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Towards a Theoretical Approach to the Moral Dimension of Access

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Abstract

In the post-Cold War period the competitive self-representation of distinct social systems as being morally superior has been transformed into wide-spread uncertainty as to what constitutes a good society. In this article I suggest that comparative research into ethical systems and moralities can be productively complemented by an anthropology of virtue. Ethnographic examples and experiences from Australia and Namibia serve as a starting point in my attempt to outline such an anthropological theory of virtue. The anthropological approach to virtue outlined with reference to these examples is both non-consequentialist and realist in orientation. It is non-consequentialist in that it accounts for the moral dimension of practices such as “sharing” and “reciprocal exchange” without relying on problematic presumptions about net results or ultimate consequences. It is realist insofar as it is based not on rationalist categories but on situated social practices which entail reference to basic human goods like sustenance and mutual engagement.

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Moral Dilemmas of Access

When anthropologists discuss ethical questions of access these questions usually concern matters of professional conduct, especially in relationships with “informants” and the information obtained as a result. Considerable space is dedicated to matters of professional ethics in debates within the discipline and beyond (see the recent debate on anthropological work among the Yanomamö) and rightly so. In contrast, the anthropological *study* of ethics, ethical systems, ethical behaviour and morality more generally has received much less attention.² Anthropologists tend to focus on their own moral dilemmas rather than those of the people they encounter in the field or at least to categorically separate the two issues. This is surprising in that one would expect that an anthropological theory of ethics may eventually also inform questions of ethics in anthropological practice. Moreover, it seems to me that two of the main current challenges for anthropologists, namely post-colonialism and post-socialism, call particularly for theoretical work into ethics, morality and virtue.

The post-socialist or post-Cold War period has brought the competition between East and West to an end that was not only a clash between economic and political systems but also between systems of moral values, in particular the value of options (or wide ranging access) versus the value of solidarity (or secure access). However, even after the political and economic collapse of the socialist systems, many people living in the former socialist states (and sympathisers from outside) still maintain the notion of the ethical superiority of socialist society (see Hann 2001: 11).³ In Germany, in particular, the notion of a distinct socialist morality seems to be the core of a distinct East German versus West German identity (Wieschiolek 1999: 220). The border between the two systems may have vanished as a military and political entity but it is “reconstructed mentally” as many East Germans at this point in time maintain a negative assessment of the western system and their western

² Edel and Edel found that during the first phase of anthropology as a discipline (1888-1938) there were hardly any publications on morals or ethics (1968: 4). This has changed with the expansion of anthropology over the past decades. However, despite this expansion one of the most recent and comprehensive volumes in this field still considers the concept of morality to be “unexplored” because “few anthropologists have attempted the empirical study of different moral discourses” (1997: 5). It seems that research in this field has in fact often been subsumed under different domains and labels. Overing (1986) in her introduction to her volume of essays highlights the importance of questions of morality, but it is striking that all contributors to the volume discuss as different *rationalities* what she conceives of as different *moralties*. There is a parallel here to Parkin's point that social analysis following Durkheim tends to conflate the social with the moral (1985: 5) which makes it more difficult to identify the moral in its own right and to investigate its relation to the other dimensions of human conduct. While this may in fact be unfair towards Durkheim (Howell 1997: 7) there is certainly a tendency in anthropology to fuse moral and social aspects conceptually.

³ Others have pointed to difficulties in continuing to use “socialism” as a synonym for the good society *per se* and have suggested “the eudemonistic society” (following Aristotle) as an alternative label for a society “in which the flourishing of each is a condition for the flourishing of all, just as the flourishing of all is a condition of the flourishing of each” (Lawson 2001: 50).

compatriots, based on a perceived moral inferiority of lacking the right attitude towards work but also lacking “human qualities like modesty, solidarity and helpfulness” (Wieschiolek 1999: 220). At the same time East Germans also wanted to succeed under the new conditions, which created an apparently unresolvable dilemma for them in that “if one wanted to be successful, one had to act in a way that was morally rejected; but if one wanted to behave according to one’s moral standards, there was no chance of having success” (Wieschiolek 1999: 221). A particular point of crystallisation for these moral issues are conflicts between East and West Germans concerning the restoration of property (esp. private housing) rights. Consequently, any anthropological research on the post-socialist situation would need a useful theory to deal with this marked moral dimension of social relationships in this setting.

Similarly, the post-colonial period has brought the moral self-confidence of the colonists (who claimed to bring civilisation) and later that of the liberation movement (who claimed to put morally legitimate rulers in place) to an end. However, claims to morality still reign high on the agenda in situations as different as those of indigenous people in Australia and of landless people in Namibia, the two contexts under consideration here. In Australia the “sorry movement”, which asked all Australians to apologise for colonial atrocities such as forceful adoption of Aboriginal children by signing a “sorry book”, split the nation into those who felt the moral obligation to publicly apologise for the events of the past and those (including the prime minister) who felt no such moral obligation. In Namibia, and elsewhere in Africa, the land reform movement calls for a redistribution of land, not only on the grounds that land for many people is the necessary basis for making a living but also because the appropriation of land in the colonial period that led to the current inequitable access to land was immoral (see Widlok in press). The situation in countries like Namibia is complicated by the fact that a restoration of ancestral land, for instance by the most disadvantaged San population, is also refuted by the post-colonial government on moral grounds. The government argues that independent states like Namibia have a moral responsibility to foster nation building, to counter ethnic segregation and to cater to all members of the population without consideration of ethnic identity. Again, anthropological work in such a setting needs to be informed by a theory that takes the moral dimension aboard.

In this paper I provide steps towards an anthropological theory that would be the prerequisite for dealing with these postsocialist and postcolonial challenges to comparative and ethnographic anthropological research. It is part of a larger research project that proposes an innovative way of explicating the moral dimension in issues of access, economic transfers, exchange and sharing. I suggest that when discussing these issues, two aspects are frequently conflated which are usefully kept separate: the first is that of a moral consequentialism (of

morality being conceptualised in terms of specific beneficial outcomes of cumulative individual action), and the second is that of moral realism (of moral acts being intrinsically linked to human goods).⁴

I suggest a theory of virtue that is non-consequentialist but at the same time moral realist in orientation. It is non-consequentialist in that it accounts for the moral dimension of practices such as “sharing” and “reciprocal exchange” without relying on problematic presumptions about proximate or ultimate consequences. It is realist insofar as it starts out not from rationalist categories but social practices that entail reference to basic human goods like sustenance and mutual engagement. I try to carry forward a practice approach by providing an analytic tool which avoids “the fallacy of the rule” (Bourdieu), of misconstruing agency as a fulfilment of rules previously distilled from a totalising view of exchange cycles. The key concept in this approach is that of “virtue” understood as a set of guiding and integrated dispositions for successfully responding to moral dilemmas and other challenges in the pursuit of basic goods and not as obedience to conventions and rules. I will distinguish virtuous practice from any other practice through its reference to a good, that is anything intrinsically desirable and from which goals and benefits (which I will call classified goods) are being derived. These key terms provide the meta-language for a comparative analysis of issues concerning property and access. I begin this paper with my concrete experience of moving between two very different field work sites, namely northern Namibia and northwestern Australia. Both cases differ with respect to the ways in which outsiders are granted access and with respect to the ways in which access is regulated internally. After sketching the two ethnographic post-colonial situations I then outline the theoretical approach suggested here and I conclude with some ideas as to how the proposed approach would change our perspective on these case studies and beyond.

⁴ Durkheim, for instance, seemed to reject consequentialism in his opposition to utilitarianism and has at least indirectly supported realism in his rejection of rationalism. He emphasised that moral properties cannot be reduced to the apriori concepts of Kant’s rational reasoning (see Turner 1992: xxvi) but that they are always partial and transformable, that as social facts they are not the outcome of cumulative individual action as in the utilitarian conception but rather the other way round (see Turner 1992). It is noteworthy that in his view the inheritance of property was a “fundamental injustice in the right of property” (Durkheim 1992: 215), a clear example that not everything that is socially constitutive is by definition moral. He saw the main problem with inheritance in that it “upsets the balance” and that it prevents services from being “reckoned at their true social value” (1992: 214) which in his view was not created through labour but through collectively and subjectively conceived usefulness (1992: 216). Durkheim underlined that the right of property was not “a kind of immutable concept” but something that would evolve indefinitely as societies develop (1992 :215).

Access Granted and Access Denied

In my first field experience in southern Africa, as a student in 1987, I accompanied an agronomist who was conducting a feasibility study for development projects in what was then called “Bushmanland”. At the time northern Namibia was still occupied by the South African Army and we had to report to the police and needed special permits to travel to that area. With our foreign passports (German and British respectively) we had little difficulty travelling through the country and entering the “communal” land in the north, which was separated from the settler farms further to the south by a veterinary control fence that at the same time served as a police control.

