

**“If They Kill Us at Least the Others Will Have More Time to Get Away”:  
The Ethics of Risk in Ethnographic Practice<sup>1</sup>**

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ABSTRACT

Anthropologists have been addressing the issue of risk in the field since the early 1990s, but have yet to detail on what grounds and in what circumstances such risk is warranted. After surveying developments in epistemology in anthropology, this article makes two challenges to the discipline. The first is to consider the strengths of virtue theory for navigating the relationship between ethnographic particularity and broader moral claims. The second challenge is to engage in conversation with religious agents who themselves demonstrate solidarity with the afflicted in situations of risk. Throughout, I draw on my fieldwork in northern Uganda and South Sudan.

“I have a favor to ask.”

I say this in my most importunate voice. I am meeting with Ben Phillips, the Uganda Country Program Director for Catholic Relief Services. We have been in his office for an hour talking about the conflict in northern Uganda. The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), early on representative of the Acholi people of the North, has by now abducted between twenty-five and sixty-five thousand people in the region to be porters, soldiers, and sex slaves, and has mutilated or murdered thousands more. The United Peoples Defense Force (UPDF), sent by the government ostensibly to protect the Acholi, has been of little help, and its numbers have committed rights

abuses of their own. It can be difficult to get around in the region, and I need Ben's help.

"Last summer CRS was kind enough to provide a car and driver to get me places around Gulu. I am wondering if it could do the same this trip in the Kitgum and Pader districts. I want to get to some more outlying areas."

"We could accommodate that. We would need to know your views on travel with UPDF military escort. If you are unwilling to travel with escort, then you would be limited to visiting locations which CRS has assessed as being safe enough to reach without escort."

I mull over Ben's words, then answer.

"I think I'll make other arrangements. Thanks for hearing me out."

"I fully understand."

We get up from our chairs and, while shaking hands, I ask Ben, mostly out of courtesy after declining his offer, "Any final advice?"

He replies, "If you are on a road and no one is coming toward you, you are heading directly into the LRA. The people have scattered."

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While anthropologists have long faced risk in their fieldwork, it was not until the 1990s that they began to address risk as a particular topic of focus. Jeff Sluka writes that in 1990 he was "the first anthropologist to publish an article specifically on managing danger in fieldwork as a methodological and subjective issue."<sup>2</sup> That same year, Nancy Howell published *Surviving Fieldwork*.<sup>3</sup> Howell had approached the Board of Directors of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in the mid-1980s about the need to address directly the problem of risk in fieldwork. The Board established an Advisory Panel on Health and Safety and called upon Howell to spearhead it. Both Sluka's and Howell's works offer advice—not unlike, "If you are on the road and no one is coming toward you, you are heading directly into the LRA"—on how to minimize the risk inherent in researching conflict situations.

At around the same point in time—1991—Philippe Bourgois published a strong critique of the AAA code of ethics as being too narrow for research in conflict situations. His fieldwork in Central America brought to the fore for him the problem of disinterested research, as defined by the AAA code, in conflict settings where there is an asymmetry of power, and where those without the power are victims of massive human rights violations.<sup>4</sup> What is notable in the article is that, lacking a substantive body of anthropological literature on the ethics of risk in fieldwork, Bourgois needed to turn to a formal organizational code of conduct in order to generate dialogue. While subsequent publications have furthered the conversation in significant ways,<sup>5</sup> when discussing the ethics of risk, the discipline of anthropology as a whole appears to move—even bounce—back and forth

between giving very specific practical pointers and critiquing the formal code without offering any integrating conversation other than to relate individual experience. Part of this dynamic may well be the legacy of anthropology's hard-fought-for cultural relativism that grew out of the discipline's concern about colonialism being embedded in moral discourse. However, as we will see, that very cultural relativism was and is morally driven.

It may well be time for the discipline of anthropology to think about its (often suppressed) modes of moral discourse, and to ask itself what modes best express and facilitate the commitments of its practitioners. My argument in this article moves in three parts. First, I show how the confrontation with risk in fieldwork exposes both the moral drive behind much anthropology to protect and support those people deemed "other" and the lack of coherence between that drive and the epistemological relativism that has predominated in the discipline. I am aware that there is some debate about that relativism,<sup>6</sup> but it remains the dominant fallback—and thus often unargued—posture in the discipline. Second, I will make the case that neo-Aristotelian virtue theory provides one—though I am sure not the only—way to ground both engaged commitment to research subjects and moral claims that protect those subjects. In this section, I will not only set out a version of virtue theory but also display it narratively through a series of events in my own fieldwork in Uganda in a story that discloses the limits of my own virtue at the same time that it vivifies the theory. My effort is to show that the Aristotelian/neo-Aristotelian tradition of virtue theory presents a grammar of moral discourse—with its focus less on a rule-based, juridically centered ethics and more on the living practices of a community—that has much to commend it to the work of anthropologists.<sup>7</sup> Finally, I will argue that anthropologists who are seeking to develop coherent moral rationales for their commitment in risk-filled settings would do well to enter into conversation with religious actors in such settings. These latter actors are often familiar with both risk and unpresumptuous discourse in the virtues. The ground of my claim of the possibility of conversation is the strong analogy between the broad virtue of solidarity, often appealed to by engaged anthropologists, and the Christian virtue of love.

It is important that I be explicit about my own positionality at the start. I am trained in Christian theology—or, more precisely, Christian theological ethics—and have been working from an academic setting, the University of Notre Dame, since 1990. Several years ago I had what would not be inaccurate to call a crisis of vocation: I could no longer in good conscience ply my trade while working from only libraries and speaking to only academic guilds. Liberation theology has influenced academic theology sufficiently such that even those practitioners disinclined towards other liberationist themes must recognize the importance of the poor. Still, the poor themselves are rarely allowed to speak, even in liberation theology where the task is most often to speak *for* those who "cannot speak for themselves."<sup>8</sup> After some time, it became clear to me that the ethnographic methods of anthropology—for instance, participant observation and the open-ended interview—could help provide a corrective to my discipline.

I began work among the Acholi people in northern Uganda in 2005, during the conflict there,

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and expanded it to include the Acholi in South Sudan in 2007. I have spent about fourteen months on the ground. About half of that time I have lived in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. In addition, an Acholi colleague and I have seventy digital voice recorders on the ground with locals trained in interview techniques as part of a collaborative project called “Acholi Voices: Democratizing the War Testimony in Northern Uganda.” We are still in the process of gathering, translating, and transcribing interviews. We plan to post them online in January 2011. Finally, in response to local requests, I, together with others, have started a nongovernmental organization ([peaceharvest.org](http://peaceharvest.org)) that combines peacebuilding with agricultural training. My field experience has confirmed my methodological misgivings about theology, and I have critiqued my discipline for its shortcomings.<sup>9</sup>

However, if theology and anthropology are to enter into conversation with each other and not simply involve the former poaching ideas from the latter, then it is necessary to interrogate the latter as well. Anthropology, at least with regard to Christian religious traditions, has a specific history that it will need to overcome or at least significantly reinterpret if it is to contribute to and gain from an exchange with theologians.<sup>10</sup> There are openings for such conversation, where the discipline moves beyond an anthropology *of* Christianity to anthropology *in conversation with* Christianity,<sup>11</sup> but these openings are rare and constitute a decidedly minority effort. My task, then, is to help widen the openings from the theological side, but in a manner that speaks to anthropologists in terms recognizable to their discipline.

### *The Limits of Cultural Relativism*

“What are you going to do for us?”

It is my last night in Pabbo camp, and I have rejoined the group of men whom I have come to call in my notes the “Teachers’ Drinking Club.” Most of the men are teachers in the secondary school. The camp has not been attacked by the rebels in two years, but a burned-out school bus three kilometers north reminds people that the rebels prefer to set them on fire than to shoot them.

Each night after work, the men of the Teachers’ Drinking Club sit on benches in a circle around a clay urn full of alcoholic mash and drink the brew through four-foot bamboo straws.

“We know you have your research. But what are you going to do for us?”

