This is the pre-publication submitted version of the following paper:

Barnett, C. (2012). Geography and ethics: Placing life in the space of reasons. *Progress in Human Geography* 36(3), pp. 379–388.

### **Progress Report**

## Geography and ethics: Placing life in the space of reasons

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**Key words:** action ethics normative philosophy of mind practical reason

### **Abstract**

Discussions of ethics in recent human geography have been strongly inflected by readings of so-called 'Continental Philosophy'. The ascendancy of this style of theorising is marked by a tendency to stake ethical claims on ontological assertions, which effectively close down serious consideration of the problem of normativity in social science. Recent work on practical reason emerging from so-called 'Analytical' philosophy presents a series of challenges to how geographers approach the relationships between space, ethics, and power. This work revolves around attempts to displace long-standing dualisms between naturalism and normativity, by blurring boundaries between forms of action and knowledge which belong to a 'space of causality' and those that are placed in a 'space of reasons'. The relevance of this blurring to geography is illustrated by reference to recent debates about the relationships between rationality and habit in unreflective action lies. Ongoing developments in this tradition of philosophy provide resources for strengthening a nascent strand of work on the geographies of practical reason that is evident in work on ethnomethodology, behaviour change, and geographies of action.

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#### 1 Introduction

Since the completion of the first of my reports on Geography and Ethics (Barnett 2010), the literature on the geography of justice and injustice has been further augmented by contributions from Dorling (2010), Fainstein (2010), and Soja (2010). Justice emerges in these works as a worldly principle to be striven for; injustice as a wrong that is exposed either by the deployment of detailed spatial data analysis, or by paying close attention to the demands of social movements. In showing that justice and injustice are 'emergent' qualities of social processes, these contributions are further evidence of the need for geographers interested in *normative* issues to pay more attention to re-socialized philosophies of action and social theories re-sensitizing the social sciences to issues of normativity. This second Report focuses on the first of these developments, the relevance to geography of recent work on practical reason to be found amongst certain strands of contemporary English-language philosophy.

# 2 Towards ethics without ontology

In a recent progress report in this journal on the history and philosophy of geography, Trevor Barnes (2008, 655) observed that it is "slightly odd that philosophical inspiration is so geographically and intellectually constricted". He was referring to the array of thinkers who belong to so-called 'Continental Philosophy' that have become key reference points in human geography. It is work inspired by this tradition which Jeff Popke has reviewed so lucidly in his progress reports on Geography and Ethics in recent years (Popke 2006, 2007, 2009). This philosophical tradition, with its deep suspicion of the impartial universalism attributed to 'liberal' traditions and its concern with difference, informs a growing literature in geography on distinctively partial styles of ethical practice, in which ethics is primarily understood in terms of relationships of alterity and otherness (e.g. Parfitt 2010). This includes work on the relations between egalitarian obligations of boundless responsibility and the partial duties of care (e.g. Lawson 2007, 2009; Laurier and Philo 2009; Bowlby et al 2010, McEwan and Goodman 2010); work on human and non-human conviviality (Bingham 2006, Bingham and Hinchliffe 2008); and work on generosity and hospitality (e.g. Dikeç et al 2009, Geoforum 2007, Davies 2006, Clark 2006, Korf 2007). Ethics emerges from the 'Continental' tradition as a residue of hope, as a vitalistic energy to be enacted differently (perhaps in ways which cannot even be anticipated), or as a messianic horizon which imposes responsibilities that are 'infinitely demanding'. Ethics turns out to be all about embodied dispositions (as in non-representational theory), relations with others (as in deconstruction and or nonhuman geographies) and practices of the self (after Foucault).