Just after sunset, we arrived in /Aotcha – a !Kung (or Ju/'hoan) settlement where an activist filmmaker had left his caravan as a base camp – with nothing but the good word of that filmmaker. Shortly afterwards Ju/'hoan men armed with clubs and spears arrived at the caravan, thinking that we may be agents of the South African administration that had tried to push people off their land in a number of instances. However, people were appeased by the fact that John Marshall, the filmmaker, had sent us and they promised to come back the next morning to help us in any way we wanted. Over the following two weeks we were able to collect samples of various wild food and medicinal plants that grew locally. We were also led around the area, visiting numerous other settlements, being welcomed in all of them.

When I returned to Namibia to carry out long term field research three years later I worked mostly with Hai//om people, neighbours to the !Xū (!Kung) people but living hundreds of kilometres away from /Aotcha. The Hai//om were also classified as “Bushman” because hunting and gathering had been very strong elements in their lives. The =Akhoe Hai//om with whom I spent most of my time, live in an area that, just like “Bushmanland”, had been very difficult to access before Namibian independence in 1990 because it was used by the South African army as a security and deployment zone for the war that largely took place on the other side of the nearby Angolan border. The new Namibian authorities granted me permission to move around freely in the country even though the situation in the north was still considered to be somewhat unsettled. Moreover, my initial experience was replicated insofar as expatriates in the country as well as people in Hai//om settlements, were very welcoming. Southern African hunter-gatherers have often been portrayed as “the harmless people” and, although this portrait is stereotypical and incomplete, it resonates well with my field experiences. Not only did I have little problem finding people who wanted to talk to me but the self-representation of the Hai//om was also one of being cooperative, of allowing access to their resources and to what outsiders have identified as “their culture”. The Hai//om medicine dance, for instance, is open to outsiders and it is even performed upon request for outsiders, for instance the neighbouring Owambo, the dominant agro-pastoralist group of the

area or the neighbouring !Xū or Damara, Khoisan-speaking groups, like the Hai//om, who live in this area of Namibia (see Widlok 2001a).

To illustrate this point, consider the following extracts from a long, in-depth interview with a man called ≠ Noa//oab !Nabarib, also known as Old Johanneb (see also Widlok 1999).

‘[...] We stayed well with the Owambo [the agropastoralists in the area] in the German time. Like children of one woman. The adult men had German munition and they loaded their guns which they had got from the Owambo and shot animals with it. The white men, the Germans, from the *tsabo!hus* [land of the hard ground], from here, they came with carts to look for elephants and killed them. This is the way the old people lived, this is how they told us. They stayed with the white man who shot, and shot, and shot, and shot, and shot, and shot to fill the carts with elephants and to take them back to their land. They did not do any harm to the Hai//om and they stayed for themselves. Because this was Hai//om land which is now Owambo land. Then it was Hai//om land and the Hai//om stayed for themselves and the Germans only came to shoot elephants. [...]’

‘When we were born the tracks left by the carts that took away the elephants had not yet disappeared. They were big roads on which carts were pulled by ten oxen. They left deep tracks.’

If we accept that Old Johanneb's account reflects a more widely spread Hai//om perception of their history and that it reflects not only ideology but practice, it seems that over a long period in history Hai//om relations have been predicated on access rather than on restriction. When Hai//om talk about their relation with the !Xū (who are also hunter-gatherers), their relation with Owambo (who are agro-pastoralists) and with European hunters, as well as about relations with one another they constantly emphasise the importance of granting access. Although I did not, then, look at the material in terms of virtue ethics, it occurred to me later – after having worked in Australia – that since the granting of access is recreated so persistently across very different settings, it would be fair to talk of a Hai//om virtue, understood as a durable disposition, in this context. This will require further comment and discussion below.

Australian Aboriginal society has gained a reputation for being rather hermetically sealed to outsiders. Today, access to this society is organised corporatively, that is to say, one needs an organisation that sponsors (and controls) the research. The first question among Australian colleagues therefore is through which organisation one's research is being carried out. While the point has been made that in the early days of Australian ethnography missionaries and government officials often acted as gatekeepers, it is fair to say that the gatekeepers have expanded their role as the number of legal and social scientists living off Aboriginal society has increased dramatically. When I started systematic field research in Australia in 1998, I encountered numerous gatekeepers who effectively denied me access to Aboriginal society, not without indicating that they themselves had that access. Here are two episodes to illustrate this point:

At the office of a Kimberley-based land council I have an appointment with an anthropologist who does work for his PhD but who at this stage primarily runs a land council for the Aboriginal elders who want to make a native title claim through this organisation. As I arrive I am asked to wait a while in the secretary's room. I reply "no problem" and start looking at a huge map which almost completely covers one wall. It is made up of topographical maps with lines and boundaries added onto it with a pen. My anthropological colleague who was about to return to the other room to finish his business, stopped on his way out, turned around and said "But do not look at the maps, they contain private information". I complied but noted the extended use of the notion of "private" which clearly did not refer to anything that would commonly be called "personal". Here "private" referred to the draft stage of a native title claim which would soon be made public but which was likely to be in partial conflict with other Aboriginal groups working with another land council who had overlapping claims.⁵

I was denied access several times with reference to "private interests", not only by associations and councils that, as non-governmental organisations do facilitate interests that are private in the sense that they are non-state interests, but also by government offices.

At the government office for Aboriginal agricultural affairs I hear that for many of the farms, or cattle stations that the government had bought from white Australians and then given to Aboriginal "communities", there are detailed reports with social science data that would interest me. The research into these matters was government funded and there to be used for making Aboriginal farming more effective and for making decisions about any further purchases of farms for Aboriginal use. However, the Australian civil servant with regret denied me access to these documents, arguing that I would need to contact the owners of these stations because the information contained in the reports could be "private". Since I had heard Aborigines complaining that in most cases a small faction of a proposed "community" of owners had subsequently managed to push others out of the circle of those who managed and profited from the property, I argued that it would be difficult to identify who would be the rightful owners who could give permission for me to look at the documents. I was then referred to ATSIC, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, the government's main administrative body. As I went to the local ATSIC office I requested a list of all Aboriginal corporations and their current chairpersons so that I could make contact with them. The receptionist was not sure whether I could get that information and went into the office of her superior. I could not see the superior but heard his reaction which was strictly negative in that he thought that they could not without permission give out the addresses and names of chairpersons. As I began to see myself in a situation where I would need permission from people whom I could not even contact because I needed their permission for that in the first place, I was saved by the fact that the superior – an Aboriginal Australian himself, came out of his office and recognised me from a recent funeral that we had both attended. I was then given the list of addresses (but not the names of chairpersons).

⁵ Another illustration for this point is a fax that was sent around as an information for celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Kimberley Land Council. The council was established when the residents of Noonkanbah, a property in the southern Kimberley region were trying to prevent large oil exploration on their land. In the meantime, Noonkanbah had become an Aboriginal-owned station but the celebration could not be held there because the local Aboriginal corporation and its chairman were fiercely opposed to the Kimberley Land Council as it was now set up and run. The KLC therefore intended not so much to commemorate what happened 20 years earlier but rather to use this event to strengthen its position in an increasingly plural landscape of Aboriginal organisations. It is therefore even more paradox that an event which was meant to propagate support would have the standard fax head which features a fairly elaborate warning:

"FACSIMILE WARNING. This document and any following pages may contain legally privileged information. The copying, distribution or dissemination of them or any information they contain by anyone other than the addressee, is prohibited. If you have received this document in error, please let us know immediately by telephone, and return it by mail to the address below."

Interaction with gatekeepers made it clear that no information on Aboriginal culture would be given “for free” but that it would always have to be an exchange in the sense that I would have to give up my status as external researcher, work for an Aboriginal association and then receive information in return. Similarly, within Aboriginal society those who wanted, for example, a share from a farm bought by the government had to actively demonstrate and maintain their membership in the relevant associations and their exchange with the supporting land council. If this contact was discontinued, access would be denied.

I managed to conduct field research despite the gatekeepers but I continued to be confronted with similar strategies of exclusion all the time. In many ways the situation was the inverse of what I had experienced in Africa. In Namibia many people responded by saying that I should come to stay and one would then see whether and how one would work with me. In Australia, by contrast, the common reaction was to say that one would first need to work hard on a decision about a permission for access before I could be allowed to stay in an Aboriginal community.

