

Enduring the Awkward Embrace: Ontology and Ethical Work in a Ugandan Convent

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ABSTRACT The first phase of anthropology's turn toward ethics called our attention to freedom, evaluative reflection, and projects of intentional self-cultivation. While the inclusion of such moments of intentionality and freedom provided a helpful corrective to overly determinist frameworks for the study of morality and social life, we lost sight of other aspects of ethical life and personhood that are less easily controlled. Drawing on an ethnographic case that might otherwise be considered exemplary of a Foucauldian "care of the self," this article draws on texts from Africanist anthropology and Franciscan theology to explore how members of a community of Ugandan, Kenyan, and Tanzanian Franciscan nuns living and working at a residential home for orphans and children with disabilities in central Uganda understand and engage with the uncertain potential of moral transformation. [*ethics, personhood, ontology, Christianity, Africa*]

RESUMEN La primera fase del giro de la antropología hacia la ética llamó nuestra atención a la libertad, la reflexión evaluativa y los proyectos de autocultivación intencional. Mientras la inclusión de tales momentos de intencionalidad y libertad proveyó un correctivo útil a marcos excesivamente deterministas para el estudio de la moralidad y la vida social, perdimos de vista otros aspectos de la vida ética y la condición de persona que con menos facilidad son controlados. Basada en un caso etnográfico que de otra manera podría considerarse ilustrativo de un "cuidado de sí mismo" foucaultiano, este artículo se basa en textos de la antropología africanista y la teología franciscana para explorar cómo los miembros de una comunidad de monjas franciscanas de Uganda, Kenia y Tanzania que viven y trabajan en un hogar residencial para huérfanos y niños con discapacidades en Uganda Central entienden y se involucran con el potencial incierto de la transformación moral. [*ética, condición de persona, ontología, cristianismo, África*]

"And, even though he usually shuddered at lepers, he made himself dismount [from his horse], and gave him a coin, kissing his hand as he did so. After he accepted a kiss of peace from him, Francis remounted and continued on his way."
– Legend of the Three Companions (L3C 11: FAED II, 74)

Moments of evaluative reflection and intentional projects of self-cultivation were among the most prominent areas of concern in the first phase of the turn toward ethics in anthropology (Faubion 2011; Laidlaw 2013; Mahmood 2004; Rabinow 2003; Robbins 2004; Scherz

2013; Zigon 2011). The inclusion of both intentionality and freedom provided a helpful corrective to overly determinist frameworks for the study of morality and social life more generally (Laidlaw 2002), but in this effort to better incorporate freedom, deliberation, and projects of self-making, we, perhaps unintentionally, backgrounded other aspects of ethical life and personhood that are less easily controlled.

In this article, I build on anthropological discussions of personhood, ontology, and agency in Africa to explore elements of the ethical lives of a community of Ugandan,

Kenyan, and Tanzanian Franciscan nuns working at a home for orphans and children with disabilities, which I call Mercy House.¹ By attending to the nuns' culturally situated understanding of inborn qualities and the involvement of God as an active agent in their ethical lives, I join scholars like Amira Mittermaier (2012), Michael Lambek (2003), and James Laidlaw (2013) in arguing for an anthropology of ethics that attends more carefully to a broader range of ontological commitments. By demonstrating the centrality of such issues through an analysis of a case that we might otherwise think of as exemplary of projects involving a high degree of control and intentionality, I hope to address some problems in the Foucauldian model in a way that may have widespread applicability, even if the specific constellation of forces varies from context to context.

ETHICS AND ONTOLOGY

Over the past fifteen years, work on ethics and morality has emerged as a significant area of study within the discipline of anthropology. At the beginning of this line of inquiry, many anthropologists turned to Michel Foucault's work (1990, 2005)² in search of conceptual tools that might allow them to better describe a series of persistent problems related to the analysis of practical reason, social change, and conflicts over the valuation of incommensurable goods (Daswani 2015; Faubion 2011; Laidlaw 2013; Mahmood 2004; Robbins 2004; Scherz 2013, 2014; Zigon 2008, 2011). In his last books and lectures, Foucault analyzed Greco-Roman and early Christian systems of self-formation. Through this analysis, he developed a framework for describing "moralities" as comprising both "moral codes" (1990, 25), or rule-like interdictions, and "forms of subjectivation" (29), or forms through which people transform themselves. Through this process of transformation, people become better able to take these statements about the truth (the code) and transform them into action-oriented matrices so deeply embedded that they can deploy them with relative ease in their everyday lives (Rabinow 2003).

While Foucault thought moralities could emphasize either the codes of behavior or the forms of subjectivation, it was the forms of subjectivation that were of primary interest to him. He described four elements. First, there is the element of ethical substance, or what we might think of as the primary aspect of the person that the form of subjectivation attempts to modify. For example, where some moralities might emphasize actions, others might emphasize emotional states, desires, or the quality of a relationship between two people. Second, there is the mode of subjection, or the mode through which one comes to see oneself in relation to a rule and obliged to follow it. Am I, for example, subject to a particular morality because I am a citizen of a particular country or because I am an adherent of a particular religion? Third, there is the elaboration of ethical work. Here, Foucault points us to the particular exercises of self-care through which one comes to align oneself with a particular ethico-moral system, equipping one to face future dilemmas

and challenges. These exercises may include such things as reading, imaginative exercises, memorization, prayer, manual labor, habits of dress, confession, or the daily examination of one's behaviors. Finally, there is the telos, or the form of subjectivity that one would achieve if one were to fully embody a particular morality (Foucault 1990, 2005).

