# ETHICS, GEOGRAPHY AND

Ethics is an inquiry into the moral values embodied in discourse and practice and a concern for what is good, right, or just in our individual and collective lives. It is an attempt to formulate rules of thumb to help us grasp the ends and means of life, providing insight and guidelines to strive for what the ancient Greeks termed *eudaimonia*, a term sometimes translated as happiness but better understood as "flourishing." The ancient geographer Strabo referenced this notion when he noted that geographers and ethicists alike are interested in "the art of life, that is, of happiness."

Ethics can be a subject that is difficult to discuss in geography (and elsewhere) for it raises fears of dogmatic worldviews. There are indeed people who use ethics to scold others, score debating points, or justify doctrinaire approaches to life. But this is not the main tradition of ethics. Rather, as Socrates notes in Plato's *Republic*, ethics is an exploration of "how we ought to live." It is a conversation about the moral values that inform (or ought to inform) our way of life. This involves a process of critique and vision. We criticize what detracts from our well-being, and at the same time, we envision how we might improve our lives.

Ethics may be informed or distorted by religion, spirituality, personal experience, or social custom, but it is not reducible to these sources. Instead, it is a reasoned and evidentiary dialogue that bridges cultural and disciplinary positions to improve the well-being of ourselves and others. These others can include different entities (e.g., human or nonhuman) considered at different scales (e.g., local to global, individual to system). Thus, ethics may concern itself with the well-being of people, animals, and the rest of nature, whether they present themselves as individuals or communities, ecological systems or societies, over space or through time.

## Ethics and Social Change

Ethics is also a form of discursive power. It helps reveal moral concerns, guide our thoughts and actions in addressing moral problems, and hold people and societies accountable for their actions. Moral critique and vision are the foundation for all movements of social change, whether these are for animal, environmental, or social causes. It is for this reason that ethics is indispensable in political life generally, as well as in the life of the academy. This is not to say that the moral norms embedded in social customs and laws are always or mostly right. We need only look at the transformation of norms regarding race, gender, and sexual identity for examples of moral progress. Even so, ethics-based arguments motivate struggles for change and spur the evolution of our customs and laws.

If this arc of ethics and social change seems a crooked path, think of it as akin to the development of law, medicine, or any practice-based tradition of knowledge. There is much wrangling, and there are many errors, but over time, trends emerge that point toward better ways of engaging the world. Reason and evidence are key here. They can do much to contest invidious custom and prejudice. They also help adjust our moral compass to distinguish better from worse norms and practices.

## Ethics and Geography

It may come as a surprise to some that geography has a strong streak of ethics in its discourse. During the quantitative revolution and the hegemony of logical positivism, ethics was peripheralized by the theoretical and methodological dogmas of a putatively value-free and ethically neutral scientism. With the steady erosion of scientism in geography, however, ethics has been revitalized as a living tradition of geographic thought, and geographers are experiencing a moral turn in their research and practice.

This moral turn began several decades ago with humanists, Marxists, feminists, environmentalists, and others seeking greater engagement with the social and environmental issues of their time. Many geographers began to investigate ethics-laden questions of research practices, protection of human subjects, cultural diversity, social justice, environmental protection, and the like as part of their research. Moreover, they began to speak with a moral voice about what ought to be done to allow people and the planet to flourish in light of the challenges of social injustice, colonialism,

war, uneven development, pollution, resource depletion, loss of biodiversity, climate change, animal rights, and so on.

Yet even as geographers engage in ethical discourse, they still tend to speak about ethics as something external to the field itself, as if it were an extradisciplinary add-on. This is far from the case. Ethics has been part of the geographical tradition since the beginning; the moral turn is both an extension and a recovery of part of our intellectual heritage. For better or for worse, a moral voice has always been present in geographic inquiry.

These moral geographies are of many sorts. They include classical regionalizations of cultural diversity, critiques or justifications of imperialism, teleological explanations of the natural world, and the norms of social Darwinism that underwrote environmental determinism. The contemporary concern with explicitly theorizing and deploying ethical concepts in geography is a welcome addition, representing a more explicit and reflective disposition. As such, these deployments of ethical discourse represent a shift from implicit moral geographies to explicit geographical ethics. Considered in this way, then, moral queries did not somehow infiltrate geography but have been there all along.