Internal and External Access

I am not suggesting that my two case studies represent alternative “cultural types” or that responses are categorically different. Quite to the contrary, I want to suggest that the two cases invite comparative analysis that can produce a good number of underlying similarities in the two settings. In both cases I encountered communities that were under great pressure by external agencies that tried to take away their land, or at least get extensive use-rights over it. And in both cases people had very negative experiences with external interference. The other important point to note is that in both cases a purely consequentialist logic would not suffice, neither for the people concerned to see whether granting access to a researcher would produce positive or negative consequences, nor for us to understand the moral dimension of the practices of granting and denying access. In the Namibian case, the agronomist was in fact the first representative of an NGO arriving on the scene, he later returned as an employee of a different NGO and helped to establish /Aotcha into a centre of development activities which turned out to be a very mixed blessing for the local people. Today most expatriates are stationed at Baraka, another Ju/'hoan settlement at considerable distance. Similarly, in Australia, the particular Land Council with whom I had tried to cooperate seems to be growing increasingly weak and isolated and the position of ATSIC, too, has come under considerable criticism by Aboriginal leaders and chairmen of corporations who speak out against ATSIC's role as an intermediary and prefer to interact directly with any request (and

money) from outside. In other words it makes little sense to talk about the moral dimension of exclusion and inclusion strategies solely or primarily in terms of whether intended and desirable consequences have been reached, since this is an open and continuing process with ramifications that are very difficult to oversee. But before I explore an alternative non-consequentialist approach I want to add some ethnographic points that illustrate differences between the two case studies with respect to the ways in which access is regulated within the group. Given the marked differences in living standards, there are numerous differences which I am neglecting here because they carry little weight in terms of the overall structure. In the present-day Australian context car sharing may be said to take the same central place as food sharing does in the Namibian case (where there is very limited access to cars). The subject matter may be different but it is the constitutive social relations that are of interest here.

One could argue, and it has been argued, that Hai//om grant access to their land, their resources and their culture because they lack a notion of property. That this is not the case is easily demonstrated with the following ethnographic example taken from my fieldnotes.

In =Giseb people collect the *!no-e* [*Strychnos cocculoides* or “Bushman orange”] and put them in the sand (about 50 cm deep) to ripen. In these *ete* [sand storage holes] they are considered private property. When I travelled with Tirob, who has the greatest number of *ete* at =Giseb, we passed one of Abakub’s *ete* which we did not touch but went on to Tirob’s *esa* which was well disguised and secured with a thorny branch. It contained 40 fruit, 6 of which were bad (*/aesun*) and had to be thrown away. Two were ripe and were eaten on the spot, the others were put back again. This *esa* was the closest to the camp (40 min walk) another one not far from there was an old springhare hole which was used for that purpose. Tirob then went to another *esa* that was further away. He returned an hour later having emptied it completely, and shared the 25 “oranges” with his mother, Abakub and Abakub’s parents, //Ubeb and Kereb, /Hauseb and family, and with Thomab, but not with Eliab and !Naredoeb who were camping in some distance.

The Hai//om of Namibia, and the !Xū, their better known neighbours, do have personal rights in property. Harvesting and storing the sweet *!no-e* fruit provides an example. The fruit is typically harvested by individuals who put them into underground storage which are considered to be private property. They ripen in the warm sand where they are protected from animals but also from fellow human beings who would pick them one after the other if they were left hanging on the tree. This also disproves, incidentally, the misleading assumption that what has been called an immediate-return system implies the inability to postpone consumption or the inability to plan for the future. This is clearly not the case and it was not implied in the concept of an “immediate return system”. What we have here is a clear case of exclusive property rights. But strictly speaking, it only constitutes half the story as indicated in my fieldnotes. Tirob, the youth who had buried all these *!no-e* in the sand, also dug them out eventually and took them back to the camp. In the camp the practices of granting access

which form part of the Hai//om repertoire came into play. That is to say, Tirob was able to exploit his ownership rights insofar as he was able to consume some *!no-e* fruit straight on the spot before taking them to the camp. But as soon as he entered the camp everybody present had access. Spatial proximity was the main criterion limiting the group of people who could make a claim; no reference to existing obligations or to genealogical ties was made.

As among southern African “Bushmen”, there are numerous occasions in Australian Aboriginal social relations where sharing takes place. The payment of state support in terms of pensions, unemployment money and child benefits is spaced equally over the month because the money diffuses widely in the social network. Extensive gambling and other leisure activities foster further diffusion. Aboriginal corporations which put great emphasis on their self-administration prefer to have the accounting done by externals, i.e. usually by non-Aboriginal Australians, because pressure is great on those with access to funds to use these funds for the benefit of people in their social network. The same pressure cannot be avoided in regard to the use of large property items, vehicles of any sort in particular. As Myers (1988:61) has pointed out, “to have a car [...] is to find out how many relatives one has”. Moreover, the establishment of an autonomous community is strongly associated with control over a vehicle and vehicles as ownership items become objectifications of social relations. The association between people and objects is so strong that a community may rather burn the truck that was controlled by a recently deceased boss than to be constantly reminded of the deceased when driving it (Myers 1988:64, see also Young 2001: 51). Access to vehicles is a major issue in Aboriginal social life, so much so that Stotz (2001) has coined the term “carhold” pointing to the fact that having access to a shared means of transport can be said to override the importance of sharing a hearth as is usually implied in the notion of “household”. To illustrate the point, here are some notes referring to the role of cars as it emerges at present-day funerals in the Kimberley region of north-west Australia, which are a major occasion for transferring property to more distant kin, usually to members of the other moiety.

Two young men had died in a drinking and driving accident. They had been in the car together after one of the regular drinking events, driving back to Bayulu, which, like many Aboriginal settlements, is “dry”, i.e. it does not allow consumption in the settlement. The two young men had been initiated together and their funerals took place on the same day. Like many funerals in the Kimberley today, they were large public events which consisted of a “traditional” payback ceremony, a church service and a smoking ceremony. *Purtayan* or payback ceremonies involve both elements of a death inquest and the transfer of blankets and other property objects which are bought for the purpose by relatives, who give them as gifts to appease other relatives from other communities who shared a skin (section) relationship with the deceased. Vehicles played a large role throughout, in particular in the second funeral. The hearse was hardly seen because the church service and the burial itself were only attended by very few. All closest relatives as well as representatives from all major Aboriginal communities in the area were positioned on the main ceremonial ground, away from both church and cemetery, and had specific functions according to their skin identity. The first important role for vehicles were that they hid the

maparn the ceremonial dancers who performed songs out of sight and made only a short appearance, a small ritual performance, in the course of the payback ceremony, which was nevertheless considered essential for cleansing the air of any potential grievances and accusations raised about the responsibility for these deaths. Secondly, the smoking ceremony which was held to cleanse close relatives of the deceased who had been in seclusion was also used to cleanse property items of the deceased before they were handed on to relatives from other places. This also involved the “smoking” of three landcruisers (as dancers circled around them with smoking branches); vehicles owned by Aboriginal corporations that had been used by the deceased and that were made safe to be used for survivors. Finally, the large majority of participants, i.e. those who were neither close relatives in seclusion nor those directly involved in the smoking or dancing, witnessed the occasion sitting in/on their vehicles, usually standing on the back of community trucks. A great effort had been made to transport participants from communities several hundred kilometres away from Fitzroy Crossing. Access to vehicles was not only important to enable participation, it also positioned participants on the ceremonial grounds. Sitting/standing on one of the vehicles underlined membership in one of the various communities who through their participation wanted to be cleared from any suspicion of having caused the death of the two young men.

Thus, a considerable transfer of goods and “services” takes place during these funerals, much greater flows of cash and objects than in the African case. But access is highly regulated according to kinship (subsection) relations and community membership. Furthermore, access to objects is strongly loaded and limited – and it creates long-term obligations. Ceremonial objects are kept out of sight behind vehicles. The continued use of cars with whom the deceased were attached requires ceremonial smoking. The association with a vehicle not only enables participation – which is important to prevent or diffuse potential death-accusations – but it marks the social position of an individual with respect to the corporate bodies and the other individuals that are involved. An Aboriginal vehicle, whether a car, truck or minibus, is neither an *automobile* for isolated individuals nor an *omnibus* for public access but a means which regulates access and to which access is clearly regulated.

A Comparative View

Before beginning a theoretical analysis of the two ethnographic case studies, similarities between the two cases need to be emphasised. In terms of morality both are instances of a post-colonialism in which the moral self-congratulation of the colonists (who claimed to bring civilisation) has come to an end. In both instances, however, claims to morality still reign high on the agenda as I have pointed out above. It should be pointed out that – although comparing two such very distant places is something that grew out of my specific theoretical interests – Australian Aborigines and “San” groups in Namibia now also compare their situations with one another. In 1993 Aborigines from Australia and Saami from Scandinavia took an NGO-sponsored trip to Namibia where they met with the pastoralist Himba and a number of “San” or “Bushmen”. The meetings and encounters they had are fairly well documented and they

exhibit a specific ambivalence. The Namibian “San” consider the Australians (and Saami) to be “politically advanced” but to be threatened culturally since they were forced to speak English (NNDF 1993: 61). While the “San” hosts recognised that they faced the same challenges as Saami and Aborigines, namely gaining “rights of access to land and natural resources” (NNDF 1993: 63) it seems that they consider themselves to have access to a strong culture but little access to economic and political power. The Saami and Aborigines in turn see the “San” as being “ancient” but at the same time as being in an earlier phase of the same development that they have undergone themselves (NNDF 1993: 39, 59). Saami and Aborigines significantly differed in their own behaviour towards their hosts. While the Saami delegation stated that “all mankind would benefit from sharing knowledge with the ancient culture of the San” (NNDF 1993: 36) and seem to have not had the impression that the visitors were imposing themselves on the “San”, the Aboriginal delegation felt less at ease (NNDF 1993: 58). They made strong demands with regard to restricting access for the accompanying media and NGO representatives, they required copies of all photographs and visual footage and reserved the “individual plus group right to say no to certain things being included in the documentary” (NNDF 1993: 49). In a sense, what I have tentatively identified above as a Hai//om virtue, namely to grant outsiders access to land and resources, comes closer, from the Australian perspective, to a vice or at least a disadvantage, a naivety, a legacy that has to be overcome. This seems to be reflected in my Australian case study in which easy access was denied to me as a researcher but also to Aborigines by fellow Aborigines.