Anthropologists, including Saba Mahmood (2004), James Faubion (2011), Joel Robbins (2004), Jarrett Zigon (2011), and myself (Scherz 2013, 2014), have used Foucault's model to describe different moralities, often focusing on the elaboration of ethical work and exercises of self-care. These anthropologists have also been highly attentive to Foucault's point that ethics is fundamentally social. Moralities come from collectives, are taught through relationships, and shape the ways in which people interact with others in the world. In many cases, these collectivities can include non-human things such as palaces (Faubion 2011) or paintings (George 2016).

Yet the role that divinities or other spiritual beings might play as agents involved in such collectivities capable of shaping the self has received only occasional attention (Mittermaier 2011, 2012). While anthropologists drawing on Foucault's writings on ethics have thought about how one's relationship with particular spiritual beings may constitute a mode of subjection, an ethical substance, or the telos of an ethico-moral system, they have rarely considered the ways in which these spiritual beings may themselves be thought to act upon the self in a transformative way. This lack of focus is surprising given the explicit articulations of divine action as an explanation for personal moral transformations (e.g., Daswani 2015, 12) and the current disciplinary interest in questions of ontology.

In *The Subject of Virtue*, James Laidlaw opens the door to including entities that exceed secular ontologies as possible participants in the constitution of ethical subjects in some ethical systems. For example, he briefly mentions the movement of souls between different humans and animals in the constitution of subjectivity through processes of rebirth (2013, 105). Yet, such forms of distributed agency receive a far more limited treatment in relation to processes of subjectivation than his discussions of the attribution of responsibility for other kinds of outcomes. Laidlaw provides extensive discussion of how people ascribe and make claims about responsibility for the occurrence of events, like a man murdering his ten-year-old son (193), a vase falling out of an open window and hitting someone on the head (191), or a collapsing Zande granary (198). In his discussion of responsibility, Laidlaw distinguishes his approach both from models of agency focused on intentional structurally transformative actions (181–83) and Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (183–88). It is his discussion of ANT that is most relevant to this article. Like Bruno Latour's ANT, Laidlaw allows for the inclusion of heterogeneous sets of human and nonhuman agents. The key difference between Latour and Laidlaw lies in Laidlaw's focus on the ways humans actively

define the boundary of the network to which responsibility is attributed (179–212). In some cases, entities that lie outside of secular ontologies can be held responsible for particular outcomes, as in the case of the admission of witchcraft as a possible cause in Zande divination (197–204). While similar arguments could be made about the outcomes of processes of self-cultivation, such arguments remain underdeveloped in his work. As described further in the final section of this article, my aim is to take Laidlaw's arguments concerning the constitutive practices through which definitions of responsibility are established and bring them to bear more explicitly on how people understand the constitution of ethical subjects themselves.

In taking up these questions, this article draws together three central areas of recent anthropological theory that have, for the most part, developed in parallel to one another: ethics/morality, personhood/agency, and ontology. In so doing, I join several other anthropologists who have called for new work capable of broadening the ontological frame of the anthropology of ethics and better accommodate emotions (Keane 2016), moods (Throop 2014), things (George 2016; Laidlaw 2013), and other people (Mattingly 2014) in our understanding of ethical life. More specifically, I join Amira Mittermaier (2012) in her efforts to think about what it might mean to take seriously local claims that divine agents are not merely present but are at least partly responsible for shaping ethical subjects.

As will become clear through the ethnography presented below, these problems are not only theoretical but also practical because, in many cases, the failure of the nuns' project of self-cultivation took the form of an inability to fully engage in the work of caring for the disabled, orphaned, or elderly residents of the charity home that the order had been operating since the late 1920s. Yet, while I will describe the impacts of these failures on the residents, my primary focus will be on the ways in which the sisters themselves understand these scenes of moral failure and the ways in which they struggled to accommodate and to tolerate the failures of their fellow sisters. Their efforts to do this, I argue, hinged on an understanding of ethical subjectivity and transformation as partially dependent upon forces outside a person's control. First, they pointed to the difficulty of transforming inborn qualities, derived through the substance and actions of one's kin, and perhaps also from the actions of God. Here we find that starting points vary and are at least partially determined by a broad network of actors. Second, they highlighted the unpredictable but necessary action of God upon existing persons attempting to change. While particular activities and exercises might create the space for God to act, the nuns understood the crucial gift of God's grace as lying beyond their control and understanding. The unpredictability and mystery of these partially overlapping aspects, that which is inborn and that which is given through God's grace, created a space for them to accept the failures and shortcomings of themselves and others as they continued to try and wait.