Otim is the macro-theorist among the teachers. To him, it is not a matter of the rebels versus the government. “The white man gives us guns so that we keep busy killing each other,” he said last night. The others looked away, or took another sip of their mash, but none said anything in disagreement. Perhaps they were uncomfortable because they might lose a potential patron. I had promised to see their school tomorrow before heading to

Gulu. Otim was and is undaunted. “Then you come and steal our knowledge. You steal our culture. You come and talk to us about our knowledge and our culture and then take it all back with you. And we have nothing left. Look at us. You see how we live. What are you going to do for us?”<sup>12</sup>

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In order to investigate how anthropology might broaden its discourse, it is necessary to examine where that discourse has been. We will see, then, how the critique of epistemological relativism has arisen from within anthropology itself. It will also be evident that there is a consistent moral drive that persists through three stages in the development of anthropology, and that engaged anthropology has yet to provide an adequate articulation of the grounds for that drive. In what I would consider a first stage leading to the present situation, *methodological* relativism arises as a moral stance aimed at the protection of the subjects of research. It comes into being in early twentieth-century anthropology—I am thinking here especially of Franz Boas’s 1928 *Anthropology and Modern Life*—as a methodology in response and opposition to the unilineal evolutionism of the time.<sup>13</sup> As I understand it, unilineal evolutionism accounts for differences between cultures not by pointing to differences in space—“They are different because they developed over there”—but by constructing differences in time—“They are different because they are from earlier and lower stages of evolution.” The theory of unilineal evolution justifies and animates racist policies of exploitation. The anthropological studies of Boas and others attempt to look at other cultures “scientifically,” that is, without the cultural triumphalism of unilinear evolutionism. They ground their scientific methodology in an epistemological *realism*. Racism, in this case, is just not scientific.

With the “interpretive turn” in the 1980s, however, much of anthropology set aside scientific realism. In the absence of an agreed-upon alternative, *epistemological* (and not just methodological) relativism became the assumed norm. The moral concern to protect the subjects of research, however, remained the same. Such concern evidences itself in Clifford Geertz’s 1984 article, “Anti Anti-Relativism”: the primary threat to humanity is not a relativism that claims no truth of the matter, but a universalism that is willing to exploit and harm others on behalf of what is actually a culturally bound understanding of the truth.<sup>14</sup> Over twenty years later, many, and perhaps most, anthropologists exhibit the same concern. Robert Ulin writes

I very much agree with Geertz that the problem is less with what is relative and more with arguments advanced in support of absolutes and universals. The challenge posed by reputed universals is more than academic but reaches to the very heart of policy formation and law at the levels of the nation-state and beyond. We simply need to recall the debates in France over the chador or here in America the ethnically charged discussions of policing borders or for that matter the renewal of the “Patriot Act.”<sup>15</sup>

At this point, without the scientific realism assumed in Boas’s method, methodological relativism blurs into epistemological relativism.

The moral concern shaping anthropology continues at this point to arise out of a judgment about which is the worse threat to human flourishing: the hegemonic design often resting behind

the articulation of universal norms or the nihilism suggested by the claim that no culture can judge any other. As a whole, anthropologists have judged the former to be the worse threat. They often attempt to keep from falling into the latter by making the distinction—as George Marcus and Michael Fischer do—between methodological and doctrinal cultural relativism.<sup>16</sup> However, vagueness about and resistance to moral discourse *tout court*e has made doctrinal relativism anthropological orthodoxy. On my reading, this is why after over 160 pages of arguing that there is no simple realism and that all anthropology involves interpretation, Marcus and Fischer break from their narrative—“We end with a word about the moral or ethical dimension...” —to make the point that anthropology ought not to be involved in the “assertion of values.”<sup>17</sup> To “assert values” is to risk being oppressive. Rather, anthropology should simply be about “the empirical exploration” of the conditions for the articulation of values. In other words, after a full book detailing how there are no simple “facts,” Marcus and Fischer end with a coda restating the fact (“empirical”)/value split in order to avoid appearing moralistic and therefore oppressive. Marcus and Fischer’s book is significant in that it is frequently cited as a classic text that brings together and projects into the future the cultural anthropology of the time.<sup>18</sup>

However, critique of this cultural relativism has arisen from within anthropology itself from, among others, researchers working in conflict areas who charge that it is precisely the relativism that is colonial and oppressive. This is what I think of as a third moment—it is too early to tell whether it will become established enough to call it a stage—in anthropology, and it continues the concern with protecting research subjects, now in the context of engaged risk. Philippe Bourgois, for instance, recounts the academic fallout from his reporting of human rights abuses in El Salvador in an article that appears just five years after the Marcus and Fischer volume. Bourgois witnesses a massacre of peasants by the Salvadoran military. He notifies the media and human rights organizations and gives public testimony. “It was also almost the end of my anthropological career,” he reports, because he had violated several dicta of the AAA’s Code of Ethics, all of which are built around the idea of the objective, non-committed participant observer.<sup>19</sup> For instance, reporting the crimes violated the subjects’—including the marauding military’s—right to privacy, and it potentially placed in jeopardy the opportunity for future non-committed scholars to conduct their research. If he had not gone to the media and rights organizations—if he had kept quiet—Bourgois would not have violated the AAA Code in any significant way.

Bourgois responds to the AAA Code by making the case that situations of oppression require a different, broader understanding of ethics. If informed consent remains paramount, then one can never report human rights violations by oppressive regimes. Anthropology, Bourgois argues, is caught in a time-warp where the posture of moral non-commitment still serves to protect threatened cultures. The result is a “predilection for the exotic” and “preoccupation with purity.”<sup>20</sup> Such a posture ignores the realities of power—both the asymmetrical power between oppressor and oppressed and the social and political power of the researcher. Bourgois points out that the peasants *wanted* him present and reporting on what was going on because he had power, and doing so

would keep them safer by making atrocities public knowledge.

What the non-committed approach to anthropology masks is the fact that cultural relativism assumes considerable power on the part of its bearer: one can afford—economically and politically—to be uninvolved without consequence. The task is to insert oneself into the setting, gather the information—or, as Otim would say it, “steal our culture”—and extract oneself as if never there. From Otim’s standpoint, it is a form of plunder. Cultural relativism is the posture that allows one to do this with a clean conscience. June Nash, writing of her years in conflict-ridden Bolivia and its effect on her view of her research, is unflinching: “This breakdown of my carefully cultivated ‘cultural relativist’ position forced me to realize that it was premised on a colonialist attitude... We can no longer retreat into the deceptive pose of neutrality.”<sup>21</sup>

Just how widespread this latest moment of socially active commitment to research subjects is in anthropology is difficult to assess, because the discipline itself gives mixed signals. On the one hand, there are the writings of committed scholars, such as those collected in the recent volume, *Engaged Observer: Anthropology, Advocacy, and Activism*,<sup>22</sup> and the fact that the 2008 American Anthropological Association annual meeting took as its theme, “Inclusion, Collaboration, and Engagement”; on the other hand, in 1998 the AAA revised its earlier Code of Ethics from the claim that “anthropologists bear a positive responsibility to speak out publicly,”<sup>23</sup> to the far weaker statement: “Anthropological researchers should make the results of their research appropriately available to sponsors, students, decisionmakers, and other non-anthropologists... Anthropologists may choose to move beyond disseminating research results to a position of advocacy. This is an individual decision, but not an ethical responsibility.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, according to the 1998 code of ethics, Bourgois would have remained an anthropologist in good standing had he not reported the military atrocities to the media in a timely fashion, but rather published his research in a peer-reviewed article that found comparatively narrow readership in the AAA a year or more later.

