1985) to make a distinction between morality and ethics. Ethics are any way of answering the question 'How ought one to live?'; morality is one way of answering the ethical question and does so through a focus on rules and law-like obligations (2002: 316; see also 2014: 110-119). The place of freedom in each varies: in some morality systems, freedom is a product of following the rules, which are themselves obligatory; ethical projects are shot through and through with the reflexive exercise of freedom. They may involve conscious adherence to morality systems or to social norms, but they may also run against them. They may be socially supported or condemned – indeed, they are always in some relationship to the social, broadly conceived. While it is individuals who act according to ethical projects, they are often pursued precisely through social relations, which may involve elements of persuasion and pedagogy. Groups of people committed to the same ethical projects may come together and press for wider changes, perhaps formulating rules in the process that may take on morality-system like force.

Values and valuations are crucial in the formation of ethical purposes and projects. Indeed, the Jains upon whom Laidlaw (1995; 2002) draws to outline his

thesis on ethics and freedom hold non-violence as their highest value. At its simplest, adherence to this value involves the adoption of vegetarianism, at its most elaborated, some Jains embrace death through progressive inaction and non-consumption, thus performing no violence on living creatures (2005). How any particular Jain incorporates non-violence in his or her life is a matter of ethical freedom and involves juggling competing values – of providing for one's family for instance, or succeeding in worldly pursuits.

In direct conversation with Laidlaw, Joel Robbins (2007) argues that a key question within the anthropology of morality (he does not distinguish between morality and ethics) is to explain why in any given society some cultural domains are dominated by what he calls Durkheimian moralities of reproduction while others are marked by moralities of freedom. The answer, for Robbins, lies in a model of cultures as structured by values, following Dumont (See also Sommerschuh & Robbins, this volume). In cultures where the values are fairly clear, well integrated in relation to each other, with one paramount value that encompasses other lesser values which are themselves hierarchically ordered and generally accepted, what we tend to find, he argues, are moralities of reproduction, i.e. the routine performance of normative moral acts without reference to freedom or choice. Robbins then turns to Weber's understanding of culture as made up of different value spheres (e.g. economic, political, religious and intellectual) each governed by different imperatives. Further, each value sphere tries to realize its own values to the maximum extent without regard for the values of the other spheres. Thus, the different value spheres stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other. Under such circumstances, Robbins argues, 'a morality of freedom and choice comes into play and people become

consciously aware of choosing their own fates. And it is because in such cases people become aware of choosing between values that they come to see their decision-making process as one engaged with moral issues.' (ibid.: 300).

Robbins' intervention is welcome because it engages with the question of freedom at a cultural level. It helps us understand why freedom and choice are emphasized in some societies, particularly those in which value spheres are highly differentiated. It also enables us to understand why moralities of freedom obtain within some spheres, e.g. the political which is constantly emergent in relation to particular events and to contestations about access to resources and power, while moralities of reproduction might obtain within more settled spheres, such as the religious, where values are set up hierarchically in stable conflicts. Importantly, Robbins shows us how moralities of freedom might cause existential angst, such as among the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea, where the conflicts between different value spheres are so deep that people simply cannot work out the right way to live, particularly as making a choice in relation to one value sphere means giving up something just as important in another value sphere. This is similar to Isaiah Berlin's notion of value pluralism, in that there is no objective reason to choose one value over a competing one; each is good in its own right. This may lead to subjective angst. How desirable freedom may be, therefore, depends on the conditions within which one chooses or is forced to exercise it.

It is, I think, very hard to find pure examples of moralities of reproduction, i.e. where individuals never feel called upon to make ethical choices about how they want to live and what is considered a good thing to do. Even where values and

rules are clear, we can see the emergence of new ways of doing good. In other words, even what appear to be moralities of reproduction can involve ethical reflection and freedom.