Towards an Anthropological Approach to Virtue

In this part of my paper I will propose a comparative view of the two cases that I have sketched. The comparison will try to incorporate the moral dimension of property regimes in terms of enabling or denying access without colouring the concept of access in terms of our own or any other particular morality. While the dominant anthropological approach to the moral dimension has been the attempt to (re-)construct and compare different ethics, on elaborate systems of values (see Geertz 2000), or at least different moralities, that is, more or less coherent sets of rules and values that are systematised by ethical systems (see Howell 1997), I suggest that some headway can be made with an anthropological theory of virtue. Such an anthropology of virtuous practice would complement the anthropology of ethics and the anthropology of morality insofar as it investigates the ways in which basic human goods that are internal to practices come to be realised. The following paragraphs will spell out in some more detail how I envision this anthropology of virtue.

While there are many theoretical attempts in philosophy and economics that could be used as possible starting points in this context, I am proposing that for the sake of developing a genuine anthropological theory of virtue which could handle the case material presented, it is more promising to take a lead from anthropological theorising in a different field and apply it to the subject matter in question. I will outline an anthropology of virtue which draws on Gell's work on art (Gell 1998) but also on Ingold's work on skill (Ingold 2000).

The Approach

Many anthropological discussions of property relations and questions of access are at least implicitly linked to moral questions, for instance concerning threats to communal ownership (Hann 1998), the denial of indigenous property rights (Wilmsen 1989), the reconciliation of social and environmental issues (Gowdy 1998) or the recognition of sharing as an important facet of property distribution (Woodburn 1998). However property relations are usually not theorised explicitly with regard to ethical terms. The first question to be asked is therefore whether there is a need for an anthropological theory of the ethical dimension of access to property.

As with the study of "primitive art" it could be, and it has been, argued that anthropology simply deals with those moral systems (for works of art read: aesthetic systems) which lie outside the scope of those religious, ideological, legal and cultural systems that dominate "the west" and have come to dominate "the rest". Given that anthropologists, for obvious reasons, are reluctant to universalise a specific theory of property ethics that has developed in the west and to simply apply it elsewhere, it seems that the majority of anthropologists has settled for a relativistic stance. The role of theory in such a relativistic anthropology seems to be limited to establishing the characteristics of the morality inherent in each culture or society. While it is certainly important to create awareness about the fact that other cultural systems may be governed by other moral rules and that these rules need to be recognised, I argue that this in and of itself does not constitute an anthropological theory of virtue. My objections are similar to Gell's objection with respect to the elucidation of non-western aesthetic systems. I suggest that it is theoretically productive to focus on social agency and social relations instead of cultural rules; to aim for a theory of virtuous agency instead of a theory of ethics. If we replace art with ethics, aesthetics with morals, and art objects with virtuous acts in the argument, the following picture emerges: We should not be satisfied with an anthropological theory of virtue that confirms the incompatibility of different moral systems just as we are not satisfied with the conclusion that there are incompatible aesthetic worlds. We should not be content with a perspective that considers morality to be an individual process of

consciousness, of enacting ethical principles, just as we are not content to consider art to be a matter of individual creativity, enacting aesthetical principles. Similarly, it is not sufficient to see ethics as strongly influenced by necessity and power politics just as it is not sufficient to see art as strongly influenced by the art market. Finally, we need not fear that including art will aestheticise our analysis or that including ethics will moralise our theoretical concepts in a way that would make them useless. We will, however, need to shift from aesthetics to the use of art objects, from moral systems to virtuous action, from theoretical to practical reasoning. The remainder of this introduction tries to spell out in more detail what exactly this implies.

What is envisaged here is a generally applicable theory of morality and virtues which orients itself along existing anthropological theories by putting acting human beings in social relations at its centre. Just as we live in a world that is already aesthetised, surrounded by objects that have been designed, we also live in a world that is already moralised, that is, shaped by actions that relate to moral goods and objectives. However, in a strict anthropological sense we are not simply interested in different aesthetic or moral principles but in the ways in which human actors commit themselves to moral goods in their virtuous acts, or, how they create objects of art, receive them and use them in their social relationships. Just as not all objects of art are beautiful in the sense of a certain aesthetic – some masks are there to create fear –, not all virtues necessarily have “good” consequences in the sense of a utilitarian or other consequentialist moral system – to be hard-working or industrious, for instance, can be bad for the environment (in heavy industry), for peace (in a factory for land mines) or for the state budget (in the case of moonlighting). Both, producing masks and being industrious are practices that cannot be deducted from or reduced to one aesthetic or one moral standard.

In his pursuit to highlight the human agency aspect of art, Gell emphasises the art object which – externalised from its creator – can become an agent in itself. This includes artistic agency that may not involve material objects but is “pure” doing, for instance installation art. Recent attempts to bring back together art and technology (see Ingold 2000) also dissolve the categorical distinction between artworks and artefacts but also that between making and doing, as both may be considered in terms of skilled practice. As Ingold points out, skill is not only involved in the making of objects (Ingold 2000: 290). This new anthropology of skill therefore provides a bridge to a new anthropology of virtue. The difference of skill being primarily a matter of *making* and virtue being primarily a matter of *doing* seems to be a matter

of degree or at least not a distinction that should lead us to overlook the fundamental similarities between the two.⁶

One of the key points in Ingold's new anthropology of skill is that it no longer reduces skilled *making* to technical execution and no longer categorically separates design from construction (2000: 289). A parallel point can be made with regard to the new anthropology of virtue that is envisaged here, which no longer reduces virtuous practice to rule-abiding moral behaviour, the application of ethical rules, and no longer categorically separates the setting of moral values from the active pursuit of them. The constitution of a human good, like the form of an artefact, may be seen not in pre-existing designs but as internal to a virtuous practice and generated by "the pattern of regular movement" (Ingold 2000: 291). It follows that the importance of formal instruction has been overemphasised in both cases. The knowledge about how to do things (technically) such as tying knots is typically not handed on as a programme, as "a package of rules and representations, independently and in advance of their practical application" (Ingold 2000: 358). Similarly, the knowledge about how to do things (morally/virtuously) such as resolving the knots of entangled interests and dilemmas may be handed on not as part of a moral package but in the process of responding to basic objectives and of making moral decisions entailed in the pursuit of these basic human goods. Practitioners can become skilled producers as well as virtuous agents without having privileged access to the professional or moral codes but simply by perfecting their own movements. In this context it is important to point out that basic human goods, like the nature of all things are not deduced from an essentialist concept of human life and nature but rather "revealed only 'after-the-fact' [...] in the light of subsequent experiences" (Ingold 2000: 97). In other words if a basic good is that which fosters the flourishing of life and if life is not something given but something that anyone strives to realise, the basic goods are not given *a priori* but received prospectively as something that people strive to achieve.⁷ It also follows that the definition of basic goods is cumulative and contingent on a sustained striving for life as a good. As I will describe in more detail below, the process whereby social actors achieve a degree of virtuousness, of successfully responding to basic goods, is one of becoming experienced and proficient in handling "abductions" (Gell 1998), rather than inductive or deductive logic. Although this reverses the established evaluation of practitioners as inferior

⁶ There is an etymological argument to the proposed link between skill and virtue in that the Latin *virtus* served as a root for "virtuous" (particularly moral) as well as "virtuoso" (particularly skilled). Note that the German terms "Geschick" (skill) and "Tugend" (virtue) which refer to the Germanic roots *schicken* (to achieve) and *taugen* (to be of good use) also refer to closely related concepts but distinguish them with regard to achievement and pursuit.

⁷ To add another twist to the argument, we could say that humans conceive of goods in "prospective hindsight", that is, in what they expect will prove to foster life when considered after the fact.

followers of those who formulate representations of practices, it ultimately suggests a more diffuse or distributed notion of where the characteristic properties of a skill or virtue lies. In both cases, skill and virtue may no longer be limited to mean a property of isolated individuals persons but a property “of the total field of relations in which they are situated” (Ingold 2000: 98).

