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Interrogating cultural assumptions: a productive challenge for social ethics

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Habe ich die Begründungen erschöpft,
so bin ich nun auf dem harten Felsen angelangt,
und mein Spaten biegt sich zurück.
Ich bin dann geneigt zu sagen: »So handle ich eben.«

(Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophische Untersuchungen § 217)

1. Introduction

When doing social ethics, we are frequently confronted with cultural assumptions as a factor in the struggle for justice, which is to say a struggle on behalf of a society which makes a good life possible for all today and in the future. These implicit assumptions or beliefs are part of the unconscious and thus unreflective foundation of our thinking and acting.[1] They are so to say the "hard rock" Wittgenstein refers to in the quotation above. Cultural assumptions are acquired by socialization and manifest in what individuals consider as "normal." That is, cultural assumptions are far more often epistemological instances that we "see through" than objects we are able to "look at."[2] To be clear, this itself is not a problem: in addition to being unavoidable within everyday life, cultural assumptions are often essential in order to carry out a range of learned behaviors.

Yet even if cultural assumptions are in most cases innocuous, as the basis for unreflective behaviors such assumptions can in some cases represent a problem. Moreover, these cases occur often enough so as to merit attention from social ethicists when considering the methodological norms within their field. Today's social ethics sees its role primarily in providing (normative) theoretical orientation within the public discourse (Frühbauer/Heimbach-Steins 2022, 44-46). Cultural assumptions such as gender stereotypes are pointed out as problems, but when attention turns to more practical matters, changes to social policy (laws, social benefit) are the frequently suggested means to get rid of social injustices (e.g. Heimbach-Steins 2022, 424).[3] This tendency can be seen as a symptom of a "political reductionism [politische Engführung]" of the social ethical perspective (Hausmanninger 2006, 38) – at least when it comes to making suggestions.

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[1] There are many examples of scholarship on the implicit as a resource for examining culture. In cognitive and social psychology this phenomenon is researched as implicit or unconscious bias. These biases are inevitable as humans need to quickly categorize input through the senses to survive (e.g. Greenwald/Krieger 2006). For an example studying particularly religious cultures, see: Slater 2017. For a broader look at the sociological relevance of cultural assumptions, see: Collins 1992.

[2] The distinction between "looking at"/ "looking through" has been subject to longstanding philosophical interest. It can be found in the work of the American logician and philosopher C.S. Peirce (e.g., 1931–5, with specifically relevant passages in volume 2, section 27 and volume 4, section 332.), whose theories on semiotics would prove highly influential on subsequent analyses of culture. For a more deeply rooted historical perspective, see the scholastic distinction between *obiectum materiale* and *obiectum formale* as interpreted by Dietrich Schlüter in *Materialobjekt/Formalobjekt*, in: Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie online, Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2017.

[3] This is not only a problem of social ethics. Also in other fields of research and public policy consulting, there is a lack of ideas about how to tackle cultural assumptions with means other than changes to law (even if it is acknowledged, that changes to policy aren't effective if cultural stereotypes work in a different direction) (Gärtner/Lange/Stahlmann 2020).

To work against tendencies of narrowing the gaze to political aspects and suggestions, we look in this working paper upon cultural assumptions not only as a part of culture, but also as a productive challenge to social ethics. Argumentation among social ethicists often stops at the point at which people make out that what they are dealing with is an aspect of culture. This is frustrating, since so much can be—indeed has been—said about the relevance of culture to the field. Culture comprises – depending on the defining discipline and background theory – a complex structure of arts, experiences, convictions, values and norms (Becka 2022, 339). A common attribute of many views on culture is that it is distinctly man-made, in contrast to nature (Becka 2022, 340). The cultural turn in humanities has brought about a very broad definition of culture, as "the meaning of the social" (Becka 2022, 342; translation by EH). For our part, our position integrates the practical, applied perspective of cultural models theory (Snibbe/Markus 2005, 704; Fiske 2002, 85) to put more stress on shared practices and their binding character and better fit our findings and purposes.

