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Geographical Ethics: Reflections on the Moral and Ethical Issues Involved in Debate and Enquiry

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Imagine that you are undertaking research for your dissertation. You are interviewing young people about their experiences of place, and in the course of these interviews someone tells you that they are being abused by one of their relatives. In accordance with what you have read about research methods, you had previously assured everyone that what they told you would be in confidence, and that they would not be identifiable in anything you wrote or said. What would you do?

How would you go about resolving this question? Try discussing it with your friends, and examine how you all seek to disentangle the issues involved (for ways in which geographers have recently engaged with such issues, see Valentine 1999 and the collection of papers on the ethical dimensions of working with young people in *Ethics, Place and Environment*, 4(2), especially Aitken 2001). Such reflection on what is right and wrong, and the actions that we take in response to how we answer such questions, are the concern of ethics. While the example above may be unusual, we are all involved in making ethical decisions every day of our lives. Likewise, we all have values, we judge some things and actions as better than others; we consider some places ugly, and others beautiful. These decisions reflect our engagement with the norms and expectations of the societies in which we live. Crucially, humans have the capacity to say what *should* be, and to try to shape the world to reflect these claims. Indeed, as David M. Smith (2000: 1) has emphasized, '[i]t is this capacity to reason about the normative aspects of life, beyond the pursuit of mere physical survival, that most clearly differentiates humankind from other creatures'.

It is useful to distinguish between three commonly confused, and much debated, terms: values, morals and ethics (for a more detailed discussion in a geographical setting, see Smith 2000). None is easy to define. In general usage, *values* are seen as the aspects of life that individuals consider desirable or worthy, and that guide their actions. Frequently, values are considered as being opposed to facts (Proctor 1999). In such a context, values are the domain of the *normative*, or what should be, while facts are

the realm of the *positive*, what is. This usage of the word 'values' shades into the meaning of morals. *Morals* are the rules that people follow; what they think is good and bad, right and wrong. *Ethics*, in turn, is the systematic reflection on moral questions; the philosophical discourse on morals. Hence the term 'moral philosophy' is often used to refer to ethics (Hinman 1994).

Two broad types of ethics may be identified: *professional ethics*, or reflections on geographical practice (see Hay 1998); and the philosophical or theoretical dimensions of ethics, which are often divided into *descriptive ethics* (the characterization of existing moral practices and beliefs), *normative ethics* (concerned with the solution of moral problems relating to such matters as social justice, inequality and environmental change) and *metaethics* (the examination of ethical reasoning itself) (see, for example, Proctor 1999; Smith 2000). These distinctions frame the account that follows.

The Context of Ethical Considerations in Geography

Two interrelated series of influences have led to the rising prominence of ethical considerations in geography during the 1990s and early twenty-first century. First, there has been considerable growth in concern within European and North American society about moral and ethical matters, typified by the increase in debate over environmental and human rights agendas. This has not only been reflected in the activities of radical or fringe groups, but is now increasingly being incorporated into some central economic and political institutions. In July 2001, for example, the *Financial Times* launched its ethical index FTSE4Good (http://www.ftse4good.com), reflecting the increased importance that financial institutions now attribute to ethical investments. In part, such concerns reflect a growing awareness of the failure of the model of science that had come to dominate 'western' society during the second half of the twentieth century. While this model is reasonably powerful at describing what exists in the world, its failure to consider its own ethical foundations means that it cannot provide society with satisfactory solutions to the much more difficult questions about how to act on such information. Increasingly it has been recognized that the claim of science to be value-free is nothing but an illusion. Science, like any other form of discourse, is imbued with the values and prejudices of the societies that produce it. As Habermas (1978: 67) has so forcibly commented, 'by making a dogma of the sciences' belief in themselves, positivism assumes the prohibitive function of protecting scientific enquiry from epistemological self-reflection. Positivism is philosophical only insofar as is necessary for the immunization of the sciences against philosophy'. As he goes on to maintain, '[t]he positivistic attitude conceals the problems of world constitution. *The meaning of knowledge itself becomes irrational* – in the name of rigorous knowledge' (Habermas 1978: 68–9).

While geographers have in part responded to these wider social trends, a second set of influences can be seen as growing out of the intellectual traditions of the discipline itself. Moral questions concerning the place of humans in the world were of some considerable significance for scholars in antiquity, as well as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Unwin 1992). However, the positive stance adopted by many geographers in the 1950s and 1960s, with its emphasis on quantification and spatial science, relegated normative concerns very much to a secondary position. Moreover, the subsequent radical opposition, drawing heavily on Marxism, tended to focus much more on critique than it did on the advocacy of alternative normative models of society. Surprisingly few geographers, for example, were prepared to advocate what they believed the world *should* be like. Some did voice opposition on moral grounds to questions of social inequality (Harvey 1973), but little attention was ex-

plicitly paid to the ethical foundations of the discipline. Notable exceptions were Yi-Fu Tuan's (1986, 1989) examination of the ways in which morality is imagined and experienced in different places and times, and David M. Smith's (1977, 1979) advocacy of a welfare approach to geography.

During the 1990s, an increasing number of geographers (see, for example, Driver 1988; Sack 1997; Corbridge 1998; Proctor 1998) began to address moral geographies more directly. Sack (1997: 24), for example, stressed that geography is fundamental for an understanding of ethical issues. As he argues, '[t]hinking geographically heightens our moral concerns; it makes clear that moral goals must be set and justified by us in places and as inhabitants of the world'. Moreover, as Smith (2000: 14) has emphasized, there is 'one metaethical issue of such obvious geographical interest that it cannot be bypassed: that of relativism'. At one level, this is fundamentally concerned with the character of truth itself: whether it is a relative or universal concept. How we answer this question plays a very significant part in determining the way in which we embark on geographical enquiry. If we adopt the former stance, our task is to come ever closer to an understanding of what that truth is. For example, many physical geographers are concerned to identify *the* universal or absolute laws that will explain processes in the physical world. In contrast, most human geographers tend to adopt a relativist stance, noting that what is accepted as truth in any given society closely reflects the social and cultural contexts in which that truth is produced (for an attempt to resolve these different positions, see Walzer 1994).

