A note on ethics and logic

by Anton Blok

> We feel that even when all possible scientific questions
> have been answered, the problems of life remain
> completely untouched. Of course there are then no
> questions left, and this itself is the answer.
> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* (6.52).

Anthropologists conduct research in order to acquire a more adequate under-
standing of human organizations. Although our ignorance in this realm is
still substantial (on an empirical as well as a theoretical level), government
and military agencies find it useful to request available ethnographic informa-
tion on specific peoples and areas. Given the issues and the scale on which
they occur today, it thus seems that anthropology is assuming its part along
with the more advanced physical sciences and helps to shape the profile of
power balances in and between particular societies. Over the past few years a
growing number of anthropologists have become seriously concerned about
the way in which certain ethnographic data can be and actually are used by
very powerful human agencies.

The central issue is thus an ethical problem. It concerns the political and
moral implications of research and publication on tribal and peasant mino-
rities which are part of or are being incorporated into larger political frame-
works. As Delmos Jones writes:

'By presenting descriptive materials we have provided a tool which the more power-
ful can use against the powerless; the tribal minorities in Thailand have no facilities
even to request the information that may be useful to them. They are, in fact,
illiterate. (...) Given the traditional ability of the anthropologist to live among
a people, gain their trust, learn their ways, their secrets, and then reveal these
secrets to their oppressors, the anthropologist can be said to be the most successful
secret agent of all for the establishment' (1971: 349).

The apprehension about this particular use of anthropology has resulted in
discussions on the question as to which values anthropologists should share
and what they ought to do in specific situations, given their different and
often conflicting commitments.

In this article two main points of view will be considered. The first is the
alleged need for an enforceable ethical code regarding the relations between
anthropologists and the people they study. For a clear statement, see Jor-
genson (1971). The second is the suggestion that, under certain circumstances,
to refrain from publishing or to withdraw from a specific area can be most
realistic ways to protect the anonymity and interests of informants.[1] It is my

[1]See Jones (1971: 349) and the observation of Oscar Lewis quoted by Joseph Jor-
genson and Eric Wolf, Reply, *The New York Review of Books,* vol. XVI, no. 6,
April 8, 1971, p. 46.

contention that the first viewpoint is based on a misunderstanding of what ethics is about and, hence, cannot be maintained. Though I can neither share the second prospect, I do not find it untenable and can at least respect it. In the following pages I will substantiate my main objections and try to explore a possible alternative.

To advocate an ethical code for anthropologists with enforcement powers is to misunderstand the logical character of a particular language-game. Ethics is the enquiry into what is 'good' or 'right'.[2] A special branch of ethical philosophy is concerned with the analysis of moral terms and concepts; in analytical ethics one tries to show to what category ethical propositions belong. In everyday language, the terms 'good', 'right', 'bad', 'wrong', etc. are used in two widely different senses. An example of the first, or relative, sense would be 'The right way to Rome'; an example of the second, or ethical sense, would be 'Protecting your informants is right'. The first is an empirical proposition, which can be put as a statement of fact, e.g. the right way is the one you follow if you want to get to Rome in the shortest time. The term 'right', in this relative sense, can be defined since it is an empirical property, and the assertion can be proved true or false. In the second statement, the term 'right' defies definition or description: it is not the name of a naturalistic or a non-naturalistic quality; it is not a name at all. Though apparently a descriptive statement, the phrase is in fact a commendation, whose function is not to give information, but to express and arouse feelings and to stimulate action. It should be recognized that to describe is to describe, to commend is to commend, and to express one's feelings is to express one's feelings. These things are not reducible to one another, nor can they be reduced or be defined in terms of anything else.[3] One cannot define 'right' in this ethical sense (in-

[2] There are three main courses along which these investigations are pursued. The first describes the phenomena of moral experience and relates these to specific societies in which they are found. This branch of ethics is called 'descriptive' ethics, and is in fact what many anthropologists to a greater or lesser extent have always been doing: to describe and seek to explain moral practices and convictions that are current among certain peoples. The second approach involves 'normative' ethics According to Stevenson (1964: vi), it 'differs from descriptive ethics in an obvious way: it does not seek conclusions about what others have implicitly or explicitly *considered* good, etc., but instead seeks well founded conclusions that are intended to supplement, back up, or stand in opposition to what others have considered good'. Investigations dealing with the analysis of ethical pronouncements and terms constitute the third branch, called 'analytical' ethics. The British philosophers Ayer (1972: 136-58), Stevenson (1944, 1964), and Urmson (1968) have been primarily concerned with analytical ethics. Of particular interest is Wittgenstein's lecture on ethics which dates from the early 1930s and which has been published together with discussions and comments in 1965.