The overall trajectory of anthropology, then, has gone from methodological relativism to epistemological relativism to, at least among some practitioners, an engaged anthropology that is as of yet unclear about its method and epistemology. There is a tension at the center of engaged anthropology that it must confront if it is to convince the rest of the discipline to practice its forms of commitment. One pull of the tension is the awareness of the position and power of the researcher, an awareness that has led to the rejection of the possibility of both epistemological and political neutrality. We always observe and speak from somewhere in particular. This emphasis on the researcher’s positionality is the pull towards epistemological relativism. The call of engaged anthropology is for the researcher to locate herself, insofar as this is possible, among and for those people who are marginalized and oppressed. The other pull is that, in order to both identify and resist situations of oppression, engaged observers find that they must appeal to the language of universal human rights, and this is the pull towards epistemological realism.<sup>25</sup> Bourgois is forceful: “To reiterate, the problem [of anthropological disengagement] is rooted in a specifically North American epistemology of relativism and ‘value-free science’ which forbids engaged research

and—when taken to its logical conclusion—denies absolute assertions including those of universal human rights.”<sup>26</sup> Others, such as Dana-Ain Davis, follow suit in asserting that engaged anthropology is “grounded in principles of inclusion, equal rights, and equal access.”<sup>27</sup> What is lacking in the literature, however, is an account of how perspectival particularity in fact links with and grounds broad—indeed, universal—moral claims.

Engaged anthropology needs to work out how it is going to keep these two pulls in tension, and not let one dominate the other. Absent a discussion linking epistemological particularity with broader claims about the way persons ought to relate to one another and how society ought to be ordered, engaged anthropology threatens to perpetuate the very problems it tries to overcome. Precisely through its solidarity with the oppressed, engaged anthropology seeks to move beyond the idea of the exoticized other; however, without nuanced moral reasoning about that commitment, it may simply reproduce the binary relationship of self over against other, only this time along the lines of oppressed (and those who stand with them) versus oppressor, thus redacting out of any narrative the detailed complexity that fieldwork is positioned to highlight. Bourgois warns that “the ethics of anthropological research are too complicated and important to be reduced to unambiguous absolutes or even perhaps to be clearly defined.”<sup>28</sup> Regarding her experience in Bolivia, June Nash observes that “not all actions in the name of revolution were revolutionary.”<sup>29</sup> Without more careful reasoning, engaged anthropology risks essentializing both oppressor and oppressed.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps worse, if engaged anthropologists do not provide careful linkages between their perspectivalism and their moral and political claims, they have no coherent way to challenge those researchers disinclined to accept these latter claims. Again, the 1998 revision of the AAA Code of Ethics states that reporting human rights abuses in a timely fashion to the media so that the public is made aware and can respond before other atrocities ensue is, “not an ethical responsibility,” but rather is an “individual decision.” The change in the Code was long in coming. The rise in the numbers of anthropologists working for either governments or private companies brought debate regarding the Code in the mid-1980s. James Downs’ letter to the *AAA Newsletter* is representative of the pressure. Anthropologists working for governments must “play by the rules of the game,” which includes non-disclosure of facts that might discomfort one’s employer. So, too, with the private sector: firms “exist to sell knowledge,” and the information one gathers, regardless of its content, belongs to them. Downs not only fails to resist the pressure, he gets swept up in it in a manner consistent with doctrinal relativism: any prohibition against secret research “fails to take into account the realities of today’s world... I welcome a Code of Ethics which considers such [classified] work a matter of personal choice.”<sup>31</sup> Absent a more richly developed moral discourse, engaged anthropologists lack any way of making the case that Downs is wrong. Given the government use of anthropologists in the United States war in Iraq, there remains an intense need for making just such a case.

### *The Virtues of Virtue Theories*



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Just as ethnographic method is not a cure-all for the ills of theology, virtue theory is not a panacea for the shortcomings of anthropology. In what follows, I put forward a version of virtue theory because it has advantages over the major alternative forms of moral reasoning as articulated by philosophical and theological ethics. The point here is not that virtue theory provides a kind of algorithmic calculus for what anthropologists ought to do in particular situations; rather, it provides a grammar—in terms of certain communal practices taking place within and understood in light of overall narratives—which facilitates moral discernment through ethnographic encounter. Because of the importance of descriptive detail, it is necessary not just to set out a virtue *theory* but to offer a *display* of what ethnographic discernment in light of virtue might look like. In what follows, I take on each of these tasks in turn.

Moral philosophy offers three main forms of normative theory—deontology (Kant and Rawls), utilitarianism (Bentham, Mill, and Singer), and virtue theory (Aristotle, Hume, Anscombe, Foote, and MacIntyre). The first two theories present major obstacles to their operating as modes of moral reasoning for the engaged anthropologist. Both deontology and utilitarianism abstract from the particulars of communal life in order to develop binding moral norms. Attention to particulars detracts, according to these approaches, from precision in moral reasoning by adding contingent factors that limit the otherwise universal applicability of the norms. Thus the Kantian, John Rawls, arrives at his criterion of fairness by positioning his fictive moral agents behind a “veil of ignorance” where they know nothing of their particular lives before he allows them to choose the kinds of lives they want to lead, and the utilitarian Peter Singer disallows consideration of any of our attachments to particular people in the calculation of distributive justice.<sup>32</sup> For utilitarians, what counts is only the greatest amount of happiness in the abstracted aggregate. To whatever degree one may agree or disagree with the conclusions of deontologists or utilitarians on specific issues, their methodologies of assuming or inventing a moral agent who reasons from nowhere in particular makes them a difficult match for a discipline that gives central place to the method of participant observation in particular cultures.

It would be of hollow comfort if virtue theories provided the best approach to moral reasoning for anthropologists simply because the other two available options were unusable. Fortunately, there is much in virtue theories to commend them. Many and perhaps most contemporary virtue theorists emphasize persons’ embeddedness in particular communities. This is due in large part to the greater focus in virtue theories on the continuity of the agent as distinct from the discreet acts that the agent might perform. To make sense of the continuity of the agent, one has to attend to her relationships with other persons in her culture and society. In the preferred term of anthropology, virtue theory attends to the theorist’s “positionality.” The moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre writes, “It is not clear to me how *any* adequate philosophical analysis in this area could escape being also a sociological hypothesis, and *vice versa*. There seems something deeply mistaken in the notion enforced by the conventional curriculum that there are two distinct subjects or disciplines—moral philosophy, a set of conceptual inquiries, on the one hand, and the sociology of morals, a

set of empirical hypotheses and findings, on the other.”<sup>33</sup> MacIntyre goes further to call for finely detailed cultural interpretations. “What we need here is not only philosophical acuteness but also the kind of vision which anthropologists at their best bring to the observation of other cultures.”<sup>34</sup>

It is precisely the lack of embeddedness that leads deontological and utilitarian approaches to take as their specific object the conformity of discreet acts to abstract principles. This is because there is no other basis of continuity of the moral self. Virtue theories, because of their embeddedness, do not create a separate sphere of the “moral”; moral excellences are analogous to other types of excellences, including in sports and the arts. Moreover, for Aristotle there are both intellectual and moral “virtues.” Therefore, the usual translation of the Greek *arete* as “virtue” is perhaps better rendered “excellence” to convey the breadth of the term, and this is the case particularly given present distortions of the concept. The development of modern society and the autonomous self-legislating individual loses contact with the fact of human communal embeddedness. As a result, its moral rules cannot be grounded in the patterns of societal interaction, but only in abstractions. The “moral” becomes a separate sphere directed only by abstract principles and geared only towards the production of laws. In this context, virtue theories themselves degenerate, such that a “virtue” becomes simply a disposition to obey a particular rule or law.

It is in this historical context that the discipline of anthropology itself arises. It is no wonder, then, that its earlier practitioners such as Boas view themselves as “scientists”—in other words, persons with intellectual virtues—over against the harsh colonial moralism of the time. In doing so, however, they reinforce the fact/value split presupposed by modernity. The result is studies that fail to take into account how the social positionality of the researcher shapes interpretation. Moreover, given the nervousness of anthropology about its own complicity in colonialism, even when the discipline in theory comes to recognize the role of interpretation, it, as we have seen with Marcus and Fischer, still refuses to recognize the role of values in that interpretation. Fact and value have necessarily come back together, but anthropologists who follow Marcus and Fischer still do not know what to do with the “value” dimension of the mix because, in the historical development of their discipline, they have come to identify value simply with a separated realm of “morals.” For Marcus and Fischer, values are something that an anthropologist can only unidirectionally assert (and thus are to be avoided). As a result, they often cling to a doctrinal cultural relativism even though that relativism is no longer epistemologically intelligible given the discipline’s awareness that there are no simple “facts.” In response, engaged anthropology presses for universal values as encoded in human rights, but as of yet has not formed a language to link rights with ethnographic particularity.