It is, however, not our interest to establish a new "cultural" ethics in a way of ethically looking at specific (national) cultures as a whole or given subcultures/forms of life. This discourse was shaped early on by Mausbach (1921) and Schweitzer (1923) and remains ongoing (Laux 2017). In the United States, Richard Miller suggests a cultural turn in religious ethics that entails assessing and representing the ethics of everyday life. Miller is interested in habitual normative practices and speech "to assess idioms of the right and the good" (Miller 2016, 74). Miller's work, which has inspired commentary from figures like Thomas Tweed (2017), was preceded by a comparative turn in religious ethics (Stalnaker and Bucar 2012). The comparative turn also trades in rich descriptions of ethnographic practices, although arguably at a cost to its normative commitments (Ranganathan 2020). The question of difference among concrete normative practices and convictions is not central to our argument. We refer, rather, to the basic mechanism of acquired assumptions and habits, which is at work in all these contexts.

Nor are we interested in problems of cultural difference between nations or regions which manifest in problems of cultural dominance or imperialism (Senghaas 1976). The same stance applies to problems of cultural difference on a national level in intercultural (mis)understanding within multiethnic societies. Ideas with regard to these issues have been developed by Baumann (1996) and are still discussed in social ethics today (Hausmanninger 2006, 40-42; Becka 2022, 351-352).

These and other reflections on contextuality and perspectivity of ethical norms, be it as a "given" or a "desiderate," are not our focus. This is not because they are not interesting or important, but rather because we are interested in another way in which culture impinges on the work of social ethics. In contrast with these approaches just mentioned, what we are aiming at is a more acute attention to socio-cultural aspects, by which we mean the acquired assumptions and practices that persons receive from their socio-cultural environment, often in subtle and pervasive ways. To put this point in terms of the discipline of social ethics, a sensitivity to socio-cultural aspects is important when doing social ethics, because it is an indispensable factor for effective implementation of any concept. For instance, acquired assumptions might corroborate a person's stated, consciously-held values, or they may bely or contradict those beliefs. What remains consistent is that assumptions both reflect and shape shared

attitudes and practices which exert a certain constraint on the individuals with regard to individual judgement, reasoning, and action / ("handeln").[4]

What can social ethical engagement be in light of problematic[5] cultural assumptions? What kind of suggestions can social ethics make to help overcome cultural barriers to justice? This paper is not the place for comprehensive answers to such questions. This paper is meant, rather, to sort out and clarify a problem which two researchers from different places in the world working in different ethical fields keep encountering; this effort can then provide a basis for developing some tentative suggestions. Our aim is to set the basis for further reflection and discussion and in this way contribute to a more comprehensive (and creative) approach to social ethical problems. To support the foregoing contention, we collect and analyze in this paper some instances in which cultural assumptions affect our fields of work: care ethics (specifically elderly care) and ecological ethics. These examples show that cultural assumptions can be like a "hard rock" which abruptly makes an end to our efforts for a just society (chapter 2), even as reflection upon cultural assumptions proves in other cases to be an asset when addressing social ethical issues (chapter 3). Having struck a balance between challenge and opportunity in our treatment of cultural assumptions, we then present tentative suggestions what social ethics could do—together with whom—to help bring about necessary change on the level of cultural assumptions (chapter 4).

2. Cultural assumptions as a challenge – examples from care ethics

There are at least three ways in which cultural norms arise as a barrier within care ethics.

2.1 Cultural assumptions as a barrier to social justice – gender norms

Even though gender equality is promoted widely in social policy, in actual fact elderly care remains widely in the hands of women. In spite of legal non-discrimination, care work is still generally understood as a task of women – wife, mother, and/or daughter(-in-law) (Emunds u. a. 2022, 46). Gender-specific cultural norms – for example the expectation that women are naturally in charge of the household – determine social participation and development opportunities in the private space, in professional life and in the political sphere (Becker-Schmidt 2004, 66). They lead to a higher load of familial care work for female family members which in turn hampers women's chances to excel in other fields of life (Emunds u. a. 2022, 47). In order to reach a state of social justice in care, measures in the field of social policy must be complemented with efforts in the field of gendered cultural assumptions (Emunds u. a. 2022, 50; Gärtner/Lange/Stahlmann 2020, 81). It seems, however, that the commonly

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[4] Hausmanninger choses a similar focus when he states „dass aus lebensweltlichem Handeln der Subjekte Sozialformen hervorgehen, die diesen wiederum in einer gewissen Objektivität gegenübertreten […]. Sozialethik kann kulturethisch diese Strukturen [Lebenswelt] normativ – unter der Leitfrage nach ihrer Dienlichkeit oder Hinderlichkeit für Personalisation und personale Selbstentfaltung – in den Blick nehmen" (Hausmanninger 2006, 38-39).

