SOCIETY, ETHICS, AND THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

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Summary

Social anthropological doctrine holds that, at least since the development of language, humans have been one species. All known societies share common themes of value orientation, aspiration, and organizing the way in which their members comply with and achieve them. Their ethical systems include three principles: the sanctity of society, reciprocity, and the preservation of the lives of fellow members of one's own social group. Their universality suggests they may be regarded as proto-ethics that have long been elements of social ordering.

In small-scale societies ethics are expressed in a wide variety of proverbs, aphorisms, and other folk formulations, rather than in the easily accessed formal statements of more elaborate cultures. Their investigation is further complicated by the situational extension of individual identity common to in societies that have kinship as their ordering principle.

In these small-scale societies ethical conduct is judged and achieved by negotiation, rather than by blind adherence to precept, to arrive at the best balance of desired good in the face of inevitable ill for those concerned.

Specific investigation of a people's ethics is rarely undertaken by anthropologists. However, it pervades daily life and, with patience, serendipity, and sensitive professional awareness is eventually bared to analysis and understanding.

To be accepted as a participant in the daily life of the people fieldworkers must conform to the vernacular ethics—no easy task while still struggling to discover their standards of privacy and decency, and criteria of tact and secrecy. Conflict between the anthropologists' own ethical standards and those of the people is common and, initially quite uncomfortable. In a few fields of inquiry it becomes intolerably stressful. There is also a professional code that governs conduct in the field, publication of results, intellectual rights of informants, and rewards for use of these and other services.

1. The Unity of Humankind

The argument that ethics are a *sine qua non* of ordered society where members' behavior is learned, rather than instinctive, is founded on observation and analysis of known contemporary and historical small- and large-scale societies (see *Survival, Society, and Ethics in Human Evolution*). Evidence of how people lead or led their lives and assess(ed) right and wrong is available in the reports of anthropologists and other observers, the relevant literature, and historical records and traditions. Until 10 000 years ago, all people were hunters and gatherers, living in groups as small as a few score and seldom larger than 100, and this way of life persisted among some peoples until the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Before the twentieth century overwhelmed these cultures and social orders, social anthropologists were able to learn much from them. It is wholly false simply to equate these near-contemporary hunters and gatherers with prehistoric peoples. However, from the variety of their societies and cultures, generalizations can be made of the organization and ordering of relationships in very small societies with small inventories of material artifacts to use in meeting their needs from what their environments grudgingly or generously provide. No such direct evidence exists for prehistoric societies. The preserved artifacts, their relative disposition in space and time, and the bodily remains of the people who made and used the clothes, weapons, shelters, toys, and tools can tell us, through the expertise of archaeologists, much of what they *did.* Recently, there has been increasing convergence of archaeology and social anthropology. From this enlivening synergy have come ever more detailed, rewarding accounts of *how* past peoples lived together in their respective societies.

This endeavor, as does that of social anthropology itself, relies on the assumption of what Edward B. Tylor referred to in the 1850s as "the psychic unity of mankind." It is a pervading article of anthropological faith that, although unproven, is consistent with the weight of evidence. This doctrine holds that, at least since the development of language as effective communication, despite all the present and past differences in the details of culture and society, *Homo sapiens* has long been the same species. Population by population, there are the same innate intellectual capacities and preferences and similar thought processes in all contemporary, historical, and, by extension, prehistoric humans. The differences that we note among populations and their cultures and societies are analogous with the differing expressions of their genetic potential that a woman and

man will demonstrate in the children of whom they are the parents. Excepting monozygotic (identical twin) siblings, these children will not only look somewhat different, but will also respond differently to their experience of the family environment. Yet all who know them will recognize their common resemblance and shared familial behavioral traits. "Psychic unity," then, is akin to the parents' genetic characteristics that are definitive within a certain range of variety of expression in their offspring. Functional human societies (i.e. those that are not wracked by destructive disorder, and are not in the process of final dissolution) share common themes of value orientation, aspiration, and of organizing the ways in which members may comply with and achieve them. Three principles that are observed in all known societies are the sanctity of society, reciprocity, and the preservation of the lives of fellow members of one's own group.