Contemporary virtue theories hold promise for anthropology in large part because they have arisen not only as an effort to recontextualize moral reasoning in close social and cultural analysis, but also as a protest against the idea that there is an entirely separate realm of “the moral”—an idea which has tended to repulse anthropologists. Elizabeth Anscombe, in a 1958 article widely regarded as inaugurating the move to virtue theory in contemporary moral philosophy, argues that

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the idea of a separate realm of the moral is so ensconced in both our culture and philosophical reasoning that, for the time being, philosophers ought to banish the word “moral” from their work, and indeed to stop doing “moral philosophy” altogether, until they can aright their distorted view of the person as free of embeddedness. “The expressions ‘moral obligation’, ‘the moral ought’, and ‘duty’ are best put on the Index.”<sup>35</sup> Anscombe is not suggesting that we should get rid of the language of “ought” altogether, only eschew the idea that “moral ought” is different in kind from other kinds of excellences. “It may be possible, if we are resolute, to discard the term ‘morally ought’, and simply return to the ordinary ‘ought’, which, we ought to notice, is such an extremely frequent term of human language that it is difficult to imagine getting on without it.”<sup>36</sup> Anscombe, like MacIntyre, views moral obligation as strongly analogous with other types of obligation—“He ought to have passed the ball”—with this difference: she views the language of “moral” as so corrupted that philosophers ought to discard it until they get their understanding of the person right. MacIntyre, writing over twenty years later, and at much greater explanatory length, risks using the term by taking the space to detail a version of virtue theory. With both Anscombe and MacIntyre, as well as with a host of other virtue theorists, we see that they offer an approach to interpretation that neither denies the role of value nor draws upon a concept of “the moral” that serves as a lever for oppressive dismissal of cultural pluralism. The person—who is, among other things, a moral agent—is always and everywhere embedded in particular communities such that the word “ought”—let alone moral and legal rules—is not something that one can simply apply from the outside. Though hardly failsafe, this characteristic of virtue theory builds in a resistance to the kind of ethnocentrism that most contemporary anthropologists rightly abhor.

With these advantages of virtue theories in mind, we can now say a bit more about just what constitutes a virtue. Then I will be able to offer a scenario and try to display what a virtue analysis might look like—one that is at once anthropological and moral. To detail what constitutes a virtue, I make reference to MacIntyre’s book *After Virtue*, which many interpreters identify as a *locus classicus* of contemporary virtue theory. The text is all the more interesting for our purposes because it came out in the early 1980s, just at the time when anthropologists were questioning the fact/value separation from the other side of the divide.

MacIntyre builds his understanding of virtue around two key concepts, that of a practice and that of the narrative quest. He defines a practice as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to the activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially derived from, that form of activity.”<sup>37</sup> MacIntyre gives both athletic (football) and aesthetic (portrait painting) examples of what constitutes a practice and views them as analogous to moral practices. Key to his concept of excellence in the performance of a practice is the distinction between goods internal to the practice and those that, while supportive and even necessary, are external to it. The University of Notre Dame’s contract with adidas may provide some of the financial support that enables the school to participate in Division I football, but it is not internal to the practice of

football like the crisp route-running of wide receiver Golden Tate. In light of this understanding of practice, MacIntyre sets out an initial definition of virtue as “an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving such goods.”<sup>38</sup>

Classical Aristotelian virtue theory provides the concept of a *telos* as a way of ordering the array of virtues that arise in and further develop practices. The problem with Aristotle’s account of the *telos*, however, is not only that he grounds it in an untenable metaphysical biology, but also that it is closed-ended and therefore overdetermines the content of the life of excellence. The endpoint of the teleological journey is fixed in a way that pre-sets all of the relationships within it. If all virtue theory necessarily followed in this vein, it would signal the end of any usefulness for an engaged anthropology. The turn to doctrinal cultural relativism in much of anthropology was driven precisely by a determination to avoid, again rightly, the closed-ended teleology of unilinear evolutionism. The biology of unilinear evolutionism is different from Aristotle’s, but the results for moral reasoning are the same.

MacIntyre explicitly rejects Aristotle’s biological grounding and offers in its stead the idea of the narrative quest. He argues that human life is unintelligible without the context of narrative: “Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions.”<sup>39</sup> It is important to recognize, however, that *lived* narratives are open-ended, both because they are subject to communal contestation and because future events will shape and reshape our understanding of what constitutes the life well lived. MacIntyre draws on the concept of a quest to express both the contestation and the open-endedness. The idea of a quest is “not at all that of a search for something already adequately characterized.... A quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge.”<sup>40</sup> This understanding of a quest and furthering self-understanding fits well with the recent emphasis in anthropology on the self-reflexivity and even autobiography inherent in interpretation.<sup>41</sup> In light of his concept of the narrative quest, MacIntyre provides a further detailed definition of the virtues as “those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but will sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good.”<sup>42</sup>

MacIntyre’s account of virtue is not uncontested, even among virtue theorists, but what I have outlined thus far is enough to provide a context within which to display what engaged anthropology might look like when infused with the grammar of a virtue analysis. Again, the argument thus far has been that anthropologists have long been driven by a moral concern to protect their often-marginalized research subjects. At one point the presumed epistemological posture for such ends was one form or another of relativism. Recently, however, anthropologists working in situations of risk have found that such epistemological relativism is inadequate for the kinds of rights claims necessary to protect subjects. I have been offering a version of virtue theory as a form of

moral reasoning that can hold together both attention to cultural particularity and the need to make broader moral claims. In the following section, I do a moral-ethnographic discernment of events in my fieldwork as a way of displaying what virtue analysis might look like. We will find that, as any close ethnographic analysis should, the narrative complexifies oppressor/oppressed interpretations without doing away with them.

### *(An Attempt to Live) The Virtue of Solidarity*

“Wait. How much longer are you here?”

Ocena Charles’s question catches me by surprise. We have been talking about the various practices of Acholi culture—the *otole* mock-fight dance, the fact that funerals can last days, even weeks—for more than an hour at the Victoria restaurant in Entebbe.

“I leave tomorrow morning,” I answer.

Ocena sits back and looks out over the water of Lake Victoria, pondering my answer for a long moment. He turns to me.

“How much time do you have before you need to get back to Kampala tonight?”

Another clearly-stated yet elliptical question.

“I have nothing planned. I just need to get back early enough so that I can get up on time for my plane in the morning.”

He looks back out over the lake, nods his head, and then turns to me once more.

“I have some documents for you. Will you take some documents for me to the United States?”

“What kind of documents?”

“For your research.” He is still speaking in code. The documents are, he says, for me, but I am to take them to the United States for him. “You can use them for your research.”

He does not fully trust me yet, but he trusts me enough to be his courier.

“Yes, I will take them.”

“And you know that you cannot tell anyone that they are from me.”

“Yes.”

“Or else the government will...” He makes a slicing movement across his neck.

My risks are far less serious in this instance, but they are real. If I am found out, the government may not let me back in the country. Carrying what is ostensibly for my research may cost me my research. It will not be the first time the government refuses re-entry to an undesirable. My employer, the University of Notre Dame, in keeping with its hard-won status as a newly arrived national university, takes a dim view of those who do not finish their research and produce “the book,” regardless of how much I may use my academic skills for humanitarian purposes.

We get a car and driver, and Ocena explains why we are heading away from his place in Entebbe. “I have to keep the documents at my nephew’s place, or else they will find them and kill me.”

We drive out to a Kampala slum and he gets out of the car. I am not sure whether we have taken our circuitous route because of possible danger or simply because that is the way the streets are laid out. To our left, shacks of corrugated metal compete for coveted space. The adults continually duck their heads so as not to cut them on the edges of the roofs, and so look like they are joining the bobbing chickens around their feet.

In less than five minutes, he is back. He opens the back door, gets in, and puts a brown file folder with an elastic restraining strap around it on my lap.

“Read it later.”