MERCY HOUSE

I have been conducting ethnographic research with the Franciscan Sisters of Africa in Uganda at Mercy House, a home for orphans, children with disabilities, and the elderly, since 2007. The Franciscan Sisters of Africa are a Catholic order of Ugandan, Kenyan, and Tanzanian nuns that was founded in 1923 as an offshoot of a missionary order of Franciscan nuns who first arrived in Uganda in 1903. During my research, I have been able to participate in the day-to-day activities of the home while also engaging in extended conversations and recorded interviews with the sisters, the residents, and other volunteers. The bulk of my fieldwork took place in 2007 and 2008, and has been supplemented by shorter follow-up visits to Mercy House and other convents run by the Franciscan Sisters of Africa in 2010, 2015, and 2016. This work has also been furthered by regular correspondence and phone calls with several of the sisters and residents in the intervening months and years.

The Mercy House compound is made up of a series of concrete dormitories for children separated by age and sex, and an older block of private rooms for the elderly.³ The buildings are laid out along a network of paved paths and grassy courtyards within a larger compound. This compound also includes a shoe-making workshop and classroom, a large multipurpose room that is used for gatherings and band practice, a smaller occupational-therapy classroom, an office, a poultry-rearing facility, a cow shed, and an income-generating bakery founded by a Dutch NGO interested in supporting people with disabilities and in spreading their love of bread in Africa. In the far corner of the compound, a path lined with beds of flowers and vegetables leads to the sisters' plastered blue house.

This compound has been greatly expanded over the decades since the Franciscan Sisters of Africa founded Mercy House in 1928. While it was designed to meet the needs of people who found themselves in need of care following their discharge from the mission hospital, the timing of its founding, which took place just a few years after the first Ugandan sisters took their vows, was not coincidental. As I have described elsewhere (Scherz 2013, 2014), in their written histories, commemorative publications, and individual articulations of the purpose and meaning of Mercy House, the sisters stress its role as a "school of charity." It is, in this sense, a place that is not only meant to provide charity to those in need but also serve as an end in itself by providing the sisters a defined space for expressing, and learning to express, their love for God and neighbor. Yet, as I will discuss further below, how this schooling is thought to occur is far less straightforward than such a description might imply.

During my fieldwork, Mercy House was home to a fluctuating population of approximately one hundred residents, including orphans, children and young adults with mental and physical disabilities, and a small number of elderly people who had migrated to Uganda from Rwanda and Congo for work when they were young and who were now left far from the networks of kin who otherwise would have

supported them. The sisters also paid the fees for some children who were sent to nearby boarding schools and who lived at Mercy House during school holidays. In addition to caring for children, the sisters running the home were involved in managing multiple donors, including the World Food Program, a Dutch child-sponsorship NGO, and a small number of individual donors. They were also responsible for operating a series of income-generating projects, including the commercial bakery, the poultry-rearing scheme, food gardens, and the piggery. Altogether, these sources of income yielded about US \$21,000 a year, a budget that was stretched to its limits to meet the educational, medical, and living expenses of the people in the sisters' care. As I have argued more extensively elsewhere (Scherz 2014), the care the sisters provided was generally appreciated by Mercy House residents and by the larger community. While institutional care has fallen out of favor among many academics, development professionals, and government workers (Cheney 2017), Mercy House has persistently challenged me to think about the ways in which direct acts of care might be locally conceptualized as compatible with local ethics and values surrounding acts of reciprocal and nonreciprocal giving.⁴

While Mercy House was, for me, originally a site for thinking about these changing ethics of orphan support and development in Uganda, over time I have also found it to be a profoundly useful site for thinking about questions of self-transformation. Over the course of my work with them, the sisters have surprised me with their candor about the problems they have encountered at Mercy House and about their own experiences of religious formation. Certain aspects of their accounts of the formation process, and the very idea of Mercy House being a “school for charity,” could be used to construct a picture of a planned and predictable process of subjectivation, filled with specific exercises built to help the sisters align their subjectivities with those of their exemplars. This idea would be supported by the fact that the process of becoming a Franciscan Sister of Africa involves four years of formal training and an additional six years of service before a sister takes her perpetual vows. Narratives (both oral and written) and rituals (including baptism, confirmation, communion, reconciliation, the taking of formal vows, daily mass, the liturgy of the hours,⁵ Eucharistic adoration, and other devotions) play a major role in the sisters' initial and ongoing ethical formation. These activities are easily recognized as the forms of ethical work that Foucault described, and I have explicitly made this point in my earlier writings (Scherz 2013, 2014). While not discounting the veracity of that analysis, in this article I argue that it would be a mistake to assume that the sisters see the outcomes of their ethical work as though these outcomes were completely within their control. Rather, mundane and extraordinary affective experiences, which they attribute to factors such as inborn qualities and divine grace, are essential to their understanding of how processes of ethical transformation work. It does not take long for these elements to rise to the surface of their accounts, but including and accounting

for them does require a modification of our models of how subject formation occurs.

ELIZABETH

Sr. Elizabeth Nansubuga joined the Franciscan Sisters of Africa in 2001, and I first met her at Mercy House in 2010. In describing her experiences, Sr. Elizabeth often focused on her struggle to reconcile her desires for the sensuous pleasures of good food, cleanliness, and the careful management of bodily boundaries—the desires that initially attracted her to religious life—with the conditions she found at Mercy House. This situation presented many problems for her—and, more importantly, for the children in her care. But while some efforts were made to change her attitude and behaviors, what was most striking to me was the other sisters' limited faith that change was within her control.

