Ethical Life
Its Natural and Social Histories

Webb Keane
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Review
Is ethics innate to human nature? In Ethical Life Webb Keane tries to answer this question on the basis of empirical research. He attempts this through an analysis of natural and social histories—that is, the analyses of naturalistic research like "neuroscience, cognitive science, linguistics,
developmental psychology, and biological anthropology;” and socialistic research like “cultural and linguistic anthropology, historical sociology, sociolinguistics, microsociology, and conversation analysis” (4). Keane asserts that though these disciplines might seem like working at completely opposite directions, “if we look closely at the points where natural and social histories converge, we can gain new insights into ethical life” (4).

Keane comes straight to the point of ethical dilemmas in the introduction itself. Citing popular ethical conundrums, he concludes that it is impossible even for a “good” person to have a firm understanding of what is ethical and what is not. This book is divided into three parts that look into “psychology, everyday interaction, and social movements” (32). The author discusses how morality or ethics is defined and dealt with in psychology, neurology, philosophy, and religion. The reader gets quite a comprehensive idea of the various approaches to morality and ethics.

This is why this book is a good textbook for moral philosophy. It is interesting that only a text that does not have moral judgment can become a good guide for moral philosophy! Keane comes out with high scores in this aspect. With an impressive bibliography, this book is all that a student needs to get a firm grounding on the subject.

Since this book was published in 2016 and since by then questions of ethics were an integral part of all discussions about technology and the Internet, it is surprising that Keane missed this vital aspect of the present-day ethical question. This is striking, particularly since the author has not forgotten to deal with intersections of ethics and the law. With Keane’s lucidity, a discussion on ethics and technology would have definitely opened up newer lines of thoughts.

Keane discusses at length the ethical challenges faced by the religious and monastic communities. A complete honesty before God regarding other peoples’ lives might bring chaos to the other people. Keane also discusses various aspects of self-awareness and conscience. The author gives various real-life examples and analyzes conversations to understand the true meaning of the statements of various people. He shows how the success of social interactions is based on the reliance of common people on various assumptions about society and people. We are used to engaging portrayals of the clashes of inner voices of conscience. Keane analyses such clashes and concludes that these inner clashes might be requests for “collusion in the construction of . . . [one’s] own self-image” (145). Establishing one’s ethical supremacy, according to Keane, involves not only one’s standpoint but also how one projects oneself to be.

Keane analyzes various historical events to understand the progress in human ethics and the raising of consciousness. Keane looks into the issues involved in converting a discourse into text, also called “entextualization” and the problems involved in declaring a particular text to be sacred truth.

Keane also traces the links between ethics and politics and revolution. He explains how elitist ideas are linked with questions of morality so that the less-educated masses can be part of a revolution. The author points to the denunciation of religion in twentieth-century social revolutions and development of ‘their own versions of a view of the moral narrative of modernity (217). Keane studies the Vietnamese revolution to trace its ethical sources. He successfully establishes the link between the sense of agency, which led to socialist ethics, and revolution.

Furthermore, Keane asserts that the history of a revolution can “be told only in terms of the unfolding of ethical motives and goals” (240). This linking of revolution and social ethics is one of the unique features of Ethical Life. Keane deftly gives a context for the subtitle of this book, “social and natural histories.” The idea that ethical dilemmas cause experimenting with ethics and consequently lead to revolutions is interesting and could be explored further. It could lead to a book-length study. Indeed, Keane has a expressive style when he concludes: “Without its social histories, ethical life would not be ethical; without its natural histories, it would not be life” (262).

Though not lengthy, this book explores various aspects of ethics in everyday life and thus qualifies to be an interesting read to everyone interested in morality.

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Webb Keane is the George Herbert Mead Collegiate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan. He is the author of Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter and Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society.

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