



Ethos and Eidos: For a Social Theory of Morality and Ethics

Monday 29 July 1pm – 2pm

Speaker

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Australian National University

Location

Larry Saha Room

Haydon-Allen Building #22, Room 2175,
University Avenue, ANU

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The presumptive purpose of applied philosophical ethics, and those who work within it, is to provide definitive guides, if not necessarily decisive answers, to substantive ethical debates. This goal is pursued through robust conceptual analysis and the construction of rigorous arguments for and against this that or the other position. The aim is to transcend the morally relativity of ones social and cultural location in favor of ethical objectivity and universality. Furthermore, certain underlying notions of modern moral philosophy and applied ethics can be understood as having been influential in shaping the broader moral culture(s) of modernity. Consider the idea that individuals are autonomous moral agents who are expected to undertake independent ethical reflection, arguably a significant facet of ‘secular’ or ‘post-traditional’ societies. Thus, one consequence of (and further contribution to) individualisation has been the fact that we are now enjoined to independently exercise our own reflective moral agency so as to come to our own reasoned, objective or publically defensible ethical judgements. Arguably, many of the developments in contemporary moral culture—including those promoted by feminism and the LGBT movement—would not have emerged in the form we see today were this not the case.

Regardless of whether we—or, for that matter, applied ethicists themselves—think the idea of objective ethical arguments or judgments is accurate or realistic, the attempt exercise our moral agency in this way raises interesting questions. It would seem clear that, from the perspective of sociology and anthropology, the concepts and arguments of applied philosophers result from the specific social and cultural practices that define the field. Similarly, the broader practices of ethical reflection would seem to be tied to the social, cultural and historical specifics of modernity. Presumably, then, there must be some relationship between the moral culture(s) we inhabit and our ethical judgements. But rather than suppose that our moral culture simply or directly determines our ethical judgments, what is of particular interest is the way they are mediated by the practice(s) of ethical reflection and argument. Furthermore, if notion of both individual and collective ethical and ethico-political agency are to be defended, we should also attend to (and make room for) the possibility that substantive ethical judgments and analysis can contribute to the reformation of a societies moral order and culture.

Adopting a broadly Bourdieuan framework, and using the terms ethos and eidos, this paper will present an account of the relationship between morality—or the implicit normative structure of a field—and ethics—the substantive judgments about good and bad, or right and wrong, and the reflective practices that produce them—that are associated with or located within that field. In so doing I seek to show how contemporary ethical perspectives, including those articulated by and within applied ethics, do not transcend the social and cultural conditions in which they are produced. Rather it is those conditions that make their production possible. Thus, as has been argued in social and historical studies of science, our epistemic values normatively structure the fields we inhabit and, therefore, the ways in which we think.

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