Conducting fieldwork among temple consecration priests in Tamilnadu, South India, I noticed an innovation that some priests had adopted. When a temple is re-consecrated, priests 'empty' divine presence from the images inside the temple, moving it into water pots which they then 'recharge' with presence through the performance of a fire sacrifice and the chanting of consecration-specific Sanskrit *mantras* (Venkatesan 2013). This water is then poured over the statues and the temple finial. During the 'recharging', the images of the gods in the temple are deemed to be 'just statues', i.e. no worship is carried out to them and worshippers do not have any access to embodied deities. Some priests I was working with had noticed the disappointment of worshippers at the absence of the embodied deities, and had begun to fashion and temporarily induce divine presence into images, made by pasting sandalwood and turmeric onto a wooden frame, so that worshippers could still see and worship the gods. This practice, increasingly common, does not appear in the ritual manuals priests use for re-consecration ceremonies. It is an invention. When I asked about it, one priest said: 'they come to see the gods and worship. They come out of love. It is not good to disappoint them. So, we make these images (*murti* or embodied deities).' Other priests present agreed. The priests' reasoning is explicitly ethical – worshipful love should not be thwarted, people should not be disappointed. Here there is no conflict within the value sphere of religion; overall moralities of reproduction obtain, and priests follow explicit textual rules in their conduct that they claim ensure well-being in the world, i.e. are for the wider good.

Notwithstanding this, and even though they know that following the rituals is sufficient, priests are moved to acts of care that come out of their understanding of the disappointment worshippers feel when there is nothing for them to worship. We come, then, to care. The re-consecration rituals are seen to create sorrow, which priests make a matter of concern to alleviate. Their acknowledged expertise frees them to innovate in ways that deploy the rituals but go beyond the texts to enact ethical caring purposes.

Freedom as an emic term

Priests do not explicitly invoke freedom in this case, rather emphasising their ability as ritual experts to care both for the deity and worshippers by manipulating divine presence. In other words, it is I who identifies their making of paste images as an act that brings together the burden of care for another's disappointment, reflection and the subsequent exercise of the freedom to innovate. I will return to the usefulness of the term from an etic point of view, for now let us stay with emic invocations. For example, priests explicitly speak about freedom in relation to *moksha* or liberation of the soul from the cycle of rebirths through human endeavours, usually renunciation. Priests, like many other Hindus, actively support the efforts of renouncers, recognising their quest for *moksha* as righteous and worthy. In order to do so, they may constrain their own impulses vis a vis renouncers and also evaluate renouncers by how strictly they hold themselves back from the world (Venkatesan 2016).

Anthropological studies show that people around the world desire and organise to achieve freedom for themselves, for others or for goods that they believe should be unconstrained or unfettered. This ranges from this-worldly

invocations of freedom – liberty, emancipation, the freedom of institutions like the market, or of things like software, the ability to follow a course of action or to lead one’s life as one sees fit – to conceptions in terms of other-worldly aims – freedom from the cycle of birth and rebirth, from the body, from earthly cares and so on. As a substantial topic of study, then, freedom requires no special pleading. Indeed, there have been a number of studies that have variously focused on the promises and pitfalls of freedom (e.g. Englund 2006; Hansen 2012); on free software (e.g. Coleman 2004; Kelty 2008, 2014); on evaluations of freedom in changing socio-political times (e.g. High 2013); on freedom in and through religious discipline (Cook 2010; Mahmood 2005) as well as both free markets (Carrier 1997; Jonsson & Saemundsson 2015; Keshavjee 2014) and freedom from markets (Barnard 2011, 2016; Farkas 2017), the freedom to connect with the world (Pedersen 2018) and to refrain from ‘reading’ and therefore impinging on others (Stasch 2008) to name a few.

These studies variously interrogate the meanings of freedom, the desire for and attempts to achieve freedom, and the consequences of achieving freedom. They ask what people mean by freedom when they invoke it. They also ask when freedom becomes a motivating factor, for whom and for what purposes. Importantly, some of these studies evaluate the effects of such invocations and movements towards freedom in the lives of differently positioned people. Noting the diversity of the meanings that freedom attains in use, Wardle and Lino e Silva suggest that awareness of the existence of freedom, as a topic to be investigated, seems often to start ‘from the presence of a signifier of freedom in the concrete research context extending from there into the various meanings that freedom acquires in daily use.’ (2017:24).

While different emic invocations of freedom might be radically different in their content, any project that explicitly keeps freedom/free at its heart, I want to suggest, is an ethical project that often involves social critique. Comparing different systematic invocations of freedom and attempts to further it advances the anthropology of ethics by focusing on how people reflexively identify matters of concern to them and attempt to create the conditions to do something about them. This does not have to involve resistance, but it does have to contain a considered reflection of the world or of oneself as presently constituted, a normative vision and some plan to achieve it. Freedom may be invoked variously to protect an existing way of life from threats to it, to challenge existing arrangements, or to change one's relation to the world in ways deemed good or right. I ground the above observations in the following discussion of three different activist groups for whom freedom/free are emic terms. The content of freedom varies from case to case, but each as we will see, perceives itself as an ethical project – one that is right and good. None is easy, and all require individual commitment, co-ordinated action and wider support that needs to be actively mobilised.

