

54. 'Good life' in the Anthropocene? Ethics in Times of Crisis (Workshop)

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AG „Ethics“

Planetary environmental changes are affecting and threatening more-than-human lifeworlds and knowledge traditions in many regions all over the world. They are associated with experiences of crisis ranging from water depletion, mass extinction, pollution, and extreme weather phenomena to the socio-political conflicts generated by them. Such challenges require not merely practical and epistemic adjustments but also moral decisions and reflections on the ethical questions of human responsibility and the realization of a “good life” under new conditions. This workshop investigates how people in different societies respond as ethical subjects to such global experiences of crisis, and it explores situated ideas of ‘good life’ and human responsibility associated with them: Which new forms of ethics and politics are emerging in or related to this situation? To what extent are responses to planetary challenges based on local or global ideas of ethics (attribution of person status and rights to rivers in New Zealand versus claims to transnational climate justice)? How do existential threats affect local ontologies, knowledge traditions and moral practices? How might the extinction of entire species relate to their perception as persons in various ontologies?

We invite anthropologists working at the intersection of the anthropology of ethics, multispecies anthropology, and the anthropology of the Anthropocene to participate in this workshop.

Rights of nature in Ecuador: An instrument for political change?

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In 2008, both rights of nature and numerous rights to buen vivir or sumak kawsay were introduced into the Ecuadorian constitution. Today, particularly the rights of nature have become an important tool in the (legal) struggles against extractive projects and of climate and environmental activists in general. Based on fieldwork in the Ecuadorian Constitutional Court and the Ministry of Environment, Water and Ecological Transition, as well as amongst rights of nature advocates, communities fighting against mining in the Intag valley and leaders of the so-called indigenous

movement, my presentation addresses the following set of questions: What are the social and political effects of these constitutional rights? How do court decisions that rule in favour of the rights of nature (and/or buen vivir) influence state policy, and what effects do they have on social movements? What hopes are raised by these rights and legal practices, and what disappointments are fuelled by them? Which interpretations of these rights prevail in practice and which voices are silenced in the process, and how? And finally, what are the institutional possibilities and challenges or even impossibilities of implementing court rulings in favour of the rights of nature and buen vivir?

Should we all get vaccinated? Emerging regimes of living in a viral world

Florian Helfer, Universität Hamburg

In the Anthropocene, zoonotic diseases and viral outbreaks will become part of our everyday life. Societies have to debate the question of mass vaccinations. At the core of this debate lies the ethical question: "Should I get vaccinated for the greater good, even though the vaccine might pose an unknown risk to my health?" Within this debate, contesting types of knowledge and practices of knowledge production stand against each other. In this uncertainty, moral explanations or regimes of living (Lakoff & Collier 2015) are used to stabilize the situation.

For my research, I look at the public and political discourse of vaccination in Germany and try to locate contesting lines of moral and ethical ideas and practices of engaging with the crisis. I want to know how regime(s) of living emerges in the context of the crisis and how they have been used for political debates. In addition, I want to conduct interviews with public health officials, medical professionals, and laypeople to illuminate the concrete relations between those contesting epistemologies of knowledge and the role of moral argumentation within the field of public health.

Ethical projects in animal rights: transforming the self or social relations?

Therese Kelly, Universität Heidelberg

My paper looks at differing ethical projects within the animal rights movement in the UK. During my fieldwork in Bristol, I focused upon and compared a group of vegan activists and a group of radical animal rights activists (RARs). Both do activism to highlight the suffering of non-human animals but they see the problem in different ways so their 'activisms' differ. I explore this through a framework of 'ethical projects' (Sidnell 2018).

The personhood of animals is central to the morality of the vegan activist ethical project, where being vegan and encouraging others to be vegan rests on recognising that the animals we eat are persons and this is morally wrong. RARs also practise veganism but are more likely to see it not as a moral imperative, but a tactic to use within the wider fight for both animal and human liberation.

The vegan activist project, concerned with self-transformation into a morally consistent vegan, extends the framework of liberal democracy to animals asking that they be recognised as persons with rights in law. The RARs focus on transforming social relations through prefigurative politics that seeks to challenge capitalism, which they see is the source of both animal and human oppression.

Human-Elephant Relations in South India; Relational Ethics and Attunement

Anu Karippal, University of Virginia

Abstract: In putting the anthropology of ethics and morality (Lambek, 2010) to test in interspecies studies (Haraway 2008; Locke 2013), this paper probes into the moral-phenomenological milieu of human-elephant relations in Kerala, South India. While elephants have been an integral part of social life as war elephant, divine beings, laborers under the East India Company and now as cosmopolitan figures of conservation, such intimate relations have come under scrutiny with the growing studies on elephant intelligence and debates in animal rights discourse, all of which delve into the ethicality of elephant captivity (Kulick, 2017). Such scientific and conservation discourses, although not random but grounded in concrete experiences, frame elephants as beings “truly” belonging in the wild, stripping them of their social history and thereby portraying human-elephant entanglement as a relation of violence. In juxtaposing such top-down, totalizing approaches to morality, the paper posits that an ethnographic inquiry into the ordinary yet extraordinary interactions between elephant caretakers and elephants offers an alternate interpretation of moral experience – grounded in phenomenological concerns such as the sensorium of touch, earning and giving of trust, attunement, and the uniqueness of each elephant – moving beyond the defines of torture.