As a young girl growing up in Central Uganda, Sr. Elizabeth's family had encouraged her to become a nun, but she said that she resisted the idea of joining a religious order on account of her experiences at a series of boarding schools where sisters regularly caned their pupils.⁶ Yet, she had a pair of aunts who were nuns who came to visit and asked her, “Don't you want to become like us?” So she agreed to join the order. When I asked her about this change of heart in an interview in May 2010, she said:

[It was] because of the way they used to dress. It attracted me. When they came home, my mother could give them special treatment. Food. When they were not there, we ate normal food: greens, beans, *posho*⁷ but when they were to come, they cooked for them chicken, they boiled for them water for bathing, even the way they used to dress. They held the rosary like this and used to sit there in the morning and said prayers. So, I was attracted to their way of life. So, from there they asked, “Would you like to join any of us?” I said, “Yes.”

Like many of the children at Mercy House who also expressed desires to become sisters for these same reasons, Sr. Elizabeth was initially drawn into religious life by the sensuous attractions of her aunts' immaculate habits, the buckets of hot water that her mother prepared for their morning baths, and the chicken that was cooked for their meals. As her own words suggest, these seemingly mundane pleasures are relatively rare luxuries in rural Uganda, and the experience of watching the steam rise from your bathing bucket on a cool morning while you squeeze hot water from a washcloth onto your back or pouring a rich chicken soup over your plate of *matooke*⁸ are both culturally mediated bodily delights in their own right and important indexes of respect and honor for guests or members of a household. Now that Sr. Elizabeth is a nun, having made her final profession in 2009, these embodied experiences of pleasure and respect are hers to enjoy when she returns home to visit her mother and father. She takes pride in her neatly pleated habit and takes care to protect it from the constant threats of dust and mud that rise from Uganda's red soil.

Sr. Elizabeth also enjoyed her work at some of her early posts, where her tasks were more closely aligned with her

original desire to work in administration or accounts, but she found herself challenged by her position at Mercy House. She had been assigned to work there a year prior when another sister fell ill and had to be sent to Kampala for medical care and recuperation. When the regional superior made the assignment, she acknowledged that it was not a good fit for Sr. Elizabeth's own "inborn gifts," and Sr. Elizabeth herself avoided answering her superior's request for several weeks before agreeing to go.

Part of Sr. Elizabeth's hesitation came from the relatively isolated position of Mercy House, which lies near a rural trading center at the end of a badly rutted road that was until quite recently in very poor condition. But even more important was Sr. Elizabeth's aversion to working with people with disabilities. This reluctance presented serious problems for those in her care. Many of the children and young adults told me that when Sr. Elizabeth first arrived, she was very impatient with them and often spoke cruelly when they failed to complete their tasks. Some of these children had lived through painful experiences of rejection, humiliation, and abuse before coming to Mercy House and felt a great need to talk with someone about their lives. As Namika Rebecca, a young woman with spina bifida who had been under the sisters' care for many years, said, "What a child from here needs is [someone] to sit next to her, to touch her, to share, so someone feels loved." Other children shared this sense and talked about the importance of having people sit close to them, listening, and sharing food from a common plate. While many of the sisters who worked at Mercy House did such things with joy, Sr. Elizabeth's refusal to engage in such acts of everyday physical intimacy was painful for all of the children and particularly significant for those with disabilities that were highly stigmatized or seen as contagious.

It is clear that the difficulties Sr. Elizabeth faced as she attempted to take up this new work that had been chosen for her presented serious problems for the children she was asked to care for.⁹ They experienced her reluctance as something palpable and chafed under her short temper. While moments of embodied discomfort might be taken as objects for ethical reflection and work, such moments also produce different and less-acknowledged forms of discomfort for those people who must endure these awkward embraces. These children's words are important reminders of the human costs of poorly aligned postings like Sr. Elizabeth's, and they echoed in my mind as Sr. Elizabeth candidly described her misgivings about her assignment and her struggles to take up her new role. She talked about the difficulties she experienced while learning to care for children with disabilities and other medical problems, saying:

One day I went to the dormitory and I found Charles [a young man bedridden with hydrocephaly] on the veranda. I was with Sister Jane, and she said, "I have nobody; the boy who has been taking care of him went away. We have to clean the boy." The following day I went there and I looked at the boy and said, "Now

what will I [do]?" It was too hard for me to return to the boy, to clean him. It was too hard, but I had to do it. When I came [back to the convent] I [did] not have appetite [for] food, but the following day I went back there and I got used to doing the work. . . . When I came here, I didn't have that heart of taking care and really being sympathetic to the disabled children and the sick. But when you are with them, you develop it.

While Sr. Elizabeth was ultimately assigned to a different post involving less direct and physical forms of care, by the time she left she had come to find her work with Charles and the other children who lived at Mercy House somewhat easier. She was eventually able to eat when she returned to the convent at the end of the day, and she was somewhat kinder to the children for whom she had been asked to care. Through a process of repetition, she got "used to the work," her body slowly allowing her to do her work with somewhat greater tenderness. Yet what remains most interesting for the purposes of this article is the partial nature of this transformation and her superiors' ultimate decision to move her to a different assignment. While affect and actions can be shaped over time, there remain bits around the edges that point to the always less than fully realized nature of work on the self. That Sr. Elizabeth's transformation was far from complete came as no surprise to the other sisters at Mercy House. While the sisters hoped that practice and repetition could result in change, they also understood moments of ethical failure as partly outside of Sr. Elizabeth's control. As I will argue below, their acceptance of Sr. Elizabeth and her struggles relied: (1) on an understanding of innate or inborn qualities drawn from psychology, Catholic theology, and an indigenous understanding of personality; and (2) on the unpredictable and unmerited workings of divine grace.