Freegans and dumpster-divers forage food that has been thrown away by shops either because it is past its best-by date or because it is not selling quickly enough. Practised in many places from Seattle to New York to Barcelona to Manchester, the noteworthy point about both freegans and dumpster-divers (see Lotman 2013 for the differences between the two) is that they actively choose to root around in skips to find food, both to consume it and implicitly and explicitly to critique capitalist structures that valorise the exchange rather than the use value of food-commodities, leading to food waste even as people go hungry. This

distinguishes them from the large numbers of people throughout the world who have to rummage in rubbish dumps in order to eat and who would rather not do so. Freeganism, in particular, is an ethical and ethicized way of life, spawning reading groups, redistribution centres, foraging walks and public protests (Barnard 2011, 2016; Shantz n.d; Edwards & Mercer 2007; More 2011). It runs counter to socially accepted ideas about waste as dirty, focusing on the potential of some waste to be a good that should be available to anyone who wants it. It also breaks property laws - rooting around in skips that are fenced off on private land can lead to arrests (Balmer 2014). Freeganism is a continuously evolving project that is oriented both towards the individual self and to the wider world. Its aim is freedom from complicity in exploitative and destructive market economies. Freegans, we learn, progress from dumpster diving to other activities such as bicycle maintenance and repair, sewing and other forms of self-provisioning. Their understandings of their bodies change and their senses become more and more attuned to finding usable things in a world of waste. In other words, the ethical project expands to encompass more and more areas of life as individuals reflect, in light of their ideals and values, on the world in which they live and seek to change, and how they themselves want to live.

My second case study focuses on people and practices that cluster around Free/Open Source Software (F/OSS). This is the antithesis of proprietary software where access to the software source code is heavily restricted even to users who purchase the software. Kelty describes F/OSS as 'a set of practices for the distributed collaborative creation of software source code that is then made openly and freely available through a clever, unconventional use of copyright law' (2008: 2). The cultural significance of F/OSS, Kelty argues, goes far beyond

computer programmers and their concerns. Rather, it constitutes a reorientation of power and knowledge extending into various realms that are concerned with intellectual property (music, film, publishing etc.). F/OSS, also speaks to questions of access, is drawn into power struggles between multi-national corporations and nation-states, and is related to development initiatives. It plays strongly into ideas about the gift (Raymond 2001), and questions of freedom – *to, from* and *of* (Kelty 2014).

While many people around the world use Free/Open Source Software (F/OSS) for various reasons – some of it is freely available to download and use – users with the skills can reconfigure the software to suit their particular needs. For significant numbers of self-identified ‘geeks’ (i.e. those who are committed to Free/Open Source Software) it is an ethical project rooted in technical capacities. At the heart of this ethical project is the recognition of the importance of computers and the internet in contemporary life, and the attempt to keep the infrastructure that makes information available and knowledge possible accessible and modifiable rather than closed off. Anyone can participate in this ethical project; participants do not have to subscribe to a particular politics. A common analogy is with free speech (<https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.en.html>). The mandatory openness of the source code guarantees negative freedom - no restrictions bar one, that the source code must remain open – is placed on what one does with it. Coleman writes:

The moral and semiotic load of free software is *a commitment to prevent limiting the freedom of others*. This is done to realize a sphere for the unfettered circulation of thought, expression, and action for software

development... [F]reedom underscores an individual's right to create, use, and distribute software in a manner that will allow exactly the same for others, so long as license rules are followed—the goal of which is to enact a *universal sphere* for the flourishing of free forms of action and thought (2004: 509-10).