A focus on difference has also brought geographers into a much more overt consideration of the ethical implications of other aspects of their discipline, notably on the moral significance of distance. In his examination of development ethics, Corbridge (1998: 35) thus emphasizes that 'citizens and states in the advanced industrial world have a responsibility to attend to the claims of distant strangers'. He goes on to assert that development ethics 'is not just about questions of transnational justice and positionality; it is also about the construction of plausible alternative worlds and practical development policies' (Corbridge 1998: 35). Likewise, Silk (1998) has drawn attention to important issues surrounding the significance of distance for care, highlighting the complexity of assumptions all too often ignored when we use phrases such as 'nearest and dearest'. A further area of moral enquiry with which geographers have recently begun to engage more directly has been concerned with the difference between the human and non-human worlds (see, for example, Welch and Emel 1998; Low and Gleeson 1999), and particularly on the moral values associated with different biocentric, ecocentric or geocentric views of the world (Lynn 1998).

Professional Ethics

Turning to matters of professional ethics, there is some considerable debate about the creation and use of ethical codes or guidelines. While guidelines are generally designed to encourage good practice, formal codes can become constraining (Hay 1998). Nevertheless, along with many other professional bodies (see, for example, American Sociological Association 1989) geographers have in recent years sought to establish ethical statements that can provide guidance on what is deemed to be acceptable behaviour by members of the profession. Among the most comprehensive of such statements for geographers was that endorsed by the Council of the Association of American Geographers in 1998 (see Association of American Geographers 1999). In its preamble, this stresses that the diversity of research undertaken by geographers makes it impossible to generate a comprehensive ethical statement that will be appropriate for all geographers, and it emphasizes that the principles it sets forth should be seen primarily as starting points for ethical consideration. The statement focuses on six main areas of ethical engagement:

1. Professional relations with one another (including avoiding discrimination and harassment, sustaining community and promoting fairness in hiring).
2. Relations with the larger scholarly community (concentrating on attributing scholarship, evaluating scholarship and self-plagiarism).
3. Relations with students (addressing instructional content, pedagogical competence, training students with funded research and confidentiality).
4. Relations with people, places and things (covering project design, ethical behaviour during field research, and reporting and distributing results).
5. Relations with institutions and foundations that support research (focusing on funding research, and the use of results from funded research).
6. Relations with governments (addressing government research support and employment).

While not all of the statement is of immediate relevance to your learning and research, the guidelines are well worth reading for the scope of the practical ethical issues that they address. They highlight four principles that are of particular relevance to your debate and enquiry:

- The importance of honesty: results should not be fabricated, and geographers should not plagiarize the work of others.
- The impact of field research: geographers should consider the effects of their research on people, places, flora, fauna and environments prior to embarking on the research and should seek to minimize any potential damage arising from the research.
- The golden rule: people, places and things should be treated in the same way that researchers would like their own selves, places and possessions to be treated.
- Returning results: research results should be given in an accessible form to those with whom the research was undertaken.

It is essential to note from these that ethical considerations do not just apply in the context of human geography, but are equally applicable to research on and in the physical environment. Even taking an ice core on a glacier or digging a soil section have significant ethical implications that need to be considered before the research is undertaken.

As well as such guidelines, there is a growing body of literature written by geographers that addresses specific practical ethical dimensions of geographical enquiry. This can beneficially be examined at the early stages of planning a research project. Hay (1998), for example, proposes a helpful set of prompts for moral contemplation and action, grouped under the five headings of free and informed consent, confidentiality, minimizing harm, cultural sensitivity and feedback to participants. These closely mirror the concerns reflected in the Association of American Geographers' (1999) statement, and provide a useful checklist for those embarking on geographical research. Hay goes on to stress the importance of encouraging undergraduate and postgraduate students to acquire a grasp of the complexity of moral enquiry through engaging with a series of case studies that highlight particular ethical conundrums. Given the diversity of geographical enquiry, and the difficulty of ever reaching agreement on a definitive code of ethical practice for geographers, he stresses the importance of encouraging geographers to learn to think ethically.

Geographical Ethics

This brief overview has stressed that ethical considerations enter geographical enquiry at

both a practical and theoretical level. As with any academic discipline, there are important ethical considerations that need to be borne in mind when undertaking empirical research; indeed, geographers in their immediate interactions with the physical and socio-cultural world around them need to be more aware than most of the ethical implications of their research practices. However, geographers' preoccupations with fundamental moral questions concerning social justice, the identity and meaning of place, our interactions with the non-human physical world, and the significance of distance, all mean that there is much to be gained from a deeper exploration of the interface between geography and ethics.

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Further Reading

An excellent introduction to research ethics in geography, incorporating useful practical examples and guidance, is Hay (1998), while a thought-provoking collection of essays by some of the leading geographers concerned with ethics is found in J.D. Proctor and D.M. Smith (eds), *Geography and Ethics: Journeys in a Moral Terrain* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). The most accessible text on the interface between geography and ethics is David M. Smith's *Moral Geographies* (2000). The journal *Ethics, Place and Environment* includes numerous examples of the ways in which geographers have recently sought to engage with ethics and moral questions concerning place and the environment. *Environmental Ethics* is a scholarly interdisciplinary journal dedicated to the philosophical aspects of environmental problems.