ETHICS AND THE PROBLEM OF INBORN QUALITIES

Sr. Elizabeth and the other sisters at Mercy House took the difficulties she faced as she "got used" to her new assignment to be at least partly determined by her particular inborn qualities. The sisters at Mercy House often spoke of their fellow sisters' different personalities and the efforts that they themselves had made during their formation process and in their ongoing experiences living in different communities not only to accept themselves and their fellow sisters "the way that they are" but also to find ways to live and work together with all of their strengths and failings. The sisters sometimes made reference to a person's inborn "gifts," implicitly referencing God as the giver of these different qualities, a theme that will be taken up further below, but this was only one of many possible explanations. Speaking on this topic in relation to the personalities of her fellow sisters, the head of Mercy House, a young sister from Central Uganda named Sr. Jane said:

In the novitiate, they make you understand people and to take them the way they are. There are some things that people can copy and change, but again according to our background, there are some things that . . . cannot happen. So, in the novitiate

they teach us that . . . we are all people, but our personalities differ. . . . It is because of our backgrounds. . . . We learn in the novitiate and come to appreciate each other's culture and personality.

Sr. Annette, a recently professed sister from Eastern Uganda, whose own story appears below, said that in the novitiate she was taught that differences in personality were the product of events that occurred while a person was still an embryo or fetus:

I can talk more of human development. . . . Like if my father was not willing to have me at that time when I was in the womb, it would affect me that my father never wanted to have me. So, you are taken back through that process in prayer; you see yourself in the womb that time. It involves forgiveness and acceptance, accept who I am—I am small, I am dark, I am beautiful or ugly, but I was created in the image of God. I come to forgive [my] parents if they never wanted me, maybe they had their reasons why they did not want another baby then. . . . From there you come to accept being what [you are]. . . . [Likewise,] I can look at a person and I know why that person is behaving that way, then I come to accept different personalities in the community.

Sr. Annette's descriptions draw on strands of psychology (Monk 2001) and theological writings on human dignity; they also reflect understandings of personality, morality, and destiny that are common in many cultures in Africa. While Baganda children's parents, relatives, and other caregivers place a great deal of emphasis on instilling *mpisa*¹⁰ (set patterns of culture, manners, and discipline, often taking the form of demanding embodied dispositions), Sr. Annette and Sr. Jane's understanding of personality and other qualities can be related to other ideas circulating in Buganda, some of which see a person's unique qualities as inborn or inherited (*obuzaale*). These qualities can be virtues, such as being clever (*mugezi*) or kind-hearted (*omutima omuyambi*), or they can be vices, such as being prone to theft (*obubbi*), selfishness (*obukodo*), or adultery (*obwenzi*). In either case, many of these inborn qualities are things that affect one's orientation toward one's relationships with others and are also thought to come about through the effect that others, particularly kin, have on the self. The effects of these others can come about through the influence of intrauterine events, similar to the ones Sr. Annette mentioned above, but are more often described as coming about through the influence of substances such as blood or milk coming from either the maternal or paternal side.

The lack of appetite that Sr. Elizabeth experienced upon her return to the convent after bathing Charles can also be described in this way, as the outcome of an inborn queasiness (*obwenyinyaze*). My longtime Ugandan colleague, George Mpanga, readily recognized this loss of appetite and added that this feeling of nausea and inability to eat is often preceded by the witnessing of visceral scenes, like traumatic injuries or car accidents, and sometimes comes along with vomiting, fever, and goose bumps. While he said that he had suffered from this feeling on an isolated number of occasions, he noted that there are people who feel this way often. He

added that this queasiness was generally thought to be a vice, a form of pride, and stressed that it was inborn.

This way of thinking about personal qualities, as at least in part the product of an unfolding of innate dispositions, is common in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. This thinking has been especially well described in West Africa, where some understandings of people's destiny and ethical life stress the role of blessings and a child's own prenatal choices (Jackson 2014). Paul Riesman's writings on children's acquisition of personality traits in Fulani ethnopsychology address this point extensively (see Riesman 1990). Writing against a reading of the "wealth in people" literature that would have us focus on the accumulation of indistinguishable dependents, Guyer and Belinga also stress the evidence for "personal singularity and social multiplicity as social and cultural values" buried in many ethnographies of Africa (1995, 103). Building on these works in her writings on the lives of young women in Cameroon, Jennifer Johnson-Hanks describes Beti personhood as:

Entailing the notion that each individual had a unique character and destiny, the amalgam of various inheritances and disparate sources of inspiration. Child rearing consisted largely of observing to ascertain where each child's future might lead and then encouraging or fostering those individual talents: a sort of divinatory pedagogy. Future paths were seen in part as unfoldings rather than as "choices." The unfoldings could fail, to be sure; a person could fail to develop inborn potential or to follow and foster inherited gifts. (2005, 368)

The sisters' engagements with the diverse personalities among their ranks mirror the "divinatory pedagogy" described by Johnson-Hanks. Given their understanding of the limited and unpredictable possibilities for changing these dispositions, the superiors of the order generally tried to match sisters to jobs that seemed likely to match their personal gifts. While the sisters also attempted to change themselves and each other through an elaborate repertoire of techniques, and hoped that God might perform his own work upon them, their understanding of the sedimented nature of qualities that were inborn or acquired early in life made them less than certain that sisters could change when placed in posts that seemed to be a poor match for their capacities.