We drive away.<sup>43</sup>

\* \* \*

The virtue theory I have been setting out frames its moral reasoning in terms of narrative, and it is not difficult to interpret the colonial and post-colonial history of the Acholi people of northern Uganda whom I study as a narrative of being on the receiving end of oppression. In his anthropological work on the Acholi, Sverker Finnstrom refers to them as “the abject of the abject.”<sup>43</sup> Prior to the arrival of the British, the people in northern Uganda who came to be known as the Acholi were loosely federated and decentralized.<sup>45</sup> In 1894 the British named Uganda a protectorate and in 1896 included the people of northern Uganda in this designation. That Uganda was a protectorate and not a colony is critical because in the former the British dominate through “indirect” rule, that is, by designating one indigenous group to rule over the rest on behalf of the empire. Indirect rule, coupled with the British quest for bureaucratic order, hardened and reified ethnic differences by setting African over against African.<sup>46</sup> The British made the Bugandans in the South, who already had a centralized political system that more closely resembled that of the colonizers, the administrators of the protectorate.

Over one hundred ten years later, a form of indirect rule continues. President Museveni's National Resistance Movement government receives over half of its budget from foreign aid in a way that reinforces his twenty-four-year presidency and lack of democratic accountability. (In the last campaign, he jailed his main opponent, Kissa Besigye, on trumped up charges of rape and treason). What is taking place in Uganda today is *de facto* indirect rule by the donor nations. They get a president who meets their strategic interests, and he gets to rule in perpetuity. When the Acholi resistance failed in 1987 and then imploded in the 1990s with the Lord's Resistance Army abducting and mutilating its own people, the Museveni government not only failed to provide sufficient counterforce to protect the Acholi, but also forcefully displaced them into so-called "protected" camps that actually served as magnets for LRA attack. The WHO estimated in 2005—when over 90 percent of the Acholi lived in camps—that there were 1000 excess deaths per week (deaths in excess of what would be the case under "normal" conditions for the region) due to malnutrition, disease, and violence.<sup>47</sup> This, and an array of direct human rights violations in the North on the part of the Ugandan military,<sup>48</sup> has made the charge of genocide against Museveni and his National Resistance Movement ruling government a prominent, even if suppressed, Acholi interpretation of the conflict.<sup>49</sup> Freedom from this oppression is an overarching *telos*, and international publication of the actions of the NRM is a key means of furthering progress towards that end.

This is the narrative I stepped into when I began doing my research in northern Uganda in 2005, and I came to it with a narrative of my own. For fifteen years, I had been teaching Catholic social ethics with an emphasis on issues of armed conflict and the gap between rich and poor, and had become increasingly convinced that the main mode of investigation in the discipline—library research—was seriously inadequate for both epistemological and theological reasons.<sup>50</sup> Like many engaged anthropologists,<sup>51</sup> I found the incentive and reward system of the academy—with its emphasis on paper presentations at guild conferences, articles in refereed journals, and university press books—to be too narrow to measure the practice of an excellence in a life worth living. Writing on the poor and afflicted seemed to me to require a more robust commitment to them, and that meant engaged participant observation in places—namely, IDP camps—that would take me far outside of my comfort zone. In the language of virtue theory, then, I was seeking to live a more committed practice of solidarity with people who were marginalized in the context of a narrative structured by oppressor/oppressed dynamics.

My experience in the camps reinforced for me the Acholi's interpretation of themselves as oppressed and marginalized. While I was helping nuns feed those whom the United Nations Food Program did not reach and who were on the edge of starvation, the NRM's main concern, as it often is for oppressive regimes with regard to anthropologists,<sup>52</sup> was whether I was a spy. In the meantime, they were spying on me.

\* \* \*

The Government Security Officer or "GiSO" of Obul IDP camp, Olweny Benedict stops

me on the main road through the camp. “You have failed to see me.” I am the only *munu*—white person—of the twenty-two thousand people here, and not easy to miss.

“I stopped by your compound twice. You weren’t there,” I answer. The GiSO’s responsibility for camp security includes control of the flow of public information. He does not like my response.

“So, you have still failed to see me.”

Olweny appears to be in his forties, though it is hard to tell. It is eight-thirty in the morning and his eyes are already bloodshot on yellow.

“I have direct contact with the President” he continues. “I can call him whenever I want. If he is in London, whenever. I have been an intelligence officer for fifteen years, including in Sudan. That is why they have me here. Obul is close to Sudan. It is not even ten miles. Some people come here and say bad things about Obul. And you?” Olweny asks. “What shall I say you are doing here?”

“I am an academic. I am studying traditional Acholi religion.”

“So we cooperate. I have to tell the higher command what you are up to. They already know that you are here. They wonder, ‘What is the *munu* doing in Lokung?’ Now I can tell them what you are doing. They had some mistaken ideas.”

That afternoon, two young men show up outside my quarters while I am writing up the morning’s field notes. They ask, seemingly in passing, about my plans. I have not met them before, though they pull up chairs. Okumu, my host and a member of the opposition party, has warned me about the possibility: “Anyone who asks how long you are staying, do not tell them. Give them a vague answer to throw them off. Acholi do not ask how long a guest is staying. It is against hospitality. If they ask, they are spies. If they ask what you are doing, just tell them that you are doing your research and helping with the church.” They do not, as most visitors do, ask for my financial assistance.<sup>53</sup>

\* \* \*

The history of virtue theories is also a history of different tables of the virtues. The classical tradition enumerated four cardinal—from the Latin, *cardo*, meaning fundamental, the thing on which other things hinge—virtues: courage, justice, temperance, and prudence. Christianity added the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. There have been variations on both of these lists. The term that engaged anthropologists draw on most, however, appears to be “solidarity,” and I will focus on this virtue. Pope John Paul II characterizes solidarity as a virtue involving the “firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.”<sup>54</sup>

My first efforts at solidarity—other than the simple fact of being there in the camps, which



many Acholi told me itself gave them some hope—were activities of the sort that Christian traditions have described as the works—or in the language we have been using, the practices—of mercy: feed the hungry and clothe the naked in direct, low-level daily interaction. When a friend in the United States gave me \$5,000 to “use in any way that you think will help the Acholi,” I raised more funds and, with others, put together a month-long pilot project that coupled peacebuilding with the provision of oxen and training in their innovative use for a region that had lost 98% of their working livestock to the conflict. We have now formed the nongovernmental organization PeaceHarvest ([peaceharvest.org](http://peaceharvest.org)).

Still, Ocena’s request to ferry documents raised questions as to the depth and kind of my commitment. The fact that the government had already positioned me in the social context of its distrust and that I had interviewed people who had been tortured by its operatives—one man had a cord that was attached to the ceiling tied to his genitals and was forced to jump off of a box—inclined me to accept the request. June Nash’s words rang loud in my head: in such a setting, “neutrality” is untenable. It seemed that committing myself to the common good, and the marginalized in particular, would require even more of me than I previously thought.

However, if virtue theories provide the grammar to ground and even justify my action in accepting the documents, they also offer the language to critique it. The dominant Acholi narrative is not without its problems. Many Acholi served in the military in Milton Obote’s regime, which preceded Museveni’s, and participated in atrocities committed by that regime in a region called the Luwero Triangle. When I ask Acholis about the atrocities, the most frequent answer I receive—as if Nuremberg did not exist—is that Acholis did not constitute the officer corps that gave the orders. Moreover, given that the majority of the direct attacks on the Acholi from 1988 onward have been from the Acholi-led and dominated LRA, the charge that it is Museveni’s regime that is singularly involved in genocide loses its credibility. Without unweighting the severity of the activities of the NRM and those who act on its behalf—and certainly without suggesting in any way that the Acholi, as some would have it, deserve their fate—careful analysis of the narratives at minimum complicates the oppressor/oppressed rubric.

