



Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action

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What is the place of the ethical in human life? How do we render it visible? How might sustained attention to the ethical transform anthropological theory and enrich our understanding of thought, speech, and social action? This volume offers a significant attempt to address these questions. It is a common experience of most ethnographers that the people we encounter are trying to do what they consider right or good, are being evaluated according to criteria of what is right and good, or are in some debate about what constitutes the human good. Yet anthropological theory has tended to overlook all this in favor of analyses that emphasize structure, power, and interest. Bringing together ethnographic exposition with philosophical concepts and arguments and effectively transcending subdisciplinary boundaries between cultural and linguistic anthropology, the essays collected in this volume explore the ethical entailments of speech and action and demonstrate the centrality of ethical practice, judgment, reasoning, responsibility, cultivation, commitment, and questioning in social life. Rather than focus on codes of conduct or hot-button issues, they make the cumulative argument that ethics is profoundly ordinary, pervasive—and possibly even intrinsic to speech and action. In addition to deepening our understanding of ethics, the volume makes an incisive and necessary intervention in anthropological theory, recasting discussion in ways that force us to rethink such concepts as power, agency, and relativism. Individual chapters consider the place of ethics with respect to conversation and interaction; judgment and responsibility; formality, etiquette, performance, ritual, and law; character and empathy; social boundaries and exclusions; socialization and punishment; and commemoration, history, and living together in peace and war. Together they offer a comprehensive portrait of an approach that is now critical for advancing anthropological theory and ethnographic description, as well as fruitful conversation with philosophy.

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Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action From Fordham University Press Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #5217186 in Books
- Published on: 2010-11-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.30" h x 1.20" w x 9.10" l, 1.67 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 482 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

A forceful demonstration of what anthropology has to contribute to debates about ethics within moral philosophy.-Charles Hirschkind

This book is a major contribution that has about it the excitement that comes with addressing genuinely fresh issues. Examining the ethics of everyday life as they are embodied in speech and other kinds of action, its contributors stake out an important new area of research. Certain to have a great impact on anthropology, this is a book that should also be widely read by those in all fields who take ethics to be an important topic of study.-Joel Robbins

About the Author

Michael Lambek is the Canada Research Chair in the Anthropology of Ethical Life in the Department of Social Sciences, University of Toronto at Scarborough as well as Professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto. Among his recent books are *The Weight of the Past, Illness and Irony* (edited with Paul Antze), and *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*.

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