ANNETTE

Though the sisters hoped that practice and repetition could result in change, their understanding of ethico-moral transformation also relied on their faith in God's grace. While they thought of their embodied engagements with the children in their care as an ethical practice in its own right, they conceived of it as being also, and perhaps more importantly, the opening of a space where God might enter to do his own work through the free and unmerited gift of grace.

Working within an ethical framework in which moral exemplars figured prominently, the sisters often referred explicitly to a story drawn from *The Legend of Saint Francis* (Three Companions 1905). *The Legend of Saint Francis* is a medieval text that recounts the life and ministry of

St. Francis, the monk who founded the Franciscan order in 1210. At the start of the story, Francis hears the voice of God in prayer telling him that if he renounces all that he had previously desired and comes to do the will of God, all that he previously found sweet and delightful will become bitter, and all that he had despised will fill him with “sweetness and delight unmeasured” (23). A short time after hearing God’s voice, Francis passes a man with leprosy on the roadside, dismounts his horse, and kisses the hands of the man as he offers him a coin. As Francis rode on, he “began more and more to despise himself, until by the grace of God he had attained perfect mastery over himself” (74). Several days later, he took a large amount of money to a hospice for people with leprosy, kissed their hands, and distributed the money.

A framework based on the idea that one can achieve an ethico-moral transformation either by committing to a new moral code or by undertaking a regime of ethical practices might cause us to misread this popular story, which is often reduced to a single synoptic embrace, as one in which Francis arrives at this transformation on account of his own good works, his initial willingness to dismount and engage in the first embrace. Yet, returning to the text of the *Legend of the Saint Francis* itself and the sisters’ frequent retellings of this story, we find instead that the actual transformation begins after Francis got back on his horse and continued on his way, and it comes about not through the embrace itself but through the way in which it opened him to God’s direct intervention.

The importance of this story’s details in the sisters’ understanding of their own instances of moral success and failure became clear to me during a conversation with Sr. Annette Namara, the newly professed sister who we heard from earlier, who first came to Mercy House in 2009. Unlike Sr. Elizabeth, Sr. Annette described the joy she took in her new assignment, drawing an explicit comparison with the story of St. Francis’s embrace to interpret the affective ease with which she made the transition:

[You know] St. Francis was in fact a sinner . . . he was the head of the youth. He could get money and buy beer and alcohol and drink and dance in the whole town. [But one day] . . . he got a vision and God asked him “Do you want to serve me or you want to serve the earthly?” [Before that day] St. Francis could not meet a man with leprosy and greet him, but after that he was a friend of the [lepers] and could embrace them. . . . [It is like this:] when you have just come to this home and you have been somewhere else, you may even get scared of eating food in this place. . . . Like when I had just come here, this boy Sam was sick and had sores all over the mouth and he was having a certain smell. I was giving him food and they told me that his disease is contagious and he couldn’t take food . . . unless you put it in the mouth. So, I washed my hand and fed him and the boy ate and got satisfied. But some people were looking at me. Before I joined [the order], I had a lot of mercy, but [I could not have] come back and eaten with my same hand, but that [day] I [came back to the house and] ate and did not use a fork. When I came back I found that they had cooked fish and I just ate and felt nothing. I just thanked God because it is not easy. . . . Anyway, it is God, anyone could have it.

For Sr. Annette, the exemplary moment of St. Francis giving and receiving the kiss of peace from a man with leprosy figured in two ways. At one level, it gave her courage to feed the boy and to see this act of feeding as religiously significant. Yet, and perhaps more importantly, at a second level, Sr. Annette interpreted her own appetite, her ability to come back and eat fish soup—a choice meal, but one that involves using one’s hands and fingers to carefully pick out the tiny bones of stewed fish, slick with broth and onions—“with [her] same hand” and “feel nothing” as an instance of grace. She remarked, delighted, “it is God; anyone could have it.” In saying this, she was making her capacity to do this work from the first day with such ease as a result not of her own doing but of God’s intervention in the world and as an unmerited gift of grace.

This understanding of the acquisition of virtue as a direct gift from God mirrors Catholic theological writings on the infused theological virtues. Some of the sisters who had earned tertiary degrees in theology used this language to describe such cases and suggested several readings by Catholic theologians, such as William Mattison, who draw on the writings of Thomas Aquinas and others to describe a system of virtues made of both acquired virtues and infused virtues. Acquired virtues, such as courage, temperance, and justice, can be learned and developed over time, and may be useful for achieving worldly ends. By contrast, the infused virtues of faith, hope, and charity can only be gained through God’s grace and have union with God as their end. Further, it is important to note that Catholicism sees God acting both through natural processes, as might be relevant to the idea of inborn qualities, and through supernatural action, as relevant to their understandings of grace (Mattison 2008).¹¹

God’s role as an agent of change in the narratives of sisters like Sr. Annette highlights an aspect of ethical experience that lies outside of the sisters’ control and, as such, is less amenable to their own intentional efforts to influence it. The importance of this unpredictable element in their ethical lives makes transitioning between different ways of living in the world far less certain than it might otherwise seem.