Moreover, performing the works of mercy is one kind of practice, serving as a courier of sensitive documents is another, and sets the agent—me—in a web of intrigue in a way that acts like feeding the hungry do not. Ocena knew the risks better than I did, and yet he requested, in a manner that was far from straightforward, that I undertake them. He would not tell me what was in the documents. It was “for your research.” He did not tell me who he wanted me to deliver the documents to until I had arrived in the United States, and he e-mailed me from a third party. For my part, though, I do not regret taking the documents. I took them not knowing the full range of the possible implications of my actions. After I had left for the United States, one of the several extra-constitutional secret service groups Museveni has formed demanded entry into the compound of the religious community with which I had been staying and insisted on seeing the guest registry. The government had been listening in on the phone calls between Ocena and me, with the result

that I had inadvertently drawn in unsuspecting people. It caused havoc in the community. Aristotle writes that experience is necessary to develop the *phronesis*, or practical wisdom—itself an intellectual virtue—necessary to direct the moral virtues. I had the desire to practice the moral virtue of solidarity but overestimated—willfully so, I think—my ability to direct it.

Through use of this scenario, I hope that we can see how the grammar of “narrative” and “practice,” provided by virtue theories and coupled with what Clifford Geertz calls a “thick description” of a situation, offers a way for engaged anthropologists to enter into moral discourse and assessment in a way that directs their practices without being moralizing. It combines socio-cultural and philosophical analysis in a way that not only overcomes the fact-value split, but also shows the latter to be the fiction that it is. It seems, then, that virtue theory can attend to the concern among many anthropologists for solidarity with research subjects while attending to both cultural particularity and the need to make broader moral claims.

It is important, however, to take the demonstration further. We have seen how situations of risk raise the issue of moral reasoning for anthropology. Now I would like to take that reasoning and place it back into a situation of risk where not only the researcher’s project, but also her life is at stake. Not many of us experience such situations, and the question remains how to gain practical wisdom here. In the virtue tradition, one learns through experience, which means, as in my case, making mistakes. The problem is that situations where one’s life is at risk do not permit of mistakes. How then are we to learn? Virtue theories draw on the idea of exemplars: we can learn through reading about—or, better, watching—persons who exemplify practical wisdom in living out the virtues. With regard to situations where one’s life is at risk, both engaged anthropologists and religious persons who live in solidarity with the abject have experience, and both can benefit from ongoing exchange with one another. The ensuing conversation is not simply beneficial for its own sake, but also because with the emphasis on the particular in virtue theories, there are no universals—including human rights—in the abstract. The only way to ground universal, or at least cross-cultural, claims is through the difficult process of dialogue and even cooperation between traditions of practice.<sup>55</sup> In what follows, the strong analogies between solidarity broadly understood and Christian charity allow one instance of this dialogue to take place.

### *Anthropological Solidarity and Christian Charity*

I have never seen a night sky like this. There are no cities near Magwi, South Sudan, and so no light pollution. I see now that there are stars between the main, brightest stars, and stars between the ones in between—many more and much brighter than I could have imagined. We are sitting outside in plastic chairs in something of a circle in the compound of the Eucharistic Center where conversation has yet to be displaced by television. Father Joseph Otto and the health unit workers, Dominick and Odoch, bounce from topic to topic, fed by the day’s events, and my attention shifts from sky to conversation to sky again.

Seemingly without topical prompt, a debate breaks out among them regarding the best direction to run during an LRA attack. Dominick, a slender Madi from Adjumani, argues that it is best to run across the line of fire, to what appears to be off to the side of the attack. Father Joseph disagrees. He holds up his hand in the shape of a C and presses it forward.

“They attack you like this. The two sides first. They try to catch you at the back, but if you run to the side, they will catch you also. This is how they attacked in January. Ay, yi, yi,” he laughs, shaking his head. “January was the worst month.” Dominick and Odoch tag-team the next few lines.

“Ay, last January was bad. It was my first month here.”

“The SPLA was not here yet. They did not come until Easter.”

“There was no one to protect us.”

“You could not go a day without hearing gunshots. You would hear bombs. You would see fires.”

“It was dry season, and the fires would set off bombs — unexploded ordnance from the war with Khartoum.”

“You just didn’t know. You would see somebody one day, and the next they’d be dead. Like those men who bought those parts for the Land Cruiser. On the way home they were killed.”

Father Joseph continues his story.

“The LRA attacked. People from all around came to our compound. They were saying, ‘Father Joseph, the LRA are coming! Help us!’ I did not know what to do. We couldn’t protect them. Father Maurice was here. So I asked him what we should do. He said, ‘Let’s get a motorcycle and ride towards the LRA. Let’s try to talk to them. Maybe they’ll talk. And if they kill us, at least the others will have more time to get away.’”

The next day, Father Joseph and I drive to Torit to see the bishop. Though the Magwi County Commissioner says that they have all gone to Western Equatoria, the LRA are still around. Father Maurice saw one running from the SPLA earlier in the week, and next week four will be spotted in Agoro, Uganda, just south of the Sudan border, while I am there. Father Joseph crosses himself and says a prayer before he starts the car. I ask him what went through his mind when Father Maurice suggested riding a motorcycle towards the center of an LRA attack.

“We were the only ones. The SPLA was not there to protect. They did not come until after Easter. And the people, they are just people of the village. They did not know what to do. There are no activists, no community leaders. There is no one who can be in the middle

and try to talk with the LRA. Someone maybe they can trust. It is hard. These LRA are not very dependable. But I am a man of peace, and so I seek to make peace wherever I am. I am a priest, and I am supposed to be an image of Christ. So we just got on the motorcycle and went.”

\* \* \*

When I ask in my conversations with graduate students and assistant professors of anthropology what persons and texts they hold up as exemplars, two of the most frequent responses are Phillipe Bourgois and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, and their books, *In Search of Respect* and *Death Without Weeping*.<sup>56</sup> To be sure, neither Bourgois nor Scheper-Hughes seeks to position themselves as exemplars. I suspect that they might well cringe at the suggestion that they are such. Still, that is one sign of their status of being exemplars, because, as MacIntyre points out, the person of excellence carries out the practices for the sake of the practices themselves, and not for some external good like attention from the discipline. I have commented enough on Bourgois above, and so here will focus on Scheper-Hughes to make the case that there are sufficient analogues between anthropological solidarity and Christian love of neighbor that a conversation between the practitioners of each would be fruitful for both parties.

I am aware that the very suggestion that there are analogues between engaged anthropology and committed Christianity may lead some, perhaps even many, anthropologists, to reject engaged anthropology altogether. The charge would be that it confirms their suspicions that engaged anthropology is necessarily moralistic. If what I have argued thus far is true, however, that charge cannot be made without assuming and retreating back into an untenable fact/value separation grounded in an unintelligible doctrinal relativism.

I am calling upon the discipline of engaged anthropology to move beyond an objectivist anthropology of Christianity to an anthropology *in conversation with* Christianity, not least because many of the discipline's subjects are themselves Christian. I should make clear as well that my use of the example of the religious tradition of Christianity is not because of any special salvific status on its part—I am sure that similar analogues can be found in other religious traditions—but because it is the tradition I know best as a professional, and because it is, in a form syncretized with traditional Acholi culture and religion, the most practiced among the people I study. Finally and most importantly, as shown above, the only way engaged anthropology can move towards the kind of universal claims that it wants to make regarding human rights is through conversations in a search for analogues with other communities, even those which have historically been considered its enemy.

Scheper-Hughes writes about how the demands of her research subjects that she cease simply observing their activity and join in the aims of their community prompts her turn to a committed anthropology. The impoverished women whom she had been studying in Brazilian shanty towns “turn[ed] their anger against me. Why had I refused to work with them when they had been so willing to work with me? ... I backed away saying... ‘I cannot be an anthropologist and a *companheira* at the same time.’ ... And they gave me an ultimatum: the next time I came back to the

Alto do Cruzeiro it would be on their terms, that is, as a *companheira*, ‘accompanying’ them.”<sup>57</sup> The pattern of the call to commitment coming from outside the anthropologist, indeed, from her research subjects, is not unique to Scheper-Hughes. We have already seen how this is the case with Bourgois. Dana-Ain Davis writes of her own situation, “Sherita asked me what I was going to do with all of the information I collected. She made it very clear that she was only a ‘case file’ at social services and that it was my responsibility to tell ‘people’ how difficult life was and share the problems women faced while on welfare... My work as a politically engaged anthropologist began at that moment.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, Sherita was asking Davis, like Otim asked me, that her research not be another instance of cultural plunder.

