



Title of Issue: The Ethnographic Edge Volume 1, Issue 1, 2017

Editors: Jacquie Kidd and Robert Rinehart

To cite this article: Peters, Michael.. 2017. "Ethics as 'Pure Theory': An Anthropological Theory about cultural Values." *The Ethnographic Edge* 1, (1): 17–19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14663/tee.v1i1.23>

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14663/tee.v1i1.23>

To link to this volume <http://dx.doi.org/10.14663/tee.v1i1>

Copyright of articles

Creative commons license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

Authors retain copyright of their publications.

Author and users are free to:

- **Share**—copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- **Adapt**—remix, transform, and build upon the material
The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.
- **Attribution**—You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use
- **NonCommercial**—You may not use the material for commercial purposes.
- **ShareAlike**—If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.

Terms and conditions of use

For full terms and conditions of use: <http://tee.ac.nz/index.php/TEE/about>

Ethics as 'Pure Theory': An anthropological theory about cultural values: A Response to Tomaselli

Michael A Peters

The University of Waikato
New Zealand

Keyan G. Tomaselli has written a provocative piece that questions conventional ethical assumptions and procedures governing research involving fieldwork and ethnography, taking issue with approaches that adopt an institutional (IRB) 'one-size-fits-all' ethical template. Tomaselli does not offer 'clear solutions' but provides a number of 'signposts'. Not all these signposts point the same way; some impact on the universalising ethics of institutional review boards, derived historically and unquestioning from the medical research model that takes the form of 'human subject research ethics'; others demonstrate the absurdity of such universalist accounts when dealing with non-Western and other species fieldwork. (What on earth might 'informed consent' mean to pack-animals or, indeed, to the San people, First People of the Kalahari, or the Anangu, the Nunga, Koori or Noongar? Especially when various government authorities themselves can't agree with indigenous peoples what they should be collectively named, Peters and Mika, 2017a, b.):

1. Problems emerge when biomedical ethical protocols are inappropriately imposed on anthropologists and post-positivist researchers engaged in 'lived research', alienating researchers and their participants, instrumentalising research, and bureaucratising the process. (They are many separate problems rolled into this category including the institutional response to indemnity or insurance by universities that are anxious to avoid claims against them and as a consequence unthinkingly utilise medical models for all social and cultural sciences.)
2. In relation to anthropology and the nature of non-Western societies, Tomaselli asserts a form of cultural relativism, claiming "There is no single rationality. There is no single normativity or worldview" which "throw[s] into question the whole framework of ethics. 'Do no harm' for one constituency is often interpreted as doing harm to another".
3. Multispecies ethnography problematises the old ethics paradigm of human-animal relations and raises complex new ethical issues for ethnographers who increasingly must take into account animal rights and issues of experimental testing on animals.
4. Autoethnography is a problem for the biomedical ethics model that seems unable theoretically to differentiate between Freudian psychology (what Freud called 'the talking cure') and derived therapies and a form of self-reflective ethnography.
5. Many African governments control research through legislation, often working in conjunction with university IRBs. These 'ethical' agencies often create bureaucratic layers of impediments to research, to the relationship between the researcher and the researched, often without any understanding of local ethics of the peoples with whom the ethnographer is working.



6. The biomedical ethics model that takes a highly technical and instrumental form cannot address the concerns of “lived research” and falsely assumes that “an instrumentalist form is neutral, universal, uncontested and acceptable to all”.
7. In his conclusion, Tomaselli critiques WEIRD intellectual grand narratives and research traditions (WEIRD: Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich Democracies) and proposes some avenues for discussion.

Tomaselli raises some issues about the field of research ethics and its critical history in the modern university and how it impacts badly on forms of research that differ from the biomedical model. I think he raises some crucial questions and does so in an eclectic way that forces us to reflect on some meta-questions of the Western scientific apparatus. He really only scratches the surface for not only ethnography but ‘post-qualitative’ and ‘intimate research’ that has come to the fore after postmodernism with the rise of post humanism, new materialism, ecosystems thinking and theories of complexity, leading to new forms of researcher subjectivities and to the decentering of epistemological questions in favour of an emphasis on critical ontologies.