1.1. The Sanctity of Society

Humans have a need for sociability (see *Survival, Society, and Ethics in Human Evolution*). There are different ways of meeting that need. As conquerors of subject peoples repeatedly have shown, social integration and stability can be achieved and maintained by intimidation. However, this is costly of administrative and enforcement resources—a luxury that the small-scale societies of our ancestors would not have been able to afford. The concept of the sanctity of society is a much more feasible, economical, and altogether more effective means of fostering integration and stability. "Sanctity" is not to be taken too literally; it is intended to signify an ideal of society as inviolate and unchallenged by individual aspirations and actions. Paradoxically, its members may alter it in various ways, but never with the intention or foreseeable consequence of damaging or destroying it. The G/wi Bushmen provide an illuminating example: their belief is in a deity, N!adima, who created the universe, its essential order, and all life forms. The last were fashioned with their specific characteristics, needs, and abilities and were then left for each to devise its own *modus vivendi.* Society and culture, then, are seen as human artifacts. In their own historical accounts and in my observation, G/wi have changed some aspects of their social organization for what they saw as improved convenience and harmony, but only by consensus decision. They were emphatic that the social order and its ramifications and representations are to be respected. Willful tampering with them will bring destruction of the whole G/wi people. It is impossible to trace the origins of these ordering principles. A plausible speculation is that our ancestors, demonstrably given to exploring, experimenting with, and discovering variations of their cultural and social practices, came to realize at a very early stage the benefits of investing in curtailment of immediate self-interest to reap the dividend of security and amicable cooperation. It seems reasonable to suggest that this realization underlies the formulation of and adherence to a set of guiding principles like a society's ethics—if we must live together, let us do so to our mutual benefit and agree about how to do it. The puzzle is how did they ensure compliance with them? Studies of hunter-gatherers show that dictatorial or even overtly authoritarian political styles with power concentrated in a small circle are seldom suited to this way of life. Exclusive power requires exclusive control over access to some valued resource. Unless the habitat is so highly differentiated or the culture so devised as to contain only one source (either would be a very rare condition) that may, therefore, be closed to others, the members of the group are free to move to a new location and leave the tyrant without

subjects. Small societies characteristically fear loss of numbers—the population will become extinct if it shrinks below critical mass—and their problem is how to *include* people, rather than exclude them. Their ethos is inclusive, rather than exclusive, and antithetical to concentration of power, which also argues against a cadre of priests that might otherwise invoke the differential application of divine sanctions to offenders against ordering principles and differential rewards to their supporters. The common belief is in a system of well-deserved, semi-automatic sanctions that threaten a wider circle than only the offenders (e.g. their families, or the whole community). This would have the effect of making every member a keeper of the peace, distributing power among them, and allowing discussion, negotiation, and decision of reconciliation, recompense, or repentance.

Regard for the integrity of the social fabric is paramount. Conflict with other principles may be masked by redefining or otherwise manipulating the way the situation is construed. In one small, closely interrelated and isolated community in which I once lived this dilemma was solved, perhaps a little expeditiously, after a man took a rifle and shot his son, with whom he had a long-running disagreement. Objectively, it seemed to be a savage outburst of ungoverned temper. Not long before this tragedy he had shot at one of his laborers after a violent argument (he escaped conviction on a charge of attempted murder, his successful defense having been that he was such a good shot that had he intended to hit the man he would not have missed) and the two incidents appeared to be somewhat similar. The man did not enjoy particular prestige, being seen by most as a rather pathetic "loser" in everything except his prowess as a hunter. This time he was charged with the murder of his son. A conviction would see him hanged, or imprisoned for life. He had many children who would have to be cared for. Furthermore, they and his large circle of kin would have to live with the contagious shame of having a child-murderer in the family. Also, there would be the poignant sorrow of having given evidence against a relative, and then having to face his wife and children every day and trying to maintain the attitudes and behavior required of family members.The officer investigating the death, an exceptionally sensible and understanding man, had lived for a long time in the district. When the shooting was represented by the household as an accident he did not press the matter unduly (there were no forensic scientific facilities available to him) before the coroner and the family's account was accepted. Everybody sympathized with the father, but his firearms were all "borrowed" by his relatives, who spent a great deal of time on his property, taking on both protective and therapeutic roles. Perceptions had been rather crudely manipulated to transform the nature of the act, but adequate measures were installed to prevent its repetition; ethics and social fabric ostensibly remained unviolated. There was no more violence from the father.

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Biographical Sketch

George Silberbauer was born in Pretoria, South Africa, in 1931. Professor Silberbauer was educated at the University of Stellenbosch, University of London, Gray's Inn, the University of the Witwatersrand, and the University of South Africa, and completed his Ph.D. at Monash University, Australia. He served in the South African Air Force (Maritime Group), and in Her Majesty's Colonial Service in Botswana (formerly the Bechuanaland Protectorate) as the District Commissioner Ngamiland, Kasane, and Ghanzi and the Bushman Survey Officer. Professor Silberbauer was senior lecturer in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Monash University and Director at the Koorie Research Centre. He has been a distinguished visitor in anthropology and archaeology departments of several North American universities, and a visiting foreign fellow in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Cape Town. With the added experience of being a firefighter and the secretary of the Upper Beaconsfield Rural Fire Brigade, Professor Silberbauer has been a consultant to the Country Fire Authority in Victoria for the analysis of major bushfires, and to the Shire of Yarra Ranges in Victoria for fire warning systems. He is a member of the State Community Recovery Committee and the Yallock River Improvement and Rates Committee.

Professor Silberbauer's publications include *Bushman Survey Report* for the Bechuanaland Government (1965), *Hunter and Habitat in the Central Kalahari Desert* (1981), Cazadores del Desierto, *Editorial Mitre* (Barcelona, 1983) as well as numerous papers on Bushmen, Australian Aborigines, socio-ecology, government and indigenous peoples, conservation, ethics, waterway management, bushfires, disaster management, and recovery.

Besides his academic achievements, Professor Silberbauer's interest lies in maritime history, gardening, drawing unrecognizable caricatures, and doing the bidding of the cat in whose house he and his family live.