Scheper-Hughes decides to join the Brazilian women, and doing so shifts her understanding of her discipline. “If we cannot begin to think about social institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms,” she writes, “then anthropology strikes me as quite weak and useless.” In her 1995 article, “The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology,” she, like Bourgois, makes the de-romanticization of other cultures the core of her argument: “What draws me back to these people and places is not their exoticism and their ‘otherness’ but the pursuit of those small spaces of convergence, recognition, and empathy that we share. Not everything dissolves into the vapor of absolute cultural difference and radical otherness.” Scheper-Hughes replaces the idea of “radical otherness” with that of “solidarity,” a concept that recognizes the distinctiveness of other cultures while also affirming sufficient points of similarity for some mutual recognition and cooperative action.<sup>59</sup>

The recognized points of inter-cultural connection enabled by the de-exoticization of others and the resultant affirmation of an ethics of solidarity allows, even requires, the anthropologist to make, when called for, value judgments about the persons she studies. Scheper-Hughes dramatically illustrates this point by telling of her intercession in the disciplining of some thieves in the Chris Hani camp—a South African shanty town—in 1993. The camps resisted policing by the white security forces because of the latter’s many brutalities. Therefore, members of the camps attempted to police themselves. Without a written or strong oral basis for self-regulation, the communities administered their versions of justice in uneven and often capricious ways. In Chris Hani, three boys were caught stealing 400 rands (about 125 dollars). Quickly a crowd gathered that was going to “necklace” the boys. Necklacing is the practice of putting a tire full of gasoline around the neck of a person and setting it on fire, a modern form of witch-burning. Members of the ANC intervened and got the punishment reduced to fifty lashes. As a continuation of the discipline, the boys were not allowed to eat or drink. Fearing that the smallest of them was going to die, Scheper-Hughes, knowing that she could not do so openly, sneaked a doctor into the holding cell to check on him and then secretly evacuated him to a hospital.

Scheper-Hughes is aware that solidarity with one’s research subjects, particularly if they are marginalized persons, yields risks. After taking the smallest thief to the hospital, she received an anonymous phone call: “‘Stay away from Chris Hani camp,’ the heavily-accented brown-Afri-

kaner voice warned. ‘People there are angry that you interfered with their discipline. Your safety cannot be guaranteed.’”<sup>60</sup> However, she returned to the camp, and her testimony in a communal meeting helped change the camp’s disciplinary practices. Here, already, her actions closely parallel those of the two priests in Magwi in the scenario above: she recognizes that, given the social context, she is in all likelihood the only one with the power to act in the way she did.

Indeed, when she attempts to articulate her commitment, Scheper-Hughes calls her actions “witness,” and it is here that she comes closest to recognizing her convergence with a discipline that anthropology has long rejected. She writes, “It is the act of ‘witnessing’ that lends our work its moral, at times almost theological, character.” This is because to speak and act in light of the “primacy of the ethical” is to “suggest” certain “transcendent” grounds for moral norms.<sup>61</sup> Bourgois is similar in his appeal to human rights that transcend specific cultures, and even more so when the horror of the atrocities prompt him to conclude by describing the victims in terms with deep theological resonances: “We should not forget that our ‘informants’ continue to be crucified.”<sup>62</sup>

I am not at all suggesting here that anthropologists become theologians, or that their concerns about the history of oppression at the hands of Christianity are without merit. These concerns are mine as well. Rather, I am suggesting that situations of extreme violence and risk often press anthropologists, if they answer their research subjects’ calls to join in solidarity, to interpretive language that finds significant points of contact with a committed Christianity, and that conversation ought to take place between these two groups for its own sake and for the sake of the oppressed.

The parallels between Scheper-Hughes’s and Pope John Paul II’s understanding of such solidarity are striking. In John Paul’s *Sollicitudo rei Socialis* (English title, “On Social Concern”), solidarity has three aspects to it. The first is simply the descriptive fact of human interconnectedness. Solidarity is “a question of interdependence, sensed as a system determining relationships in the contemporary world, in its economic, cultural, political, and religious elements.” Secondly, however, awareness of interdependence can and ought to spawn concern that the relationships between and among peoples are shaped for the good. Interdependence must be accepted as a “moral category.” Noteworthy here is John Paul’s warning against abstractness and his insistence that solidarity should be grounded in encounters with specific people. Solidarity “is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”<sup>63</sup> Again, the Magwi priests act on the part of the people because no one else can. Third and finally, when solidarity has a transcendent referent, it exemplifies itself in one’s willingness to sacrifice one’s own life for others, even for one’s enemy. The following paragraph illuminates most fully Father Joseph’s willingness to join Father Maurice in riding the motorcycle towards the LRA.

In the light of faith, solidarity seeks to go beyond itself...One’s neighbor must therefore be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her; and for that person’s sake one must be ready for sacrifice, even the ultimate one: to lay down one’s life for the brethren.<sup>64</sup>

If we turn to Scheper-Hughes's account of solidarity, we find strong analogues to each of the three aspects or moments in John Paul II's treatment. First, there is an acknowledgment and even affirmation of human interdependence and commonality. Again, "What draws me back to these people and places is not their exoticism and their 'otherness' but the pursuit of those small spaces of convergence... Not everything dissolves into the vapor of absolute cultural difference and radical otherness." Like John Paul, Scheper-Hughes takes this recognition of connectedness as an occasion for commitment. In her words, "If we cannot begin to think about social institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms, then anthropology strikes me as quite weak and useless." Her accounts of her work in Brazil and South Africa provide precisely the kind of specificity that John Paul points to when he speaks of solidarity as a "firm and persevering" commitment to "the good of all and of each individual." Finally, in her actions on behalf of the thieves, we have a love of enemy even to the point of the willingness to risk one's life. It is at this point that her actions and those of the priests in Magwi converge most forcefully: if the man who made the anonymous phone call or one of his accomplices kills Scheper-Hughes, at least one of the imprisoned boys will have more time to get away.

If we are to follow Scheper-Hughes and John Paul II, then we must insist that the witness of both engaged anthropology and an authentic Christianity involve, when the situation calls for it, the willingness to risk our lives. This does not mean that we do not use *phronesis* or practical wisdom in assessing risk. The aim is solidarity, not risk itself. Still, a life where risk — real bodily risk — on behalf of solidarity is never at stake raises questions about the commitment to solidarity. As John Paul II points out, oppression is structural violence; if we never become exposed to the violence, then this is an indication that our commitment is questionable. Willingness, or what John Paul calls "readiness" to risk, is a mark—even if it is not the only one—of commitment to love one's neighbor. Scheper-Hughes's actions exemplify John Paul II's claim in *Veritatis Splendor* that martyrdom—or even the willingness to lay down one's life—"confirms" moral truths in "a particularly eloquent way." It is the "high point of witness to moral truth."<sup>65</sup> In other words, in moving from the particulars of a person's life in a specific cultural setting to broad claims about the human dignity and rights of all people, virtue theory insists that we reason with our bodies as well as with our words. What we gain from the conversation between engaged anthropology and committed Christianity is the insight that perhaps the most elegant argument for human rights is a life of a certain sort well-lived, and, as a result, a willingness, when the circumstances call for it, to let that life go for the sake of someone else and something more.

### ***Conclusion: Broadening the Conversation***

I have made the case for a kind of anthropology that recognizes the fallacy of the fact/value separation and does not shrink from a more robust commitment to its research subjects, drawing

upon the traditions of virtue theory to give that commitment shape and direction. I have also argued that anthropology should engage committed Christians in conversation about the outer edges of the risks involved in such a venture. The history of anthropologists and Christians in the field is not, for the most part, one of friendship, and it is at this point that the directive to love, or at least talk to, our enemies is most poignant. This we should do above all for the sake of those whose good we claim to seek: those who are crushed—in Bourgois' words, "crucified"—by the powerful and the vicious. If we undertake this task of conversation and cooperation, we will soon find that our energies, even joined, are not sufficient, and that we will need to extend the effort even further to other groups and communities, religious and otherwise.