In the abstract and the essay Tomaselli invokes the name of Charles Sanders Peirce and adopts Peircean pragmatism as the semiotic paradigm through which he reads an emphasis on “relationality rather than the inevitability of discrete findings”. It seems appropriate to turn to Peirce himself on ethics. In the 1890s, as a sixty year old, Peirce started off being quite dismissive of ethics (*Collected Papers* 1.50, 1896). A short while later he dramatically changed his mind. From a position where he thought morality was essentially conservative, he comes to reject the science of ethics as having any place in a theory of inquiry to embrace ethics as ‘pure theory’—a kind of ‘ethical anthropology’ meaning the study of what is considered to be moral. As Herdy (2009, p. 273) notes, “From 1902 onwards Peirce classified Pure Ethics as a Normative Science, a positive science that asserts positive truths, which result from categorical facts” (CP 5.125, 1903). Pure Ethics would count as the field of metaethics today aimed at second-order ethical questions such as ‘is there moral knowledge’ and, more importantly, ‘what is the relation between ethics and culture?’ and ‘what cultural forms does ethics take?’

While metaethics is essentially a form of analytic philosophy that began with G.E. Moore, often developed in rarified and abstract settings away from applied and practical questions, cultural difference and anthropological considerations have generated much discussion, including the obvious question that if moral values are truly universal and objective why is it that different cultures seem to have such very different accounts of what is right and wrong? (Mackie 1977, Rachels 1986). In this light, anthropologists like Ruth Benedict (1934) and Melville Herskovits (1952) embraced a metaethical relativism and philosophers like Derrida (1971, 1982), who entertained a suspicion of logocentric biases, suggests that ethical meaning is characterised by *différance*, a principled undecidability. Foucault, by contrast, talks of ‘power/knowledge’ and the Foucauldian approach would emphasise how ethics are part of the ‘scientific’ colonising ethos that accompanied the growth of anthropology in the Western world. Postcolonial theorists have intensified the examination of ways in which cultural values (including ethics) have been transplanted from one cultural context to another. The biomedical ethics model of double bind experimental science, of which Tomaselli writes, is generally institutionally resistant to this type of philosophical and historical reflection and probably in principle incapable of seeing itself as an instrument of ‘technoscience’ or Western imperialism. Cross-cultural moral diversity, *prima facie*, would lead us to think that all universalising research ethical codes are, or can be, suspect, especially when applying such protocols across cultures. We should not be blinded either to the politics of cultural diversity at the metaethical level and the fact that what ‘we’ take to be the virtues of liberalism and its sciences—tolerance, respect, individualism, ‘do no harm’—have varied historically in the evolution of the disciplines and in the service of empire; just as there is today a new marriage between the revitalised positivistic sciences oriented to measurement and

ranking, and the dominance of neoliberalism as a world economic system. My thanks to Tomaselli for a brave speculative paper that dredges up some uncomfortable issues about our 'scientific' ethical practices.

References

- Derrida, J. 1971. *Positions* Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, J. 1982. "Différance." *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago & London, Chicago University Press.
- Foucault, M. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon, translated by Colin Gordon et al. New York, Pantheon Books.
- Herdy, R. 2009. "The Origin and Growth of Peirce's Ethics: A Categorical Analysis." *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, <http://lnx.journalofpragmatism.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Herdy.pdf>
- Mackie, J. L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London, Penguin Books.
- Peters, M. A. & C. Mika. 2017a. "Aborigine, Indian, indigenous or first nations?" *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 1 (6). doi:[10.1080/00131857.2017.1279879](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1279879)
- Peters, M. A., & C. Mika, eds. 2017b. *The Dilemma of Western Philosophy*. London, Routledge.
- Peirce C. S. 1931–1960. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, edited by C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A. Burks, 8 vols. Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Rachels, James. 1986. "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism." In *Rachels' The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 12–24. New York: Random House.