The 'intellectual and geographical constriction' that Barnes worries about might be a function of geography's investment in the very *idea* of 'Continental Philosophy' (see Glendinning 2006). The geographical framing of disparate ideas as Continental Philosophy, closely related to the invention of 'French Theory' (Cusset 2008), elides important differences around the meaning of 'ethics' within this canon. In work informed by Levinas and Derrida, there is an overwhelming emphasis on the ethics of corporeal vulnerability (see Harrison 2008, Clark 2009). This emphasis is also evident in the Heideggerian pessimism of Giorgio Agamben (see Gregory 2007, Minca 2006, Minca 2007). This ethics of vulnerability and finitude is distinct from the affirmative, lively, neo-vitalism that draws on Deleuze's reconstruction of a tradition of thought that takes in Bergson, Nietzsche, and Spinoza (see Braidoti 2006a), which has also informed recent work in geography (e.g. Braun 2008, Kearns and Reid-Henry 2009)). This latter strand of thought places much more emphasis on the generativity of life,

rather than on vulnerability, building on the thought that "death is overrated" as a basis for ethical thinking (Braidoti 2006b, 40). There are also significant differences in interpretations of notions of bio-power and bio-politics, so influential an idea in recent geographical research (see Schlosser 2008): between those who insist on keeping Foucault's distinctions between discipline, governmentality sovereignty open, and are able therefore to acknowledge the affirmative force of Foucault's last writings on ethical problematization; and those who follow Agamben in reducing all power to the dark machinations of necro-politics (see Braidoti 2007, Braidoti 2009, Braun 2007, Rabinow and Rose 2006).

If Continental Philosophy is internally differentiated (not least by different debts to English-language philosophy), then we might do well to notice the overlaps and convergences between traditions not well thought of in either territorialized or linguistic terms (e.g. Glendinning 2001, Wheeler 2000). Continental Philosophy is not quite so bounded off as it seems, and nor is 'Analytical Philosophy' quite as parochial as it is often made to appear. Perhaps the key difference is that work emanating from the 'Analytical' camp tends to eschew the type of ontological one-up-man-ship that characterizes so much theoretical work in the Continental vein. This habit of ontological trumping helps to account for the elective affinity between Continental styles of philosophy and strands of geographical thought concerned with inventing new spatial vocabularies. The affinity between the canon of Continental Philosophy and a tradition of spatial theory that has, for four decades, focussed on developing new spatial vocabularies derives from a shared political trajectory in which the possibility of political transformation is successively displaced through various ontological layers – of meaning, embodiment, desire, antagonism, affect, vital life itself (see Barnett 2011). Through this convergence, spatial theorists have of course become highly adept at theorising the ways in which different spatio-temporal configurations of action enact distinctive forms of power (see Allen 2003, 2009). But by displacing normativity into a separate domain of ideals and utopias, the ontologization of 'the spatial' distracts attention from the ways in which spatial configurations of practice unfold through the enactment of different normative modalities of action, and the ways in which these enactments draw on ordinary, everyday forms of rationality. There is certainly work in geography and cognate fields which does address these ordinary rationalities of action (e.g. Bridge 2004, Bridge 2009, Laurier and Philo 2007, Lee 2006, Smith 2009). My suggestion here is that this work holds out the promise of enabling us to think of 'ethics without ontology', as Putnam (2004) puts it. Or, to put it another way, one reason for rethinking the constrictions imposed by the hegemony of 'Continental' thought is that doing so might help to bring into view a shared space in which the problem of *normativity* can be explicitly raised.

### 3 The dualism that really matters

'Normative' is a word that resonates differently depending on which field you look at. It is a dirty word for poststructuralists, a medium of power, prescription and domination; but for Foucault, life itself is 'normative' all the way down, in a vitalist sense related to an idea of health derived from Georges Canguilhem. The idea that life is 'normative' is likewise a key feature of John McDowell's 'Analytic-Kantian' reconstruction of the philosophy of mind and virtue ethics. In Robert Brandom's 'neo-analytical pragmatism', action is shaped by horizons of accountability and commitment, by the imperative to give and receive reasons. On this view, and echoing Rorty (2007), all normative matters of authority and responsibility are understood to

be matters of social practice, not of ontology. In Habermas's discourse ethics, 'normative' refers to a concern with developing a critical-theoretical account of the inclusive procedures of justification which would make decisions legitimately binding. And 'normativity' is a topic central to ongoing debates amongst philosophers concerned with the nature of reason and rationality itself (e.g. Parfit 2006).