AGENCY, DISTRIBUTED AND DIVINE

Attending to these accounts of affective experiences, including unease, nausea, and anger; these understandings of the unruly workings of divine grace; and these culturally situated theories of inborn character traits is a difficult task for several reasons.

First, there are the problems presented by the ways in which anthropologists have used the anthropology of ethics to highlight the character and place of freedom in settings that are poorly served by models that privilege either slavish obedience to culture or unmediated acts of resistance. Despite other points of divergence among scholars working in this area, there is a sense of agreement that to study ethics is to study the intentional, the conscious, and the reflective. Scholars working on the anthropology of ethics have

often focused on the importance of the process of conscious reflection and intentional action, whether considering moments of moral breakdown among former heroin users in post-Soviet Russia (Zigon 2007, 2008, 2011), the moral experiments of African American parents of children with serious medical problems in Los Angeles (Mattingly 2014), Cairene women participating in Islamic piety movements (Mahmood 2004), the sudden moments of self-awareness and critique that punctuate the lives of frontline community psychiatry workers (Brodwin 2013), or the moral torment of Christians in Papua New Guinea (Robbins 2004). This scholarly work has no doubt provided a helpful corrective to overly determinist frameworks.¹² Yet, in this otherwise laudable focus on freedom, we might be drawn dangerously close to a view of the subject as a self-determined individual who experiences, perceives, and lives in relation to a world of others without being directly entered or affected by them.¹³

Attending to local accounts of the role of God or other spiritual actors in the constitution of ethical subjects also faces other objections from the disenchanting world of the social sciences (Chakrabarty 2000). In this world, God may speak but only through our efforts to kindle spiritual experiences into being (Cassaniti and Luhrmann 2014; Luhrmann 2012). God may act upon bodies but only because religious healing rituals can achieve real effects through the rhetorical influence of endogenous bodily processes (Csordas 1997, 2002). Even Jon Bialecki (2014), who in many ways calls for an anthropology of Christianity that is more willing to attend to the possibility of ontological difference, relies on the work of Bruno Latour to create a theory in which God figures as an object in the same way that all other things figure as objects. God, like other objects, is a hybrid assemblage; he exists because lexical items refer to him, because people rely on him, and because people take him as an object in exercises of thought (Bialecki 2017, 77). While such a position neither necessitates nor denies God's existence or his subordination to social processes, it is its own ontology and one that still lies some distance from the position of those Bialecki studied.

Alternatively, I suggest that we might consider the approach Martin Holbraad and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2016) refer to as an agnostic or anarchist approach to ontology. This is an approach that “starts from, and with, the methodological principle according to which we do not know what being is without having first engaged in ethnographic (ontographic) fieldwork. ‘Ontology’ thus becomes an ‘outdoor science’ like field ecology or natural history” (n.p.). This approach calls back to an older set of writings on witchcraft and spirit possession that sought to move beyond earlier certainties that witches “clearly cannot exist” (Evans-Pritchard 1937). Anthropologists like Paul Stoller (Stoller and Olkes 1989), Harry West (2007), and Jeanne Favret-Saada (1977) entered into “vital modes of engagement” (Bialecki 2014, 33) with the African sorcerers and French de-witchers they studied, a method that emerged out of their embodied experience and required that they take that

which “cannot exist” quite seriously. In taking this approach to addressing the ontological specificity of anthropological applications of Foucault's model, I join several scholars who are producing new work that is better able to accommodate the diverse range of ontological commitments that shape the lives of people whose models of self-transformation do not easily match those of the modern “self” (Taylor 2007).

Michael Lambek's (2003) writings on ethics and spirit possession in Madagascar are exemplary in this regard. While Lambek's framing of spirit possession as an ironic art of living with spiritual others highlights the medium's poetic agency and expression, this sense of irony also leaves open a space for the *trumbas*, the spirits of deceased humans, to act in ways that are only partially under the medium's control and authorship. While the medium has room to maneuver in any given situation, the medium is, in effect, acting in response to the actions of the *trumbas*, who appear in Lambek's accounts as real entities capable of having effects in the world.

Amira Mittermaier's (2012) research on followers of Shaykh Qusi in Egypt brings the limits of the self-cultivation paradigm into even sharper focus through her writing about the ways in which Shaykh Qusi followers understand that some dreams come to the dreamer through divine intervention. Drawing on Godfrey Lienhardt's (1961) notion of an ethics of passion, Mittermaier seeks to illuminate an “ethics of relationality, one that recognizes that humans are always embedded in webs of relationships. The ethics of passion that emerges from my interlocutors' dream stories not only undoes the notion of a unified subject but also draws attention to the role of an Elsewhere in constituting the subject, and with it to elements of unpredictability and contingency” (2012, 249). While such a perspective on personhood is common in many works in African studies that do not take ethics as their focus, Mittermaier brings this perspective into explicit dialogue with the literature on self-cultivation that has become paradigmatic for studies of ethics in Islam.