It should be of little surprise that the free software movement does not endorse any positive freedoms. Indeed, developers are clear that F/OSS is politically agnostic and neutral – its only concern is ensuring openness and modifiability (ibid.). F/OSS adherents and publics then, look very different in different places. In the USA they range from large corporations to Silicon Valley libertarians to anti-capitalist activists (ibid.: 513-4; Kelty 2008). In India, Folz (2019) shows how F/OSS is harnessed to diverse projects, from those initiated by the Communist Parties, to anti-Facebook movements, to governmental land registration projects, to giving Dalit school children access to computers. Here, it is not so much the individual's liberty to know, modify, improve and control technology that is emphasised, as it is the possibility of escaping from the influence of corporations that exert a stranglehold over governments, which increasingly rely on computerised technology and the internet to govern, and thus over people. UNESCO, too, suggests that F/OSS can play an important role in development (<https://en.unesco.org/foss>).

In both F/OSS and Freeganism, activists explicitly aim to make certain things free as part of a considered ethical endeavour to improve or change what they regard as unjustifiable. While both attempts play on the notion of free as in *gratis*, the bigger effort is no less than an attempt to transform existing

arrangements by questioning attempts to fence off goods through property logics. Both F/OSS and freeganism/dumpster-diving are ethical projects: they bring together the triad of care, the formation and enactment of purposes, and freedom. Each represents a reflexive and thoughtful attempt to answer the question 'how ought one to live?' Further, they ask, 'how ought the world to be organised?' They involve individual effort and, in some cases, sacrifice.

Dumpster-diving is illegal in many places; F/OSS activists find themselves unwilling or morally incapable of working with proprietary software, thus jeopardising careers in conventional companies. Neither Freeganism nor F/OSS understand freedom in terms of individual autonomy, unlike the right-wing libertarians discussed earlier. However even with the right wing-libertarians, the ideology of individual autonomy sits within a larger project of the freedom of the market, which is seen as more able to promote general prosperity and reward individual effort than does 'state interference', however well-intentioned. Here, the dangers of positive freedom, i.e. the 'freedom to' appear much more clearly emphasised. As we have seen in the opposition to a no-risk banking system and also to taxes on consumer items, e.g. sugary drinks, this is based on the argument that states can lead people to believe that they would rather forego individual responsibility than take the freedoms and rewards (albeit risky) afforded by the market. Negative freedom or 'freedom from', on the face of it, does not carry such a danger, but people have to be persuaded that their best interests, individually and as an agglomeration of rational individuals, lie with free markets.

Individuals may arrive at these ways of thinking either by themselves or in discussion with others. Further, each of the above socio-political projects involves pedagogy and persuasion – adherents want to teach others why their

way is good. They therefore involve hierarchies of value: this good is higher and more important than that good, and not just for any single individual but more universally. Anthropological studies of political projects that headline freedom can be compared with each other to understand the content of freedom in each case. Such comparisons can show how each project is not only constructed as ethical, but how also ethics forms the ontological grounds for activism (see also Lazar, this volume). Finally, we can study how the same national or global settings can spawn completely different kinds of political projects with very different normative purposes and ethical underpinnings. We can thus begin to ask, for instance, how the freedom of the freegans compares with the property and capitalism oriented freedom of the right-wing activists and how each attempts to shape the political space according to its notions of the good. This opens up studies of pluralist democracies in interesting ways.

Thinking with freedom

What does a focus on freedom add to our understanding of ethical endeavours when people do not use the term themselves? In 'For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom', James Laidlaw argued that 'there cannot be a developed and sustained anthropology of ethics without there being also an ethnographic and theoretical interest...in freedom.' (2002:311). We have already seen what Laidlaw understands by ethics: any way of answering the question 'how ought one to live?' Ethics involves the capacity (even if intermittently exercised) for reflection – a stepping back from life as it is currently lived or organized – and the capacity (even if severely limited by circumstances) to imagine and work towards a better kind of life. The life one feels one ought to live may be a matter

of self-cultivation to embody and enact a better, purer or more perfect self in accordance with extant values and ideals. It may be a matter of working out and enacting alternatives to current arrangements that are found lacking in some crucial aspect, or deplorable (e.g. Dave, 2012). Such attempts may be supported or not by wider society – but the point remains that the individual or groups of individuals concerned understand these alternatives as better. Note that the anthropologist does not have to agree with these projects.