What all of these perspectives have in common is a shared sense that the world is 'fraught with ought', to borrow a phrase from Wilfred Sellars (1997). The separation of normative concerns into a separate area of utopian ideals and prescriptive formulae is testament to the continuing force of an inherited dualism between the natural and the normative that is the most telling legacy of 'Cartesian', much more so that any simple ontological distinction between thought and world or subject and object. It is this dualism that bequeaths us a sharp separation between realms of causality and a realm of reasoned spontaneity, between necessity and freedom. All of the thinkers noted above endeavour to 'deconstruct' this dualism, the dualism that matters most, by seeking to place normativity in the world without thereby reducing the normative to a 'constricted' view of causal laws (e.g. Habermas 2008, Rietveld 2008). Recovering a sense of normativity as an aspect of the world, not just of disembodied thought, is in turn an important dimension of any project that hopes to 're-enchant' nature (McDowell 1994, 84-86).

The topic under which the most interesting recent discussions of normativity, ones which link moral philosophy and political philosophy, have emerged is that of 'practical reasoning' (e.g., Lovibond 2002, Pauer-Studer 2003). If by practical reason we mean the type of reasoning used to guide action, then this notion might usefully substitute for 'Ethics'. Practical reason has the advantage of drawing attention to the extent to which reasoning about what to do is, indeed, a feature of practices, of embodied, situated actions. One feature work in Anglo-American philosophy on the broad topic of practical reason is the widespread problematization of the spaces in which practical reasoning is understood to take place (cf. Pile 2008). Against the lazy caricature of Analytical philosophy as a bastion of disembodied Cartesianism, in which practical reasoning is contained in a disembodied 'mind', the prevalent trends of recent philosophy on practical reasoning has been to move away from overly cognitivist conceptions of the mind (e.g. Descombes 2001, Haugeland 1998), and to relocate 'the mind' firmly in the world (e.g. Hurley 1998, McDowell 1998), placing it alongside embodied emotions and passions (e.g. Baier 1994, Blackburn 1998), in the spaces of inter-subjective reason-giving and argumentation (e.g. Brandom 1994, Darwall 2006), 'distributed' and 'extended' through various technological mediations (e.g. Menary 2010, Ross et al 2007 c), and distributed amongst various embodied dispositions of engagement with environments (e.g. Dreyfus and Kelly 2007). These moves revive longer traditions that push against an over-intellectualization of the mind. By reconfiguring the boundaries between mind and world, action and perception, other boundaries are expanded and transformed in turn; by extending understandings of rationality to include animal action, for example (e.g. Hurley 2003a, Steward 2009); or reconfiguring the understanding of boundaries in political conceptions of sovereignty (e.g. Hurley 1999) or justice (e.g. O'Neill 2000); or challenging understandings of the relations between luck, responsibility and justice (Hurley 2003b).

In short, many of the concerns of recent 'non-representational', practice-theoretic and psychoanalytical approaches to 'affect', emotions and embodiment in human geography (e.g. Anderson and Harrison 2010, Pile 2010, Simonsen 2007), derived almost entirely from a canonical interpretation of Continental Philosophy, have close

analogues in avowedly 'non-' or 'anti-representational' and anti-foundationalist currents of Analytical philosophy. The concern with re-distributing 'mindedness' beyond the confines of 'The Mind'; with acknowledging less overtly cognitive dimensions of intentionality; and with demonstrating the continuities between mind and body, the normative and the natural, and their mediation by habit and convention – all of these are features of recent Analytical philosophy. Nor should this overlap necessarily surprise us, once we notice the renewed interest in phenomenology and pragmatism within this tradition (e.g. Glendinning 2007).