## Practical Reasoning

One of the reasons for geography's long connection with moral understanding is the field's emphasis on context and contingency. Ethics has historically been a form of practical reasoning, which features context and contingency as central elements of causal explanation and moral justification. Practical reasoning differs markedly from the analytic reasoning that dominates modern moral philosophy. Modeled on the axiomatic sciences of mathematics and formal logic, analytic ethicists seek trans-geographical truth applied acontextually to the world. That is to say, they strive for universal axioms of conduct, derived without reference to the real-world experiences that occur over space and time. They then apply these abstractions to all people, places, and circumstances. The result, of course, is rigorously intended, if rigid, overinterpretations that are out of step with the world.

This is not the case, however, for the practical reasoning that is part of alternative traditions of ethics (e.g., casuistic, feminist, hermeneutic, theological). These alternatives thrive outside philosophy, as well as pose a challenge to analytic ethics within philosophy itself. Practical reasoning seeks to articulate situationally sensitive principles to guide us in moral and political deliberation. In this view, ethics is not a timeless and placeless body of truths but refers to the use of moral concepts as rules of thumb that help us understand how we ought to live. In this respect, geography is constitutive of ethics, generating conceptual and contextual insights that inform moral theory and method. Examples include ideas of space, place, and nature that have been and continue to serve as presuppositions to moral discourse.

## Ethics in the Internal and External Domains

When it comes to the use of ethics in geography, there are two domains of ethical significance to consider. The first is the internal domain, that is, the methods of research and the production of knowledge. We often hear this domain explicitly referred to in terms of professional ethics, codes of conduct, or best practices. Ethics in the internal domain helps ensure the integrity and credibility of the field. While there are many ways of discussing this domain, it basically serves to uphold two moral values of science and scholarship—truth and trust. When speaking of truth, we are referring to matters such as the collection, analysis, interpretation, and communication of research. With respect to trust, we are thinking primarily about academic freedom, honesty, transparency, collegiality, and conflicts of interest. Along with upholding truth and trust as prime values, ethics also helps us define best practices for implementing these values in research. Common examples of best practices include the prohibition of plagiarism, falsification of data, and manipulation of research results, as well as guidelines on avoiding or disclosing conflicts of interest, prior restraint of knowledge, and self-censorship.

The second is the external domain, referring to the uses of geographical knowledge and the applications of its theories, methods, and associated technologies. We often hear this domain implicitly referred to when people speak about social

justice, environmental protection, sustainability, protecting local livelihoods, and so forth. Each of these phrases names a vital concern that embodies a substantial moral dimension. The reason for this external domain is that geography, for better or worse, has direct and indirect impacts on the health and well-being of people, animals, and the rest of nature. These impacts have consequences at a number of distinct if interconnected scales on individuals, populations, species, and communities, in natural and social systems, and in geographic space and historical time. Ethics helps elucidate the best uses of geographical knowledge by noting how research practices and knowledge products contribute to well-being in the world.

Although one may be tempted to classify the above domains into technical and critical modes, doing so unreflectively does an injustice to the diversity of intentions manifest in the work of geographers. While it may be true that, on balance, most scholarship in geographic information systems or qualitative research emphasizes the internal domain, there is important work in these areas that references the external domain. Some geographers attempt to balance the two in their research. And some emphasize one domain because they recognize its connection to the other. For example, the transparency of the research process in GIS is crucial if we are to use accurate mappings of nature and society for the greater good. And compliance with internal review boards in research with human subjects is a cumbersome but frequently necessary tool to protect the well-being of people participating in research. The domains should be considered mutually informing distinctions, not boxes into which we categorize (and perhaps dismiss) the full range and legitimate diversity of geographic research.

## Challenges for Ethics in Geography

Having said all this, ethics still faces and poses significant problems in the discipline. Two of the more important are highlighted below.