[3] See Hartnack's discussion on Wittgenstein and Urmson (1965: 118-24).

trinsically right, right-in-itself) in terms of empirical properties without committing the naturalistic fallacy. For, if we define 'right' in this second sense as 'advocated by the majority of anthropologists' (which is an empirical property), one may still ask if it is indeed 'right'. Though there is always *some* element of description in ethical utterances, their major function is not to describe facts, but to create an influence. The sentence 'Protecting your informants is right' has no more factual meaning than the statement 'Protecting your informants'. The presence of an ethical symbol in a proposition adds nothing to its factual content (Ayer 1972: 142).

An ethical language-game rules out contradictions: we cannot determine whether ethical judgements are either true or false. These are precisely the pretentions of an ethical code — to lay down rules about what is intrinsically good, not only good as a means to something else. An ethical code which incorporates enforcement powers is a contradiction in terms. It is based on a misunderstanding of the *quasi*-imperative character of ethical terms and judgements.

We disagree on questions of goodness, and disagreement in this realm can never, strictly speaking, amount to contradictions.[4]

If the concern with normative codes turns out to be illusive and hopeless, based as it is on a certain misuse of our language, how can one explain its striking actuality?[5] It has been argued that this concern is rooted in the hope 'of getting some argument or theory to share our responsibilities'; it represents

'a form of escape, and escape from the realities of moral life, i.e. from our moral responsibilities. (Such a code) would destroy all personal responsibility and therefore all ethics. (. . . .) In view of these considerations it is not surprising to find that the beginning of 'scientific' ethics, in the form of ethical naturalism, coincides in time with what may be called the discovery of personal responsibility' (Popper 1962: 237-38).

A recent article (Adams 1971), dealing with ethical guidelines in anthropology and formulated to represent the best interests of anthropologists, clearly constitutes an attempt to wash one's hands. An ethical code, as envisaged by Adams, would enable anthropologists to shirk specific commitments, while at the same time acting rightfully and legitimately, rather than justly and righteously according to their own personal moral standards. With such guidelines, most of us would have their cards in good order, that is, we would be able to interpret and bend the rules according to the occasion and get away with it. The implementation of any ethical code will involve the extinction

4 See Ayer (1972: 140-43).
5 See, for example, Stuart Hampshire's review of John Rawls' book *A Theory of Justice* ('A New Philosophy of the Just Society', *The New York Review of Books*, vol. XVIII, no. 3, February 24, 1972, pp. 34-39).

of all ethics. It represents, therefore, an effort at dehumanization. Hypocrisy will be hard to unmask. In the end we would come to believe that anthropologists who followed the rules could do their research without dirtying their hands, like the young and naive Hugo in Sartre's famous play. Recent discussions on ethics in our discipline fail to expose these illusions.

When it is realized that anthropological research, especially when addressed to the realities of power relations, cannot but damage the interests of specific groups, one may at least respect those who decide to withdraw from field work, or even from the discipline altogether. A possible and perhaps more realistic alternative involves a shift of perspective from the study of tribal and peasant minorities as such, to the enquiry into the various ways in which these and other relatively powerless groups have become part of larger political frameworks. This approach involves a shift from a short-term to a long-term perspective. In this way one may be able to account for the changing power relations in societies at large. Investigations of these processes, like the masterly study of Barrington Moore on the rise and development of particular state structures (1968), may set the pace for a reorientation. These studies are aimed at a more adequate understanding of interdependencies about which we are still poorly informed and which, therefore, are largely beyond control. 'In any society', writes Barrington Moore,

'the dominant groups are the ones with the most to hide about the way society works. Very often therefore truthful analyses are bound to have a critical ring, to seem like exposures rather than objective statements, as the term is conventionally used. For all students of human society, sympathy with the victims of historical processes and skepticism about the victor's claims provide essential safeguards against being taken in by the dominant mythology. A scholar who tries to be objective needs these feelings as part of his ordinary working equipment' (1968: 522-23).

Those concerned with the fate of peasant and tribal minorities cannot build their hope on the implementation of an ethical code, and rather than to refrain from publishing or simple retreat they may consider whether more and better information on the larger power structures will yield the means to establish some measure of control over the often ruthless ways in which minorities are incorporated. Though this alternative does not rule out misuse of ethnographic information, it certainly reduces the chances of a covert and one-sided employment. It is important to recognize that the proposed long-term perspective on the development of societies at large does not release the anthropologist from his personal responsibility which is inescapable. Between the acceptance of this human condition and withdrawal there is no middle course, except fakery.

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