It should be said, however, that the exposition of these themes in recent human geography is marked by a tendency to simply reverse the natural/normative dualism. So it is that the acknowledgment of embodiment has come at the cost of eliding considerations of mindedness, normativity, and rationality almost entirely, in the gleeful embrace of aesthetic notions of pure creativity that escapes reason. The aestheticization of the affective dimensions of life into a causal object dubbed 'Affect' is associated with the habit of ontological trumping noted earlier, normally via authoritative appeals of some sort to neuroscience or psychology to establish this or that fact about how minds and bodies actually function. It is this reversal of dualisms which underwrites the politicization of 'non-representational' theories of affect. The reversal keeps in play the distinction between external causality and a realm of spontaneous action around which the analysis of bad affect (which functions through mediums of manipulation) and good affect (which is expressed in acts of pure creativity) can proliferate. Doubts have been raised about the strongly 'political' inflection given to 'non-representational' theory and theories of 'affect' (e.g. Barnett 2008, Papoulias and Callard 2010). Political interpretations of 'affect' succeed only in the dis-enchantment of the normative, by reducing various embodied dispositions to causal understandings of behaviour derived from some field of life science or natural science. This is where considerations of practical reason re-assert themselves. If we think of questions of ethics, or normative issues more broadly, from the perspective of an agent, 'first-personally', then we are reminded that no matter how extensive our knowledge of the evolutionary dynamics or neurological mechanics of a particular behaviour, such an explanatory perspective leaves all the practical substance of an action still to be determined. For a situated actor faced with an ethical situation, no amount of causal understanding can stand as a practical reason for acting one way or another (Pippin 2009; see also Steward 2008).

The ongoing reconsideration of the trajectories of Analytical philosophy, involving a recovery of non-empiricist lines of thought routed back to Kant and Hegel, might have interesting things to tell us about the relationships between ethics, practice, normativity, and action. John McDowell's work stands as one example of the opening out of Analytical philosophy to its elided Continental roots. He reconstructs the philosophy of mind by returning to key themes in Kant and Hegel, in twentiethcentury phenomenology, and the anti-foundationalist philosophy of Wilfred Sellars (2007). This leads to a reconfiguration of key questions of classical epistemology, so that knowledge is presented as normative all the way down. From this revived holistic view of the knowing subject, statements of knowledge are understood as necessarily open to justification – they exist in a 'space of reasons' that is not radically discontinuous with the 'space of nature'. McDowell (1994) effectively 'deconstructs' the spatial framing of insides and outsides which has underwritten classical dilemmas of epistemology (cf. Blackburn 2006). Developing McDowell's approach, Susan Hurley (1998) displaces the mind/body problem with the classically Humean problem of the relation between perception and action, reconfiguring the spatialization of this

binary to insist that perception and action are interdependent, rather presenting action as a passive, representational medium of perception. From this sort of perspective, reason is understood as thoroughly bound up with the pragmatics of action (Kukla and Lance 2009).

The Continental/Analytical division has recently come into sharp focus through a debate between McDowell and Hubert Dreyfus, over how best to understand embodied action, and differences over how far conceptual capacities extend into the world (Dreyfus 2006, 2007a, 2007b; McDowell 2007a, 2007b). Dreyfus has developed a distinctively non-representational view of embodied action as unreflective, non-rational, non-conceptual – as 'unminded' (e.g. Dreyfus 2000, 2002). He accuses McDowell of still holding to 'the myth of the mental' by because McDowell presumes that the deconstruction of any clear divide between 'mind and world' teaches us that that 'perception is conceptual all the way out'. Dreyfus' holds that phenomenology teaches us that the capacity to routinely carry out any number of ordinary embodied actions of different levels of complexity without thinking about it is fundamentally a non-conceptual, intuitive capacity, shared with animals and infants. In a provocative reversal, McDowell accuses Dreyfus of being the one who holds fast to a Cartesian dualism, by seeking to separate mindedness from intuitive, embodied coping. McDowell reads phenomenology as supporting his recasting of rationality as thoroughly embodied, and suggests that it is Dreyfus who is clinging to a detached conception of rationality in order to assert the importance of unreflective action. McDowell's worry is that Dreyfus's view doesn't do enough to protect the 'autonomy of the normative' from it's reduction to a narrowly causal naturalism.