The first of these problems is the empirical objection. The idea behind the empirical objection is that geography is a science committed to empirical research. Ethics is therefore not real geography as it is not "grounded," "concrete," "spatial," "material," or "factual." This objection is not quite a rejection as it allows for a professional ethics enclosed within the internal domain noted above. It does, however, reject "speculative" excursions in so-called theoretical terrains, such as animal ethics, global ethics, and environmental justice. The error behind this objection is that it elides a discredited scientism and its empiricist vision of science with the tradition of geography as an interdisciplinary body of scholarship. This problem is compounded by an implicit facticity that makes invisible the causal relations between tangible and intangible phenomena. Both tangibles (e.g., the spatial patterns and extent of clear-cut forests) and intangibles (e.g., the values behind policy debates about the clear-cutting of forests) are real and thus empirical in any sensible definition of the term. To understand the intangible dimension, much less explain much of the tangible world, one must examine the moral causation that is partially constitutive of what and why humans do what they do.

The second problem is the challenge posed by animals and nature. After the debunking of social Darwinism and environmental determinism in the early 20th century, the field turned away from environmental matters for many decades. This has been redressed to some degree since the mid 1990s through technically focused environmental geographies (e.g., environmental geographic information systems [GIS]) and politically focused critical geographies (e.g., political ecology).

Yet from a moral perspective, these discourses remain stubbornly speciesist and anthropocentric. The reasons for this are many but are partially rooted in the value-free scientism that still stalks aspects of geography, as well as the social reductionism and moral relativism that characterize the social construction of nature thesis embraced by much of critical geography. To be sure, creative efforts to break out of these moral dead ends have emerged, primarily in animal geography and by dissident voices in nature-society relations. Their moral sensitivity to the well-being of people, animals, and nature is forging new insights that honor and extend the insights of technical and critical geographies while at the same time contesting the self-privileging moralities of human exceptionalism.

Overall then, geography is both the root and the fruit of moral understanding. As the root, its

situated knowledge is a necessary element of an ethics engaged with the real world. As the fruit, it is a conceptual space in which a more situationally sensitive ethics might thrive, even if (or because) it lends itself to a different model of practice than is normally pursued in philosophy. In this sense, geography shares with other disciplines (e.g., animal studies, environmental studies, and philosophy) the cotradition of ethics. As such, it also has a responsibility for developing geographical ethics that enrich our moral understanding of the world.

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*See also* Animal Geographies; Critical Human Geography; Environmental Ethics; Environmental Racism; Existentialism and Geography; Humanistic Geography; Human Rights, Geography and; Inequality and Geography; Justice, Geography of; Marxism, Geography and; Phenomenology; Race and Racism; Social Justice; Spatial Inequality

### Further Readings

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# ETHNICITY

Although there is no definitive definition, most scholars increasingly agree that ethnicity derives from both an internal sense of distinctiveness and an external perception of difference. The category exists to classify various groups of people based on specific social and cultural characteristics, with the most typical identifier being ancestry. Although some researchers continue to assert the emotional, hereditary, and primordial origins of ethnicity, increasingly there is agreement that ethnicity can also be the product of structural forces, social organization, and cultural representation. In other words, ethnicity is a social construction, where individuals are active agents in defining their ethnicity, and at the same time, the category must be negotiated within a reactive, shifting social environment.

Ethnicity is situational and dynamic, with individuals sustaining and asserting their ethnic identities in uneven and differential ways, depending on the social and political environment that surrounds them. So even though individuals may use the same ethnic label, they may construct their ethnicity based on the shifting notions and interpretations of their personal identities. At the same time, ethnicity is not a static concept that remains stable over time; instead, identities can be altered, manipulated, and transformed based on broader spatial, political, social, and economic dynamics. Ethnicity, then, is a creative and complex response to both individual and social forces. The formation and expression of ethnic identity come from both historical circumstances and individual negotiations to endow ethnicity and ethnic symbols with meaning.

Many individual characteristics are considered the building blocks of ethnic identity, including language, dialects, religious faith, literature, folklore, music, food preferences, social and political ties, traditions, values, and symbols, kinship, neighborhood, community links, and/or migratory status. Other external attributes are also thought to be significant in the construction of ethnic identities, including the role of governmental policies and social measures, racial discrimination, residential segregation, occupational concentration, and economic

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