

BOOK REVIEW

Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories

By Webb Keane

Reviewed by Tyler Halstead

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A story which I can recall well enough to include here, but the origins of which I cannot remember, went something like the following. Long ago, a scientist began observing frogs in a pond near his home. He was struck with curiosity at the concept of life and wanted to understand more about the source of this life, particularly that which he saw in the frogs. So he captured one and began investigating where the life was to be found in it. He thought that maybe the life was contained in the legs, as he noticed that they were what powered the frog to hop so far, so he cut them off and began to dissect them. Nothing especially reminiscent of life was found there. He cut out the eyes next, thinking that they might be where the life was held. The frog still moved and the eyes he had removed seemed rather lifeless, so he figured there must be life somewhere else within the frog. He then cut out the tongue, followed by the rest of the head and lastly, opened the abdomen to search for life among the interior organs. Alas, the scientist could not find which part of the frog was where the life came from and now every one of these individual parts that once made up the frog lay bloody and motionless on his table.

At points, Keane's dissection of the topic of ethical life felt like that story: slicing his scalpel into every individual organ that makes up what might be considered ethical and each time concluding that there is nothing inherently ethical about that individual piece. What the frog story implies, and Keane says over and over after examining every aspect of the ethical, is that it is the interaction between each of the various components that gives it life. He captures the essence of this in the final few sentences of his conclusion,

If the empirical study of ethical life tells us anything, it should be that these tensions are chronic and not likely to be resolved for good one way or the other. People are endowed with psychological capacities and propensities of which they are mostly unaware and over which they have little or no control. They are embedded in social relationships that are crucial

to their sense of self-worth. But they are also purposeful agents who respond to the ideas and arguments their social histories have produced and are prone to contributing new ones. Indeed, it may well be that these very tensions and the impossibility of resolving them once and for all help drive people to make new ethical discoveries and inventions. Without its social histories, ethical life would not be ethical; without its natural histories, it would not be life. (262)

As the subtitle of *Ethical Life* indicates, Keane's approach to understanding the topic of ethical life is to look to both the natural and social branches of human history for insights. He recognizes that these are often mutually antagonistic, or at least mutually dismissive fields, but makes a strong case that a study of ethical life is fatally incomplete without both. In fact, as the reader moves through the book, they realize that Keane's motivation for writing it seems to be just as much about using the topic of ethics as a catalyst for bringing the natural and the social disciplines closer together as it is about using the natural and the social as a means of better understanding the ethical.

Throughout this book, Keane addresses an impressive breadth of topics and manages to link them all somehow into his argument. In the early chapters, much effort is spent gleaning insights from psychology, and especially child development. It is explained how even as babies, humans show signs of responding to pain in others (44) and are able to begin reading the intentions of others (52), which though not necessarily ethical in themselves, are certainly necessary building blocks for ethical life. The key thing to pay attention to in these chapters is the development of what Keane calls the first, second, and third person perspectives (64). Just as in grammar, we cannot function with only one of these, we must also be able to move between each of these perspectives in order to have something like a complete picture of the ethical.

In the middle chapters, he employs his own training as an anthropologist to highlight examples from all over the world that seem to muddy the picture we think we have about ethics and human interaction. For instance, one objection to saying that ethical life requires us to

imagine others' perspectives is that some Melanesian cultures deny the ability to guess at another person's thoughts or intentions (118). Does this mean our search for a universal definition of ethical life has run into a roadblock? No, not according to Keane. There is ample evidence that the insistent denial of the ability to guess at others' intentions is more of a cultural injunction than anything else, he says (120). Throughout the many cultural anecdotes we encounter, the key idea is intersubjectivity (79). Ethics, no matter the culture, is about the rules and norms we as humans are governed by in our interactions with each other, whether they lie above or beneath our awareness (4).

As the book progresses into its later chapters, he begins to address what to me seems like an elephant in the room when discussing ethics: religion and morality systems. What gives morality systems their legitimacy as ethical authorities are their claims of origin from above. Keane makes clear that this does not have to mean God (201). While the great monotheistic religions might be the first things that come to mind when bringing up morality systems, he spends considerable time in the final chapter discussing the Vietnamese communist revolution as an example of an atheistic moral transformation of a society. Though the Vietnamese communists emphatically rejected any semblance of belief in the supernatural, Keane argues that their moral arguments bore similarities to those of religious movements in the fact that both "are predicated on ethical universality in principle and its global reach in practice" (248).

Though I have great respect for Webb Keane as a scholar and I found *Ethical Life* to be richly informative and thoroughly well researched, there are underlying assumptions brought into this book that I believe need to be addressed. Keane is not a determinist, in the vein of Marvin Harris, and he repeatedly makes clear that the way humans have evolved ethically cannot merely be the "inevitable outcome of a set number of causes" (28). Nevertheless, he seems to just as often invoke a naturalistic understanding of human beings and the world they inhabit to explain why we are the way we are. Though there can be some truth found in these kinds of explanations, I reject the notion that the arc of human history proceeds without a greater purpose or master plan. Naturalistic assumptions about our existence seem to fill the void that opens up when theological perspectives are excluded from in-depth explanations for something so fundamentally human as ethical life. As someone who aspires to be both a skilled anthropologist and a devoted and thoughtful Christian, I would counter that "invoking God," rather than being something we need not do (178), is something we need not avoid doing for fear of appearing unscientific or superstitious if that is where the evidence leads. In the case of our curious and seemingly innate drive to

navigate ethical ways to live together, I would say that invoking God *is* in fact where the evidence leads. The theologian in me would also say that the universally ethical nature of human beings connects well with what the Bible says about humans being made in the image of God.

Keane deserves credit for fairly representing numerous disparate and controversial cultural movements and worldviews in his writings; having read some of his other books, I would say fair and accurate representation of his subjects is one of his hallmarks. That said, this book lacks a strong concluding argument about ethics. It is an intellectual safari, taking in contributions from almost countless sources, discussing an array of things that have something to do with ethics, but in the end, lacking a clear statement of what Keane believes is the underlying origin of human ethical behavior. Instead, we are left with a much stronger understanding of how Keane thinks natural history and social history should work more closely together than we are of his views on ethical life itself.



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