One implication is that in their re-formulated versions these conceptions of skill and virtue provide a less problematic account about the emergence of skills and virtues than what was previously possible. The established anthropology of technology and art, that insisted on the privileged status of instruction and design, also had to insist on a clear boundary between a state of nature governed by evolution and a state of culture governed by history. By contrast the new anthropology of skill allows us to see the continuity between skilful making of a bird's nest and the skilful making of string bags and other things. In a similar vein I would argue that the established anthropology of morality that insists on the privileged status of ethical rules has to insist on a sharp boundary between nature and culture, say, the sharing among animals and the sharing among human beings. A new anthropology of virtue would still be able to describe the differences between the two but would also allow us to see both as practices in pursuit of a basic good, namely the flourishing of life.

Figures 1-3 try to summarise the conceptual links between the key terms that are being used in this approach. There is no evolutionary argument implied in the sequence. One could argue that general goods, that is, anything intrinsically desirable because it enhances human life, are logically *prior* to the classification of goods into benefits and goals, that is, those goods that reflexively point to specific aims (goals) and specific returns (benefits).

The equivalent to the art object produced in the process of making art is not the material outcome, the consequence, of an action but the object(ive), a classified end (goal) or non-classified end (good) that is implicated when someone is doing something (see below). The moral acts that constitute industriousness, mobility or trust are defined by the goods that are internal to these practices: I am industrious when I do work that I (and others) think ought to be done, I am mobile if I move in space and thereby alter closeness and distance in a desired way; and I am trusting if I allow shared engagements, that is, an intertwining of my life with that of others. It will have become clear that “virtues” in this technical sense are not to be confused with compliances to rules and conventions. Virtues are qualities that enable us to realize the goods that are internal to the practices as outlined in more detail below.

Human practice in very different settings – the typical point of departure for anthropology – can no longer be described with reference to a single moral standard, just as art objects can no longer be described with reference to a single aesthetic standard. In fact there may be

nothing that compares to our category of what constitutes an aesthetic or moral standard. However, this does not mean that there are no virtues (or art objects for that matter) in an analytical sense that come into play in the social relationships that we encounter. This is particularly striking, not with regard to questions of religion and ideology, where moral diversity is readily conceded, but with regard to economics. Carrier and Miller (1999) have recently sketched the key questions of economic anthropology in terms of private and public virtues and vices (Carrier and Miller 1999). The reason for the dominance of economics, and the lack of influence of anthropology, they argue, is due to the economists' ability "to put forward a coherent view of how economic life operates at different levels" (1999: 27). They go on to explain how theories involving the relation between private vices/virtues and public vices/virtues have emerged. But there is more to it than the opposition of public vices/virtues suggests. Strictly speaking, modern economics – which sees public wealth as being created through individual selfishness – is concerned about public *benefit* rather than virtue while considering virtue exclusively in terms of individual character. In a similar vein, alternative accounts (for instance Marxist theories) refer to the public *good* rather than to personal virtue. Similarly, across these approaches discussions of private vices are more specifically phrased in terms of private *interests* or *goals*. The argument developed in my study uses this larger set of terms, benefits, goods, interests and goals to outline what in disciplines like economics are rather flippantly called virtues and vices.

Figure 1
The constituent parts of an activity

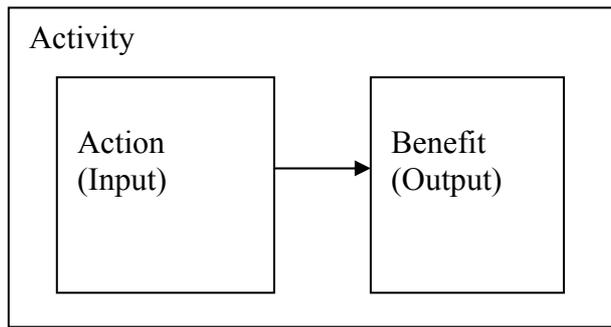


Figure 2
The constituent parts of a practice

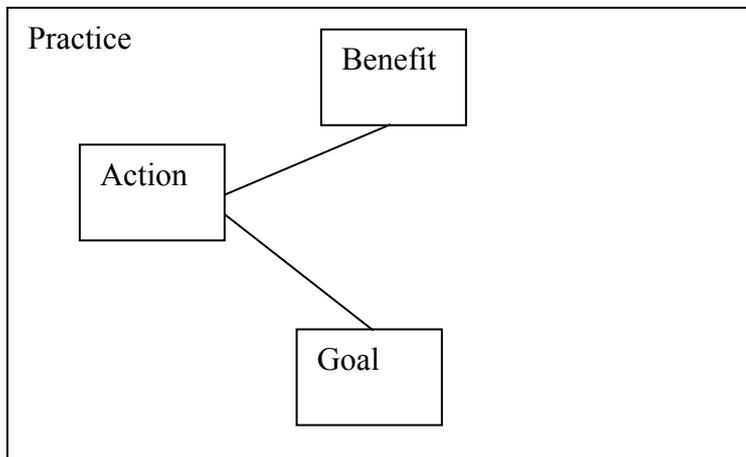
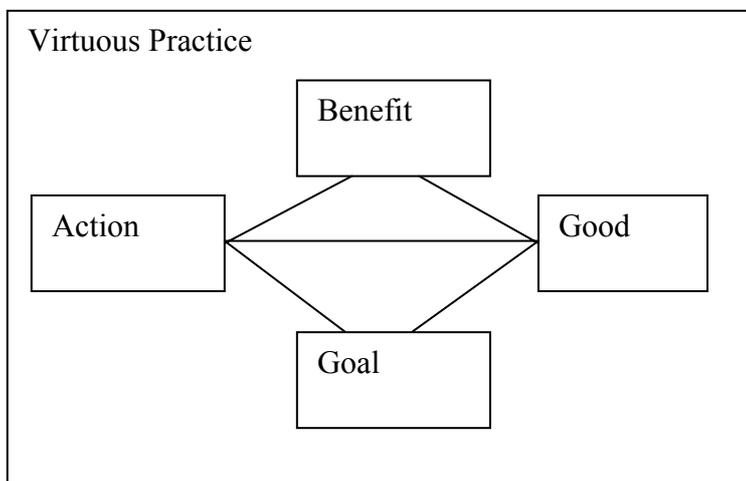


Figure 3
The constituent parts of a virtuous practice



Activity, Practice, Virtue

It is now common to label all human activity “practice” even though there are good reasons for keeping two separate terms with distinct meaning. “Activity” emphasizes behaviour along the lines of an implicit consequentialist mode, that is a mode of thought that exclusively looks at outcomes as consequences of a given set of causes rather than at motivations in terms of expectations for a future state of affairs. In essence this is an input-output (or stimulus-response) image of human behaviour where action leads to results/benefits (see Figure 1). There are of course many non-intentional effects of one's behaviour and they have taken a prominent position in much sociological theorizing. In my view this only underlines the need to talk of this behaviour in terms of “activity” and to reserve the term “practice” for behaviour which is oriented towards shared or at least mutually recognized goals as well as expected benefits (see Figure 2). The point has been made that when observing a behaviour, or when being the object of someone else's behaviour, it is not always easy to tell whether the behaviour in question is goal-oriented (i. e. the instantiation of a practice) or merely an activity which I happen to see or which happens to affect me. The activity of digging can be part of very different practices such as that of looking for water or that of retrieving fruit from an underground storage. Again, it is not difficult to see the parallel with the anthropology of art where a particular object, seen or received, may not be immediately recognizable as an art object. Furthermore, just as very simple objects can quickly become objects of art, so an activity can easily become part of a practice. The question as to whether there is an orientation towards a goal present or not in a behavioural sequence cannot be decided through induction or deduction. That is to say, observing the same behaviour many times does not in itself suffice to decide – inductively – whether it is a practice or simply an activity. Similarly, the question cannot be resolved by deducing from what one knows to be the rule. Rather, it has been suggested that the inference principle that helps us to decide whether there is goal orientation or not is that of “abduction” (see Gell 1998:14). Abductions are “nondemonstrative inferences” that is to say they cannot be used to demonstrate something to be necessarily true or false (Gell 1998: 14). They are based on what is otherwise known as the logical fallacy of affirming the antecedent from the consequent (i.e. to derive the existence of p from the existence of q under the rule that “if p then q”, when according to logic you can perfectly well have q without p). Whereas in theoretical reasoning an abduction is a fallacy, in practical reasoning it is being used successfully every day. The usual example is that of “where there is smoke, there is fire” which is strictly speaking not true (because there can be smoke without a fire) but which is very probable given the frequency of encountering fire where there is smoke. In social relations seeing a smiling person (or a picture of one) triggers

the inference (abduction) that this person is friendly even though this may not necessarily be true (Gell 1998: 15). By the same logic, then, goals can be abducted from certain practices to which they tend to be connected. When observing someone working particularly long hours, it can be abducted that he or she is industrious and really wants to get something done (the objective of completing the task) whereas of course there is always the possibility that there are other goals involved, for instance the goal of avoiding going home to a lonely apartment or to an insufferable partner. Agar has pointed out that in social research most inferences we are dealing with are not strictly determined but they deal with things that are tied together “because one causes the other, or enables it, or results in it, or evaluates it, or is part of it, or is a token of it, or resembles it, or co-occurs with it in space-time” (1986: 35) or indeed has a link of an unspecified nature (1986: 34). Moreover we are usually dealing with links that are plural rather than single creating complex sets of nodes.