We have already seen how particular ethical imperatives lie at the heart of both Freeganism and the Free Software movement. Indeed, as both actively draw on the concept of freedom, it is not too far a stretch to think through what they mean by freedom and how particular notions of freedom underpin their efforts either to critique wasteful capitalism (in the case of the freegans) or to challenge the exclusivity of property rights in software creation and circulation (as in the case of the Free Software geeks). Likewise, albeit in a very different way, we can see how the freedom of markets underpins the political activism of right-wing libertarians who conceive of themselves as autonomous individuals, but whose collective efforts are oriented towards societal changes that support the ‘free’ flourishing of said individuals. But, what does freedom as an analytical concept add to our understanding of ethical projects when participants do not explicitly invoke freedom in their own accounts?

Let us turn to the dilemma of the Good Samaritan in contemporary China, where individuals who assist unrelated strangers are subjected to extortion attempts by the very person they have helped (Yan 2009). Thus, we hear of a young man, Chen, who helps an elderly woman who has been injured in a road

accident. Having taken the woman to hospital and paid for her treatment, Chen is amazed when the woman demands compensation from him, arguing that he must have been responsible in some way for her accident; there would be no other reason for him to help her, a stranger. Yan traces 26 such incidents. My interest here is in his argument that people increasingly become scared and unwilling to help strangers, even if their ethical reasoning urges them to do so. When I was discussing this paper in a lecture on the anthropology of ethics, a Chinese student told me that increasingly young people who tend to hold more universalistic moral values (this is something Yan (*ibid.*: 20) also suggests) were using their mobile phones to document their attempts to help strangers by collecting video testimonies and contact details from passers-by to prove their non-involvement in the accident itself, leaving them able to assist victims without fear of extortion. In other words, they were exercising their ingenuity in order to secure the freedom to act towards suffering humans in what they felt were the right and good ways. Such ethicized motivations to help strangers were neither recognized by the victims they were helping nor by the state apparatus, but clearly motivated these good Samaritans who found ways to enact them.

Let us turn to a very different case. Kathryn Paxton George (1994) describes how she became a vegetarian on feminist and animal-rights grounds. Having made this considered ethical choice about how she wanted to live, she was not, however, sure that her ten-year old daughter should be raised as a vegetarian. George's dilemma appears to be two-fold: 1) will a vegetarian diet be nutritionally sufficient for her growing child? 2) If not, and she believes feminists should be vegetarian, should she as a feminist give her daughter meat? In her article, George critically examines the feminist argument for vegetarianism. Her

exploration is wide-ranging: she draws on studies about nutritional needs for diverse demographics, analyses what she sees as the male bias in moral theory and thus the inequities inherent in valorizing vegetarianism as a moral ideal. The conflation of ethical vegetarianism with feminism, she argues, is problematic because it presupposes the nutritional needs of a young and healthy adult male and ignores those of females at various developmental stages, children, and the elderly. In other words, she questions the setting up as a moral ideal of a practice that works best for certain male bodies, and which disadvantages people who either cannot live up to the ideal, or, if they do, find that it is damaging to them. George concludes that vegetarianism and feminism are not compatible. Thus, while she would continue to be a vegetarian (presumably on animal-rights grounds) she 'could not restrict her daughter's diet' (ibid.: 417).

I read this article as one where the author feels the need to put in a fair bit of work to free herself from imposing her own voluntarily claimed ethical imperative on her child for whose bodily development she feels responsible. She does so by questioning the very basis of feminist support of vegetarianism. While she retains her own freedom to make a positive choice for herself, she also frees herself sufficiently to refrain on ethical grounds from making it for her dependent child.

What about the freedom to refuse something to ensure the long-term welfare of the self and another? In 2009-10, during fieldwork among Hindu consecration priests in Tamilnadu, India, I was talking to an elderly woman in a temple that was being re-consecrated. In the middle of our conversation, she called out to her daughter, who was busy with something, to bring her some water. Observing

the crowd around the taps, I offered the elderly woman my own (reusable) bottle of water. She refused. I tried to press her to take it, saying that I had not put my lips to it and so it carried no saliva pollution (Tamil *yecchal*). She refused again, saying that if she, a non-Brahmin, drank from my bottle, then she would reap the sin of polluting me (a Brahmin), as I would go on to use the bottle later. We would both suffer. Nothing I could say, including that I did not subscribe to Brahmanical notions of purity, could shake her resolve. Her daughter also failed to convince her. She would rather go thirsty than drink from my bottle. I might not believe in caste, but that did not make the facts of caste less true.