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### Notes

**1** I wish to thank the two anonymous referees of this article, both of whom, I have been told, are anthropologists. I could not be happier with the choice of readers who are practitioners of anthropology, a choice indicating the seriousness about interdisciplinary conversation at *Practical Matters*. The readers' comments improved the text considerably, even while expressing disagreement with some of its arguments.

**2** Jeffrey A. Sluka, "Reflections on Managing Danger in Fieldwork: Dangerous Anthropology in Belfast," in *Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader*, ed. Antonius C.G.M. Robben and Jeffrey Sluka (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007): 219.

**3** Nancy Howell, *Surviving Fieldwork: A Report of the Advisory Panel on Health and Safety in Fieldwork* (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1990).

**4** Philippe Bourgois, "Confronting the Ethics of Ethnography: Lessons from Fieldwork in Central America," in *Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader*, ed. Antonius C.G.M. Robben and Jeffrey A. Sluka (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007): 288-297.

**5** Nordstrom and Robben not only address the violence undergone and perpetrated by the subjects of their research, but also "the distinct research problems and experiences of ethnographers who study situations of violence; and the theoretical issues that emerge from studying topics that involve personal danger." See Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C.G.M. Robben, *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

**6** See, for instance, the essays in Henrietta Moore and Todd Sanders, eds., *Anthropology in Theory: Issues in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

**7** I am aware of the Humean tradition of virtue theory but will not address it here.

**8** For an exception, see Ernesto Cardinal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 4 vols. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1982).

**9** See Todd Whitmore, "Crossing the Road: The Case for Ethnographic Fieldwork in Christian Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, vol. 27, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 273-294.

**10** See Kenelm Burridge, *In the Way: A Study of Christian Missionary Endeavors* (Vancouver: University



of British Columbia Press, 1991).

**11** For the anthropology of Christianity, see Fenella Cannell, ed., *The Anthropology of Christianity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006). For an anthropology that enters into conversation with Christian theology, see Joel Robbins, "Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?" *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2006): 285-295.

**12** In this scene, I interweave what were actually two conversations, one which took place in Pabbo, the other in Magwi, South Sudan.

**13** Franz Boas, *Anthropology and Modern Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003).

**14** Clifford Geertz, "Anti Anti-Relativism," *American Anthropologist* 86, no. 2 (June 1984): 263-278.

**15** Robert Ulin, "Critical Reflections on Cultural Relativism" (unpublished paper, American Anthropological Association, 2005): 9. See also, Ulin, *Understanding Cultures: Perspectives in Anthropology and Social Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Malden MA. & Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

**16** George Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 19-20, 32-33, 166-67.

**17** *Ibid.*, 167.

**18** I do not object to a fact/value distinction in some form, only to their utter separation as if there are facts completely independent of how we construe them within patterns of value. Marcus and Fischer's use of a fact/value separation to dodge the issue of the patterns of value laden in their own projects is also problematic.

**19** Bourgois, "Confronting the Ethics of Ethnography," 295.

**20** *Ibid.* See also Roger Keesing, "Anthropology as Interpretive Quest," *Current Anthropology* 28, 2 (1987): 161; and Sidney Mintz, "Forward," in Norman Whitten and John Szwed, eds., *Afro-American Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives* (New York; Free Press, 1970): 14.

**21** June Nash, "Ethnology in a Revolutionary Setting," in *Ethnographic Fieldwork*, 33.

**22** Victoria Sanford and Asale Angel-Ajani, eds., *Engaged Observer: Anthropology, Advocacy, and Activism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

**23** American Anthropological Association, "Statement on Ethics (1971)," <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/ethstmnt.htm>.

**24** American Anthropological Association, "Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association Approved June 1998," <http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm>.

**25** I use the language of "pull" here because what is not involved is the *entailment* of either relativism or realism.

**26** Bourgois, "Confronting the Ethics of Ethnography," 295.

**27** Dana-Ain Davis, "Knowledge in the Service of a Vision: Politically Engaged Anthropology," in Sanford

and Angel-Ajani, *Engaged Observer*, 238.

**28** Bourgois, “Confronting the Ethics of Ethnography,” 288.

**29** June Nash, “Ethnology in a Revolutionary Setting,” 229.

**30** On this point, see Kay B. Warren, “Perils and Promises of Engaged Anthropology: Historical Transitions and Ethnographic Dilemmas,” in Sanford and Angel-Ajani, *Engaged Observer*, 217-218, 220, 222).

**31** James F. Downs, “Proposed code of ethics supported,” *Newsletter (AAA)* 26 (4): 2.

**32** John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971), 17-21; Peter Singer, *Writings on an Ethical Life* (San Francisco: Harper Perennial, 2001), 105-124

**33** Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 72-73.

**34** *Ibid.*, 111.

**35** G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 40.

**36** *Ibid.*, 43.

**37** MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187.

**38** *Ibid.*, 191.

**39** *Ibid.*, 208.

**40** *Ibid.*, 219.

**41** See, for instance, Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

**42** MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219.

**43** I have changed the name and locations in this scenario.

**44** Sverker Finnstrom, *Living with Bad Surroundings: War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

**45** See Ronald Atkinson, *The Roots of Ethnicity: The Origins of the Acholi of Uganda Before 1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

**46** On indirect rule and its consequences, see Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).

**47** World Health Organization, with the Ministry of Health, The Republic of Uganda, *Health and Mortality Survey Among Internally Displaced Persons in Gulu, Kitgu, and Pader Districts, Northern Uganda* (July 2005).

**48** On human rights violations by the Ugandan government, see Human Rights Watch 2005, *Uprooted and Forgotten: Impunity and Human Rights Abuses in Northern Uganda*, Human Rights Watch, 17 (12A), [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org).

[hrw.org](http://hrw.org).

**49** For the view that the Ugandan government has engaged in genocide, see Olara Otunnu, “Saving Our Children from the Scourge of War,” Speech delivered on the occasion of the 2006 Sydney Peace Prize, Part 1 and Part 2, [http://www.essex.ac.uk/armedcon/story\\_id/000290.html](http://www.essex.ac.uk/armedcon/story_id/000290.html). In March 2010, Otunnu was elected the President of the Uganda Peoples Congress, a key opposition party.

**50** See Whitmore, “Crossing the Road.”

**51** See Davis, “Knowledge in the Service of a Vision,” 232.

**52** On the danger of anthropologists being considered spies by oppressive governments, see Howell, *Surviving Fieldwork*.

**53** Again, I have changed the names and locations.

**54** John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) at [http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0223/\\_PI.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0223/_PI.HTM), paragraph 38.

**55** In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre famously rejects the idea of human rights as being in a league with belief in unicorns and witches (*After Virtue*, 69). Given that in his next work, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, he affirms universal truths as long as they are established through the dialogue and interaction of specific communities, I take his initial objection to be to the Enlightenment attempt to ground universal claims in abstractions. See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). For evidence of this interpretation see the context of the argument when he makes the initial comments in a chapter titled, “Some Consequences of the Failure of the Enlightenment Project,” in *After Virtue*, 62ff.

**56** Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

**57** Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology,” in *Anthropology in Theory: Issues in Epistemology*, ed. Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 410-11.

**58** Davis, “Knowledge in the Service of a Vision,” 231.

**59** Scheper-Hughes, “The Primacy of the Ethical,” 418-19.

**60** *Ibid.*, 410-13.

**61** *Ibid.*, 419.

**62** Bourgois, “Confronting the Ethics of Ethnography,” 297. It might be suggested, as it was by one of the reviewers, that as a Catholic and indebted to liberation theology, Scheper-Hughes is predisposed to the similarities with John Paul II. Fair enough, but other examples exist of quasi-theological appeals in the attempt to bridge the gap with the “other.” One case is Pierre Bourdieu’s use of the idea of the “spiritual exercise,” found in Ignatian and other Christian spiritual traditions, when he wants to make sense of the possibility of “understanding” the suffering of others, and thus of a non-oppressive interview. See Bourdieu,

“Understanding,” in *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, Pierre Bourdieu et al. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), 607-626.

**63** John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38.

**64** *Ibid.*, 40.

**65** John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) at [http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0222/\\_P1.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0222/_P1.HTM), paragraphs 90 and 93.