In order to include the moral dimension in practice I suggest the following formal set of distinction (see Figure 3). Virtuous practice can be distinguished from practice more generally in that it strives to realize basic goods entailed in the practice. I distinguish goods from benefits, the latter being classified goods or, to put it differently, goods that have a proper name or determiner such as possessive pronoun attached (e.g. my/your/our/their means of subsistence instead of a means of subsistence). Similarly, I distinguish goods from goals which are circumstantial goods or, to put it differently, goods that come with a determiner such as personal pronouns (e.g. I/you/we/they want this resource).⁸

Virtuous practice in this formal sense would be defined as practice which includes basic goods and succeeds to translate those into determined goals and benefits and into specific activities. It should be clear that there may be very good reasons (i.e. specific goals and benefits) for a practice which may, however, not be considered to be virtuous. Furthermore, given that goods of the various sorts can be eclipsed in rather complex practices it will often be a matter of debate to establish whether a non-classified good is involved or not. Finally, practices can change not only with regard to the activities involved but also with regard to goals, benefits and goods.

⁸ It is noteworthy that the distinction I make here does, of course, not rely on the existence of specific lexical categories such as pronouns. Rather, any grammatical construction that serves as a determiner which indicates a range of applicability and specifies a construction of “belonging to” would serve the purpose. Note also that there are examples from outside the Indo-European languages where exactly the same distinction is being made. For instance, Edel and Edel (1968: 71) report that “in some Plains Indian languages [...] the possessive pronoun is not used with such words as 'bread'; it is inconceivable to them that anyone should consider food something for his own private consuming.”

Goals

In orthodox decision making theory goals are set by individual actors who then can be said to be more or less successful in achieving these goals. While I think that it is important to maintain that goals set by social agents are instrumental for distinguishing activity from practice (see above) it is also important to underline that there is no one-to-one-correspondence between practices and goals. In other words practices may be informed by more than a single goal. As goals may only be partially encoded, practitioners may take over a practice and a goal from others without consciously and creatively setting the goal or without fully understanding the goal themselves. In other words the agency that sets the goal may be diffuse or distributed but it is important to underline that there is still agency involved.

Furthermore it is important to note that although a goal is usually formulated in terms of future achievements it is logically an event of the past insofar as it has been set in the past. Given that goals are taken over from previous practitioners or from other practices, the formulation and setting of the goal may in fact be considerably far back in time. The important point is that social agents ascribe – by abduction – causal responsibility to goals for the practices observed and for the characteristics of these practices. Analytically separating practices from goals is an important first step to take account of the distributedness of agency, not only in anthropological analysis where the distributedness of personhood has been an important topic but also in everyday life where it is common that practices involve more or other social agents than those who have set the goals for a particular practice in the first place.

Benefits

Beneficiaries of a practice are here understood to be those who are at the receiving end, no matter whether they are actually benefiting or suffering under the practice. The important point is that, again by abduction, they are “beneficiaries” in relation to whom the practice has effects. Needless to say the beneficiaries can be partially or wholly identical with the practitioners but they can also be distinct from them. It is also important to note that the conception of a particular benefit or group of beneficiaries can be considered to be the cause for a practice so that the role of benefits/beneficiaries is not necessarily a passive one. We may distinguish intended and actual benefits/beneficiaries but given the complexities of social groups and relations we should always expect a changing mix of these two categories since it is common that there is no perfect match between intended and actual benefits/beneficiaries and that the relation between the two sets is not a stable one.

Goods

Even those who argue that at least nowadays it is unrealistic to arrive at a list of goods that is universally or near-to-universally shared, still maintain that the relation between practices and goods is not a completely arbitrary one. In other words, some entities are held, by abduction, to be contained in particular practices and these entities are commonly called goods. We may also call them human goods or basic goods to distinguish them more clearly from goals and benefits (which I call classified goods) as pointed out above. The practices of negotiation and mediation for instance can be said to contain the good of “living in harmony with other humans” because practicing mediation is tantamount to the pursuit of harmony. The practice of sharing, the central field of investigation in this study, is sometimes considered to be a value or good in itself. However, as I will show below, it would be more appropriate and analytically more fruitful to treat sharing as a complex practice from which goods, benefits and goals need to be abducted.

The terms “goods”, “benefits” and “goals” are not new, they have been used before and by a number of social science disciplines. The terms have been applied in micro-scale studies of individual subjects in (largely artificial) decision making and dilemma settings (as in psychology and parts of economics). In this context complex personal biographies are reduced and operationalized so that they can be treated as subjects acting in specific situations. The scale may be called sub-biographical, a scale smaller than personal life-projects. They have also been applied in the macro-perspective of political and sociological history (and again parts of economics) that explicitly go beyond the lives and life cycles of agents. These are macro-studies that are super-biographical, a scale much larger than individual life projects. In this study I want to maintain a genuine anthropological approach which aims at a medium scale by focusing on human agents in their social relations and in their biographical projects and to develop my conceptual tools accordingly. While anthropologists have successfully ventured into the kind of micro- and macro-studies, cognitive psychology and social history as just mentioned, the discipline has rightly emphasized social agency and “a particular *depth of focus*, which [...] attempts to replicate the time perspective of these agents on themselves” (Gell 1998: 10). It is therefore necessary to tie the conceptual tools into a theoretical approach that embraces the horizon of socially related and socially interacting agents in their life projects.

Virtues

The anthropological preoccupation with biographical depth, or life projects as I would prefer to call it, shares some common ground with recent trends in philosophical virtue theory. The question as to whether a substantive definition of what is morally good – on the basis of moral realism – is possible or not, remains hotly debated in economic philosophy (Lawson 2001), legal philosophy (Finnis 1998) and theological philosophy (Black 2000). For the purposes of this study which is concerned with social agency and practice, a definition need not specify the substantive contents of moral goods. In line with MacIntyre's scheme "after virtue" I understand virtue to be an acquired human quality that allows one to realize the good that is intrinsic to practice (see MacIntyre 1984). In terms of theory it is not so much the question as to what qualifies as a good but rather, given the diversity of practices and goods, the issue is one of investigating how different ways of life commit people to different sets of goods that are partly in competition with one another. In order to recognize partial incompatibilities we need to be able to identify competing goals, competing benefits and competing goods. In other words we need an extended set of theoretically defined terms as introduced above.

Application of the Theoretical Tools

It is possible to categorically distinguish the two cases discussed above as representing two completely distinct modes of transferring property objects that contain a distinct morality, and I have initially pursued this line myself. My "Bushman" case could be called sharing, my "Aboriginal" case could be called tit-for-tat exchange or reciprocity. These two categories are commonly used, in hunter-gatherer studies and beyond. They have been defined on the basis of a consequentialist model of moral action and I think that this creates considerable problems that a theory of virtue could solve, at least to some extent.

In a number of different ways anthropologists have dealt with sharing and exchange as two completely distinct modes of transferring property objects that entail a distinct morality (see Sahlins 1988, Ingold, Riches, and Woodburn 1988). Formally, sharing and reciprocity are distinguished as a one-way transfer (in the case of sharing) as opposed to a two-way transfer (in the case of exchange or reciprocity). Especially with increasing awareness about the distributedness and temporariness of agency it has been pointed out that although a transfer may at first appear to be one-way it can in fact be a two-way exchange when the time frame is being altered or if the defining frame of how the agents are constituted is being altered (Hunt 2000). Over longer periods one-way transfers may be found to go both ways eventually. Similarly, when an individual is seen as part of a corporate actor across individual persons or

even generations, transfers that appeared to be one-way may turn out to be exchanges. To solve the problem, it has been suggested that ultimately the emic perspective has to be the defining factor, that is we need to ask whether agents expect or demand that there will be a transfer in return (Hunt 2000). This immediately creates the problem that some agents may and others may not have such an expectation. Moreover, a single agent may over time change his or her view and expectation at least partly in response to time passing, opportunities being left unused, other opportunities opening up, needs and wants changing over time etc. Furthermore, given the limitations of anthropological field research, we as observers may never find out whether a particular transfer was (or is going to be) an act of sharing or an instance of reciprocal exchange. It is therefore not satisfactory to make our understanding of the moral dimension of these acts hinge on consequences which we can only very inadequately observe – if at all. A non-consequentialist theory of virtue in which goals, benefits and good are abductively inferred from practices, I argue, is able to circumvent this problem.