This incident bears analysis from two perspectives – the elderly woman’s and mine. Let us begin with hers. Ethically and morally, she is committed to upholding the rules of caste commensality. This is how she thinks she ought to live and, because these rules are generally seen as good and right in this rural part of Tamilnadu, she has the strength to insist that she, at least, will uphold them. My value system is egalitarian. I do not subscribe to caste rules that place Brahmins higher than non-Brahmins. Further, I believe that it is right and good to share water with a thirsty person. What the incident produced in me was a feeling of unfreedom, albeit not in Bauman’s sense. This feeling of unfreedom comes from the inability to exercise the product of one’s ethical reasoning in the social world which one shares with others. It is important to focus on such unfreedom because it reveals that ethical freedom is not a matter of individual will or autonomy – it is exercised in relation to others who might thwart the exercise of one’s ethically derived understandings, not out of malice, but simply because they hold to different truths.

I want to put these three examples in conversations with ‘ordinary ethics’ approaches (Lambek, 2010), which refuse to treat the ‘ethical’ as a separate domain of human life. Among the distinguishing features of ordinary ethics approaches is their focus on everyday interactions and language, and on the kinds of responsibility people take for each other. The goal is neither transcendence nor revolution, rather it is to smoothen and to repair and make collective life live-able. Because freedom is often associated with transcendence, autonomy or revolution, ordinary ethics approaches rarely draw on the concept to think with. However, choices about what one ought to do that is good and right for oneself or another – dependent, stranger or acquaintance – run through social life. Thinking through these three very different cases through the lens of freedom and ethics allows us to see how, in completely different contexts, very different people come to understandings of how they ought to live their lives and find ways to exercise their freedom to act or not in certain ways. In George’s case, we see how worries about the right diet for one’s child may push an individual to question and reject the orthodoxy that couples feminism with vegetarianism. Ideas about shared humanity may guide the ways in which young Chinese people understand their responsibilities to suffering strangers and enact them despite the risks of being financially stung. The elderly Tamil woman exercises her freedom to refuse my offer because she wants to protect herself and me. In all of these cases, individuals decide what the right course of action is and try and make it possible for themselves to follow it in their current lives as they lead them. This, of course, is well within the purview of ethics, but it is also within the purview of freedom because, in each case, the individuals involved could have acted in another way but consciously chose not to, despite their

choice not being the easier one. In each case, also, people are able to justify their particular choices in terms of their felt responsibilities towards themselves, or towards others. These justifications are value-laden, and they are about the ways in which people exercise their freedom to take responsibility for the well-being of others.

Even where ethics is 'tacit' and enacted in the midst of the hurly-burly of life and not a product of reflexive stepping back, I argue, a focus on freedom is not misplaced. Das (2012: 138) draws on Khare's ethnography (1976) to discuss the difference between inviting poor relatives to a wedding in a manner that does the invitees honour ('please come and partake of the feast') compared to one that dishonours them ('please come – you too partake of the feast'). The rich relative is obligated to invite all kin; how he or she does it is a matter of his or her ethical choice. A badly worded invitation reveals his/her evaluation of the poor relative and, because he/she was free to make the invitation in a nicer way, is evaluated in turn.

Not quite championing ordinary ethics approaches, but also interested in what he calls 'the rough ground of the everyday' in which people make their lives in Basra, Iraq, Al Mohammad also locates the ethical in acts of care (2015). We hear of Abu Hibba who, though not wealthy, secretly pays the rent of a cook in a restaurant he frequents to help the cook avoid eviction. Abbu Hibba's reason for his generosity is explicit: 'these people we've grown-up and lived with, we have to try to take care of each other as much as we can.' (ibid.: S112). Abu Hibba couches his generosity as an imperative, but it is a reasoned ethical choice, one that he makes in discussion with his wife and children. Further, while Al

Mohammad does not discuss Abu Hibba's reasons for his secrecy, again I read this as an ethical choice that seeks to ensure that the cook does not feel under obligation to him.

Ordinary ethics then, ceases to be quite so tacit and unmarked (Lempert, 2013), albeit still geared towards making life liveable, bearable or pleasant even in difficult situations or within asymmetrical relations. It involves the exercise of reflection, evaluations of need, and the extension of care. Importantly, freedom as an analytical concept remains useful because there is no script in terms of how we should act ethically towards others (Keane 2016). Drawing on freedom (and its flip side of unfreedom) as conceptual lens to think through these very different cases enables both comparison and analyses that go beyond a notion of the atomised individual, locating the individual in responsible and meaningful relations with others without losing sight of people as individuals.