Mittermaier's approach aligns well with the one I have taken in this article and allows me to offer an analysis of the ways that ideas concerning distributed agency shape the understanding and acceptance of instances in which people fail to achieve their ethical ideal. In Foucault's writings, such a possibility is not explicitly engaged, despite scattered references to the fact that such concerns would have been much on the minds of the philosophers he so ably describes.¹⁴ Thus, even where Foucault's work has been used to describe the ethics of religious communities, his model makes it difficult to attend fully to our interlocutors' own understanding of the irreducible excesses and failures in their ethical lives and in the lives of those around them. “Taking seriously” (Archambault 2016; Candea 2011; de la Cadena 2010) the role that nonsecular ontologies of Catholic theology play at Mercy House allows us to better comprehend the sisters' understanding of their own ethical lives. While the sisters attend to their bodily experiences of nausea and appetite, of lost tempers and embodied ease, as the moral ends to be worked toward and the evidence of their progress toward

those ends, they do not understand themselves to be fully in control of this process. For the sisters, experiences of and relationships with God certainly figure as the ethical substance, mode of subjection, or telos to be achieved through one's own ethical work. But in addition to these, God also figures as an agent capable of intervening to perform this work of transformation. I have little interest in overturning the Foucauldian models of ethical study that have served as the inspiration for so much excellent work in the anthropology of ethics and morality. Instead, I hope that by taking an ontologically agnostic approach to the unrulier elements of ethical life, including the work of those spiritual others who we might otherwise choose to bracket, we might bring this model into closer alignment with the worlds we aim to understand and that doing so will help us to better understand the underdetermined nature of so many ethical projects.

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NOTES

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1. Names of people, places, religious orders, and organizations have been changed to protect the confidentiality of those who participated in the study.
2. For an excellent summary of this framework, see Faubion (2011).
3. This block of dilapidated single rooms was replaced by a new building, complete with tiled floors and a ceiling-mounted television, in 2016.
4. In 2007–2008 this negative assessment was also largely true of the provision of direct material aid more generally. Since that time, basic-income grants and direct cash-transfer programs have become an area of increasing interest and experimentation

in international development (Ferguson 2015; Hanlon, Barrientos, and Hulme 2010).

5. The Liturgy of the Hours is made up of six sets of prayers and readings. These prayers and readings are performed either collectively or privately at fixed times throughout the day by many communities of monks, nuns, and priests in religious orders. The prayers and readings follow a regular rotation according to the church calendar. The morning office starts just before dawn and is followed by a mass said by the sisters' chaplain. The evening office is followed by meditation and adoration of the Eucharist.
6. Caning is a common disciplinary practice in Uganda, but it can be more severe in some schools than in others. For a discussion of the prevalence and consequences of caning, see Devries et al. (2014).
7. *Posho* is a stiff cornmeal mush that is considered a low-prestige food in this part of Uganda.
8. *Matooke* is a stiff mush made from bananas that is generally a highly desirable food in this part of Uganda.
9. For an excellent discussion of the great lengths to which people with disabilities in Botswana go to avoid this sort of response, see Livingston (2008).
10. These terms are drawn from Luganda. Luganda is the language spoken by the Baganda in the Central Region of Uganda. It also functions as a common language for many people living in the Central Region regardless of where they were born. The sisters who belong to the Franciscan Sisters of Africa come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds from all over Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, as do the children in their care. This said, Luganda was the most commonly spoken language at Mercy House and in the district where it is located. While it would be a mistake to assume that all of the sisters identified with Kiganda concepts, I have chosen to discuss these terms as a way of putting the materials they were taught in the novitiate into dialogue with one set of local concepts.
11. The relationship and distinction between the natural and the supernatural is somewhat conflicted in Catholic theology, but the precise distinctions between these two forms of divine action are not widely discussed outside of technical writings.
12. In his foundational 2002 essay, Laidlaw argued that prior anthropological writings on morality suffered from the Durkheimian premise that social organization is based on the group's adherence to "moral facts" that arise from society and inspire the respect of all. In contrast to this position that would see morality as the respectful adherence to a set of social obligations, Laidlaw sought to reintroduce freedom to anthropology, defining ethics as the realm of human experience that attempts to answer the question, "How should one live?" from a position of freedom, a position that people occupy to greater and lesser degrees at various moments in their lives and in human history. Importantly, Laidlaw does not use the word freedom to indicate a form of agency as resistance but rather a kind of socially embedded reflective freedom that may even involve engaging in ethical practices aimed at restricting one's future actions (Laidlaw 2013).
13. Such a vision lies at the center of the modern conception of the subject. Critics of the facticity and universality of this position

can be found across a range of disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, and critical theory. These discussions are also related to anthropological discussions concerning the great diversity of forms that personhood takes in different cultures (Busby 1997; Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Dumont 1986; Lambek and Strathern 1998; Strathern 1988).

14. The form that the acquisition of truth took in the early Christian forms of self-formation that served as the basis for much of Foucault's own writings on this topic were similarly dependent on God's free, and in that way, uncertain, gift of grace.

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