In my ethnographic examples the goals (and those who set them) do not figure but instead the general good of enjoying the desired items is being highlighted. In fact, one could argue that what defines this case as a case of sharing is that no explicit goal is being set (or recognized) by those who grant access to resources. Typically, the process of sharing is triggered by the beneficiaries in need who approach those who have and give. I therefore suggest that instead of defining sharing in terms of a non-continued sequence of one-way transfers it should be defined in terms of a particular sequence of terms, not transfers, involved, namely benefits and goods rather than goals.

Figure 4
Hai//om sharing land and resources with their neighbours

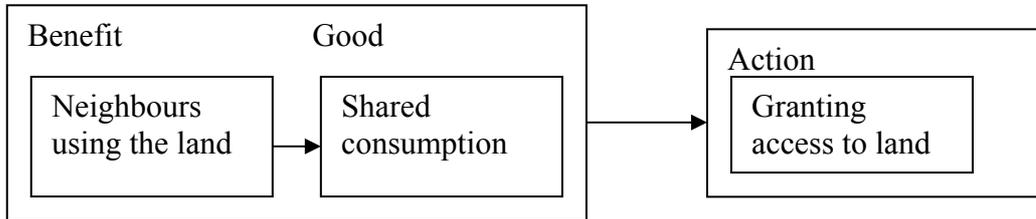
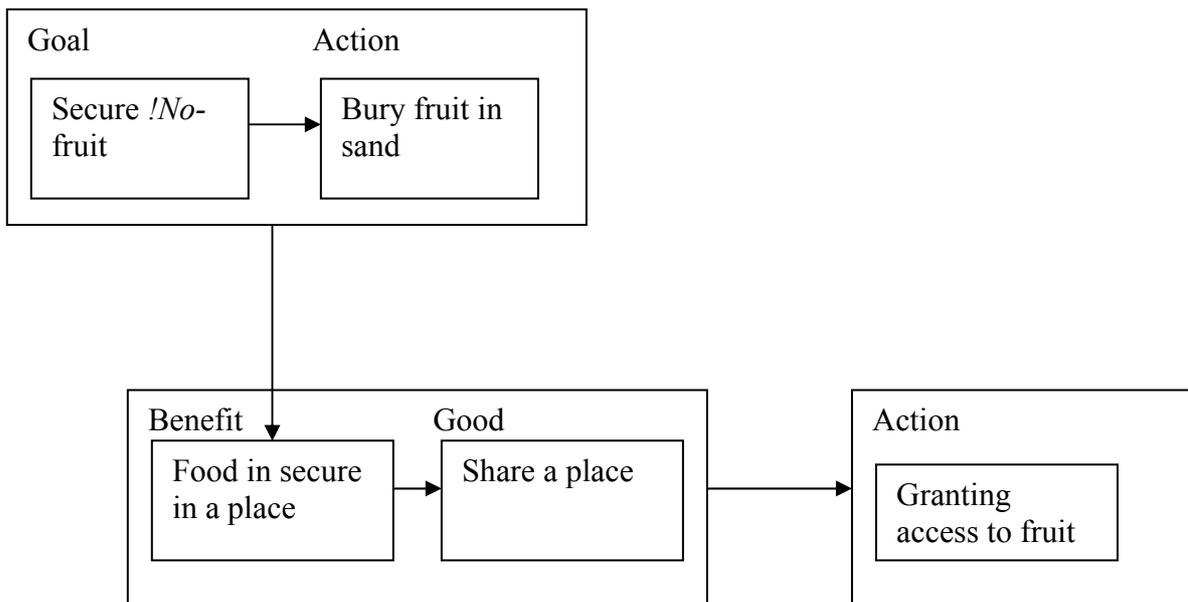


Figure 5
Sharing fruit from underground storage



Let us take the two cases in turn. In the Namibian case access to Hai//om land is being granted to various neighbouring groups. In all these cases the beneficiaries in fact can be made out to be the cause that triggers the practice itself. Their coming is being highlighted, there is no mentioning of anyone being invited but simply of !Xū, Owambo, Germans “coming”. Their presence demands a response from local Hai//om, who welcome these neighbours and grant them access to local products. This local view can be substantiated further with the fact that despite the Hai//om (and other hunter-gatherers) being commonly called “nomadic”, it is in fact the agropastoral Owambo and the colonizing Germans who have made the decisive

moves into Hai//om land and not vice versa. When analysing this case with the terminology laid out above we may propose that the benefit/the beneficiaries in this case, in fact, constitute the first element in a logical chain. Their presence coupled with the shared good of satisfied sustenance triggers the practice of shared consumption of local resources (see Figure 4). It should be noted that in this representation of the events the goals (and those who set them) do not feature. In fact, one could argue that what defines this case as a case of sharing is that, at least from the Hai//om position who grant access to resources, no explicit goal is being set but the process seems to be triggered by the neighbours in need who approach the Hai//om residents. I therefore suggest that instead of defining sharing in terms of a non-continued sequence of one-way transfers it should be defined in terms of a particular sequence of terms, not transfers, involved. This is not to say that in this process there are no goals being set by the social agents involved but only that these acts of goal setting are being eclipsed. Let me illustrate this with reference to the other Namibian case (see Figure 5). Here Tirob obviously has set himself a goal, namely to secure *!no-e* for consumption. This leads him to the practice of digging holes in which the *!no-e* fruit is left to ripen. Goal and practice are, however, eclipsed in another practice which is a result of having underground storages, namely the benefit of having a source of *!no-e* available while staying at a single place (or returning to it in short intervals) for the period it takes for the fruit to ripen, the *!no-e* season. Being able to stay with relatives is a good – which in other contexts may be compromised by other goods such as that of individual autonomy or of living without conflicts – but it entails the practice of sharing, of having others participate in the use of one's underground storages. There is a goal involved in this sequence but it is eclipsed in the benefit of not having to move away, not having to split from family and friends. I believe that a similar argument could be made with regard to the ways in which Australian Aborigines allow others to use their vehicles.

Figure 6
Aboriginal argument vis-à-vis external researchers

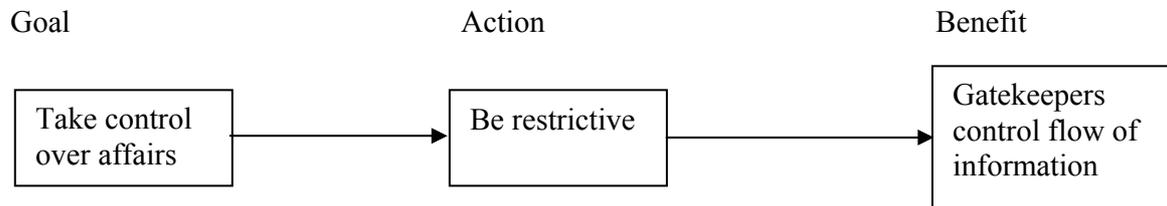
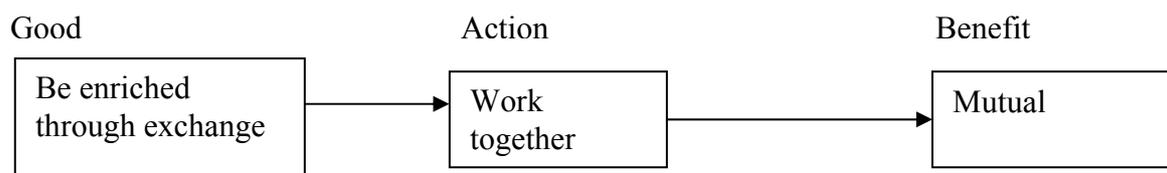


Figure 7
Researchers' argument vis-à-vis Aborigines



Moreover, the conceptual tools suggested here may be used not only for understanding the moral dimension of behaviour observed in the field but also reflexively with regard to the ethics of anthropological research itself, and – increasingly important – the ethics of regulating access for anthropological research. In contrast to goals being “eclipsed” as in the above cases, in the case of research politics in Aboriginal Australia that I have given the goal is explicitly set by the gatekeepers, who are either Aboriginal corporations or non-Aboriginal consultants employed by Aboriginal institutions (see Figure 6). The sequence “goal-practice-benefit” is reminiscent to idealized rational decision making which also governs exchange. It is striking that shared goods seem not to be included. The theory set out above suggests that they may be eclipsed. Continuing with the Australian case material, it appears that my own reaction to the strategy of the gatekeepers leaves out my own goals, namely improving my own situation by conducting successful research, but instead explicitly invokes a good, that of enjoying the fruits of intellectual and cultural exchange (see Figure 7). In hindsight it seems that at least some of the resistance which I experienced in Australia was based on the fact that my Aboriginal counterparts, or at least some of their gatekeepers, were suspecting that I was hiding my ultimate goals, for instance that I was sent by some business-sponsored private

university which would use the information gathered not for the shared benefit of Aborigines and researchers but for its own commercial interests.