Conclusion

For various reasons anthropologists have neglected freedom as an object of study. One of these is the common understanding of freedom as pertaining to individual autonomy. Another is the assumption that the concept of freedom is implicated in desires for transcendence or radical change. As I have discussed, neither has to be the case. Further, the prevalence of freedom or freedom-like concepts in different ethnographic settings means that it is imperative that anthropologists engage with this concept – its contents, valences and relationship to other key concepts such as duty, obligation and morality. Freedom as a substantive topic of anthropological attention does not require special pleading when it appears as an emic concept.

Mobilising freedom as an analytical concept appears to require some justification. Freedom enters the picture in ethical life in two ways: firstly, in Malinowski's sense of the freedom to form purposes in terms of the larger invitations and injunctions about a good life that exist in wider social groupings of which the individual is part; secondly, in terms of the freedom to enact such purposes given prevailing norms and practices. In both cases, freedom can only be understood in relational terms, even where the idea-typical free person might be locally understood as an autonomous individual. This is because the ideal of the autonomous individual, whether the renouncer of Hinduism, the hermit of Christianity or the self-owning libertarian, arises always within specific social settings and requires institutional or inter-personal support to be accepted and enacted. The purposes can be considered ethical when, in Keane's terms, they are 'oriented toward historically specific visions of human flourishing—of what a life should and could be, something that is less constraining than enabling, not abstract but embodied and concrete' (2016). This places the anthropology of ethics and freedom firmly within the purview of care. Such care may be for the self, but as I have sought to show, it can extend beyond the self to care for others (strangers, kith or kin), for institutions such as markets, or for things such as the creation and continued circulation of Open Source Software and access to edible and other useful waste. When people feel unable to realise their purposes, they can feel unfree. This may lead them to find ways to enact these purposes; by recourse to technology as in the case of the Chinese Good Samaritans, by breaking the link between feminism and vegetarianism, by organising themselves via the creation and use of legal tools as in the case of F/OSS enthusiasts or, as in the case of the right-wing libertarians by attempting to shift

the entire political direction towards their ideals. In other words, people have to work at creating the conditions to form, articulate and enact their purposes. Such work can involve pedagogy, persuasion and sacrifices, for example when freegans sacrifice their physical freedom in pursuit of their avowed ethical (albeit in some places, illegal) purpose of extracting useful waste.

In her discussion of Held's care ethics (2006) Friedman argues that 'care is a substantial moral concern of moral agents in practice. Care ethics has the particular strength of developing a plausible account of how moral agents immersed in daily practice go about understanding their situations and determining what to do' (2008: 548). While Held's focus is to develop a feminist ethics of care that is focused on emotional and other forms of responsibility towards dependent others (also see Mattingly & McKearney in this volume), this way of thinking about care and ethics lends itself both to socio-political and interpersonal ethical projects of the kind that I have been discussing with the addition of freedom into the analytical mix. Even where there is no clear formulation of purposes but rather a 'thrown-in-ness', because care is on-going and does not accede in practice to some formulaic understanding, caring does involve choices that can be evaluated and can require the kinds of justification that frees people to do what they feel is right or good for a particular other or in more universal terms, albeit always located in particular settings. Mattingly's description of a mother who has to free herself from her fears in order to let her disabled son play soccer (2014) can then be placed alongside a neophyte freegan who knows that it is right to take edible food from a skip and has to free herself from her fears of arrest or inadvertent harm to do so. While the mother is thrown into the situation of caring for a disabled child, the freegan has chosen

her ethical purpose. Neither is fully supported by wider society and there is no fixed template to follow. Each has to work out what is right for the object of care and free himself or herself to act accordingly either individually over time or by finding like-minded others.

To conclude, it is clear that freedom is central to an anthropology of ethics both as an emic and an etic concept. If, as Mattingly and McKearney argue in this volume, 'care is not merely one ethical concern or good, among others, but the ontological ground of ethics', then freedom has also to be core to discussions of care, not necessarily headlined but as a thread that runs through the ways in which people work out and strive to lead good lives or, at the very least, do right by themselves and others. For the anthropologist, this has the advantage of freeing freedom from its associations with autonomous individualism and also from an overemphasis on resistance.

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