What is most interesting about this exchange is the amount of shared agreement these two representatives of two traditions display (see Rietveld 2010). In this debate, normativity is not reserved for cognitive reasoning, it is re-distributed into relationships between actions, intentions and environmental affordances. This is a dispute between two variants of what, if we must, we might still want to call 'non-representational' accounts of action, rather than a dispute between a non-representational view and a representational view. Dreyfus stands as the figure for a view in which phenomenological insights *correct* mistaken views about activity being permeated by conceptual rationality. McDowell thinks phenomenological insights are a 'supplementation' to that view, re-ordering how we think of rationality rather than leading to a commitment to notions of non-conceptual or non-rational coping, which threaten to re-install the dualism of causality versus normativity.

### 4 Where is the action?

We should resist any urge to read the Dreyfus/McDowell debate either 'ontologically' or 'politically'. As I have already suggested, the emphasis on political readings of ontology in human geography has succeeded in squeezing considerations of the ordinary ways in which normative concerns shape human practice into a separate zone marked 'Ethics'. Between the explanatory thrust of neo-Marxian accounts of the production of space and the revisionary metaphysics of post-structuralized spatial ontologies, it is possible to glimpse a more modest strand of work in geography that is keeping open a space for understanding the ordinary ways in which norms, values, and justifications are folded into and out of assemblages of spatial practice: for example, amongst those using ethnomethodological approaches to understand the spaces of practical reasoning (e.g. Laurier 2010a, 2010b, Laurier and Brown 2008); amongst those using pragmatist thought to understand the folding together of 'the known' and 'the had' in everyday practice (e.g. Bridge 2008, Cutchin 2008); amongst

those exploring the contingencies of media practices that defy any easy interpretation as means of manipulation (e.g. Ash 2010, Rodgers 2010); amongst those exploring the practical deployment of affective technologies in chronically self-limiting regimes of governance (e.g. Jones *et al* 2011, Pykett, 2011); and amongst traditions of thought still concerned with thinking though the pragmatics of action rather than the sociocultural construction of subjectivities (Ernste 2004, Korf 2008, Schlottman 2008, Zierhofer 2002)

I have suggested here that resources to sustain and further enrich this opening might be found beyond the canon of Continental Philosophy and its derivatives in cultural theory, not least in ongoing debates which seek to at least 'partially re-enchant' nature by drawing normativity and nature together into the space of reasons. And we shouldn't suppose that thinking of the world as 'fraught with ought', that is, as shaped at least in part by imperatives to give and receive reasons, requires us to think of reasons as normative in a strongly transcendental, justificatory fashion. We would do well to avoid thinking of the normative as offset against the descriptive or the factual; and nor should we accept the view that 'normative' is equivalent to 'prescriptive' (cf. Cavell 1969, 22). Reason-giving is a much more ordinary practice than is sometimes supposed by those philosophers keen to address the enduring legacy of the normative/neutral dualism (see Schatzki 2010a). And by understanding practical reason as ordinary, we are reminded that the need for elaborating on the temporal and spatial dimensions of human activity derives from an appreciation of the indeterminacy of action (see Schatzki 2010b). It is this latter thought that drives resurgent social theories of action in which the normative dimensions of life are made central to understanding how practices unfold (see Joas and Knobl 2009), and these approaches will be reviewed in further detail in my next Report.

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