Figure 8
Owambo (farmers') view of interaction with Hai//om (foragers)

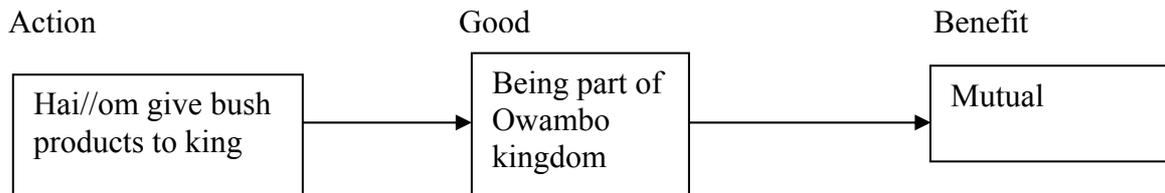
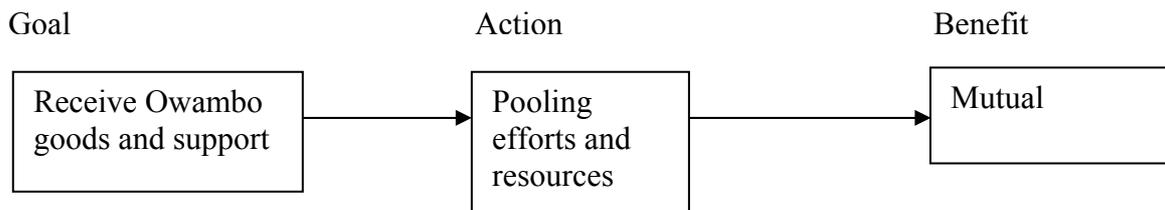


Figure 9
Hai//om (foragers') view of interaction with Owambo (farmers)



But a more general argument can be made, namely that contradictions or incompatibilities between different sequences of terms may be used to explain the occurrence of cultural misunderstandings or of contrasting discourses about economic transfers. A case in point are conflicts within Aboriginal society today. Another example relates to the economic transfers between Hai//om Bushmen and the Owambo, their agropastoralist neighbours indicated at the beginning of this paper. While the Owambo, and following their testimony many European observers, insist that the Hai//om Bushmen were giving copper and wild animal products as a tribute to the Owambo kings (Figure 8), the same transfer was considered an instance of reciprocal exchange by the Hai//om involved (Figure 9). Owambo argue that they gave food to Hai//om as a benevolent response to the Hai//om who accepted the Owambo king by either providing him with the products of the forest or by leading him to the game, by granting him direct access to it. In other words the Owambo attribute the good of being part of their kingdom, of showing allegiance to the king, to their Hai//om counterparts and may not recognize the Hai//om goal of consuming agricultural products. The Hai//om involved, as shown above, may not entertain Owambo goods at all but may construct the transfer quite

differently as spelled out in a differences of sequences (compare Figures 8 and 9). What is considered to be “paying tribute” by one party, may be seen as an instance of reciprocal exchange by the other party involved. However, I would like to emphasize that this is not merely a matter of different perceptions – or abductions – of the same process because ultimately this feeds back into practices and may result in clashes between the parties involved. This may be illustrated with reference to another facet of the Australian example. It is tempting to relate the current practices of restricted access to information mentioned above to “traditional” practices of secrecy as they are well known from the field of Aboriginal religion and possibly to construct a causal relation between the two practices (compare Figures 10 and 11). There are indeed similarities here since in both contexts, traditional ritual and current politics, there are partial restrictions on access to knowledge that are used to enhance the position of those who have full knowledge by suggesting to the non-initiated that a relevant body of knowledge exists which is held by those who are initiated. However, the abductions made from this practice differ considerably and so does the resulting distribution of benefits. In the context of current land claims the practice of restricting access to knowledge eclipses the goal of making a successful native title claim at the national native title tribunal linked to the good of protecting the interests of the community of claimants. The potential beneficiaries are the claimants – and their consultants. In the ritual context, by contrast, the practice of restricting access eclipses the goal of carrying out a successful ritual linked to the good of protecting the order of things, the order of being at large and with the community of all beings as the potential beneficiaries. While it remains a matter of debate – and probably of regional variation – as to how much spill-over there was from the general ritual to the gerontocratic political benefit (see Bern 1979, Tonkinson 1988), it seems that current processes of constructing exclusive claims (see Turner 1999) benefit from the fact that secrecy was acceptable in Aboriginal religion because it was considered to be beneficial to the community of beings at large. In other words, current processes of exclusion may not simply be seen as a continuation of an established practice. They are constituted differently but they do take advantage of the fact that there are formal similarities between traditional and current practices of restricting access and of the fact that the differences in goals and goods that are eclipsed in these practices are rarely made explicit.

Practice

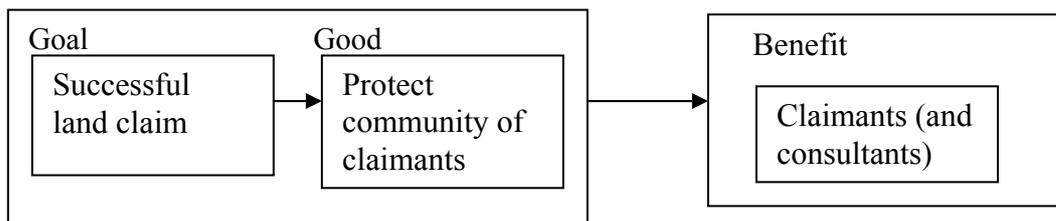
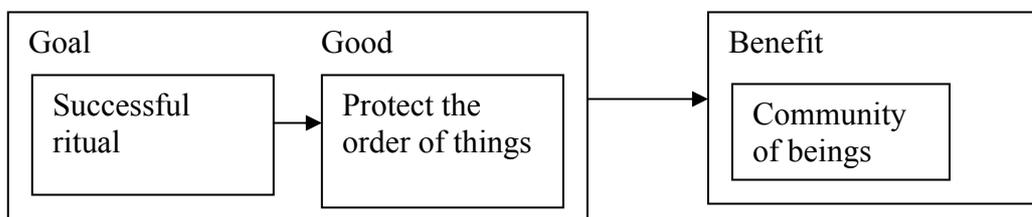


Figure 11
Aboriginal construction of secrecy in rituals

Practice



Conclusion

In this paper I have offered a new way of including the moral dimension of social practice into anthropological analysis. The objective was to go beyond a relativistic stance that simply juxtaposes different ethical systems or moralities and leaves it at that. The underlying strategy for achieving this objective was to focus on virtue and virtuous practice, rather than of elaborated ethical systems or on the moral contents of these systems. The result is a set of related terms that I have applied across diverse cases. In contrast to consequentialist accounts which, for instance, distinguish sharing from exchange in terms of claimed or expected one-way and two-way transfers that is in terms of consequences over time, my account differentiates goods, goals, and benefits as different aspects relating to virtuous practice. Following this approach, sharing can be defined theoretically as a particular constellation of these aspects. It should be pointed out that this analytical tool is not meant to be used to distinguish moral from amoral behaviour. To the contrary, it can help to replace a facile dichotomy between “truly indigenous” (following “traditional” moral rules) and “non-indigenous” (using “modern” morally disembedded procedures) with a more sophisticated analysis of how goods, goals and benefits are contained in practice (see Widlok 2001b).

It is the recognized task of anthropology and its neighbouring social sciences to describe "the human condition", to show the variety of ways in which humans live in their social relations. A major part, maybe the crucial part, of what the human condition "is", is that humans constantly develop notions as to what "ought to be" and they strive for it. They assess what "is" in the light of what they think "ought to be", and they assess one another in these terms, too. When the moral dimension is included into social science research it tends to take moral codes for granted and looks at their consequences, at the ways in which an "ought", a moral scheme, becomes the dominant discourse that has impact on social relations or continues to inform practices under conditions of change as in post-socialism and post-colonialism. An anthropology of virtue, by contrast, primarily investigates how an "ought" is developed from an "is", that is how a good that people strive for develops. While philosophers continue to argue about the logical possibilities of moral positions (ought) from social conditions (is) (see Lawson 2001 for a summary) it is important to note from an anthropological perspective that people around the world in their practical reasoning do it all the time. That is to say, people strive to bring future realities into being and they develop their ideas of what "is to be" (a practical "ought") from their situation (a particular "is"). An anthropology of virtues, as it has been outlined above would allow us to compare and analyze instances of practical reasoning of this sort, to thereby recapture an important aspect of the moral dimension of human action and of social relations for the social sciences but at the same time also to prepare the ground for ethical reflections about ethnographic research.⁹

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⁹ I am, therefore, not proposing to make a direct contribution to moral philosophy because the task of incorporating social science data in that field remains to be done. However, I expect that the results presented here will be welcomed by philosophical approaches that consider ethics as an open-ended process which is not exhausted *a priori* but which is continually broadened by humans carrying out their activities, making their choices and reflecting upon them (Black 2000:57).

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