[5] As noted above, cultural norms are not to be abolished as such. It is unavoidable that people (initially) adopt their parent's and/or peer's world view and behavior. However, there are specific cultural assumptions which promote injustice and hinder individual flourishing. These are termed as "problematic" and are a natural object of study for social ethics because of their implications.

proposed steps end up being changes to social policy (Emunds u. a. 2022, 129-151; Gärtner/Lange/Stahlmann 2020, 102-104).

2.2 Cultural assumptions as a barrier to the autonomy of relatives of elders

Organizing elderly care in networks is one idea of how to provide services of acceptable quality and sufficient quantity even when professional care workers and caring relatives will no longer be able to cover the needed amount of care in the future. Innovative concepts such as the "caring community" (Klie 2016) or the Buurtzorg model (Rositzka/Sulmann 2019) rely on networks of multiple actors – including volunteers and professionals of various (also non-medical) backgrounds – to cover the elderly's needs in care and support. However, many people are convinced that relatives should care for them and a) don't accept volunteers to support their everyday life[6] and/or b) don't accept professional care services (Heimbach-Steins/Hänselmann/Quaing 2018, 18-25). The German social system as well is rather explicitly based on the conviction that care work is primarily a responsibility of the family – it is an example of the so called "familialism" (Emunds u. a. 2022, 48; Leitner 2003). Guided by this "familialist" conviction, German care policy aims first and foremost at a high rate of (cheap) informal care by close relatives. If relatives know that the elderly person will not accept any alternative to being cared for by direct relatives or there are no acceptable alternatives in the first place, they are morally forced to do the care work, knowing that their kin will remain uncared for otherwise. Moreover, relatives of elderly persons themselves sometimes share these same "familialist" assumptions and base their life-decision on them.[7] This phenomenon is especially strong in cultural contexts with traditional family roles, but also in families where reciprocity of care in the life-time is valued highly (Emunds u. a. 2022, 43-44). All of this hinders social ethical improvement with view on relative's choice "to care or not to care" (Fraser 2001), and leads to social injustice especially when care work is devalued as it still is in Germany.

2.3 Cultural assumptions as a "hard rock" in health care counselling

A very promising idea in improving the German elderly care system next to the creation of care networks is to offer (preventive) care counselling. It has been shown that early counselling helps prevent aggravating situations of undersupply in home care (Alter und Soziales e.V. 2007, 39-40; 86ff.). In the end, even though the process of counselling makes services accessible for people who otherwise would not have made use of these offers, (early) counselling saves resources for the social health care system, for example because it prevents hospitalization. In real life however, people oftentimes decide to stay in situations of objective undersupply despite of existing alternatives which have been proposed to

[6] This is an insight gained in the interview study in the current DFG-Project „Zukunftsfähige Altenpflege. Sozialethische Reflexionen zu Bedeutung und Organisation personenbezogener Dienstleistungen" in which Prof. Dr. Marianne Heimbach-Steins and Dr. Eva Hänselmann (Institut für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften der Universität Münster) collaborate with Prof. Dr. Bernhard Emunds and Dr. Jonas Hagedorn (Oswald von Nell-Breuning Institut der Philosophisch-Theologischen Hochschule Sankt Georgen).

[7] The fact that the familialist ideal shapes the views and actions of different groups of people and even the social system can be used as an argument against the possible objection that the reported cases aren't about culture, but about individual values and choice.

them in counselling. Since this seems to be the case more often in migrant and/or working-class families,[8] socio-cultural aspects may well be at the root of this. Accepting the border of personal choice even when it means the person is inflicting harm on herself is a major professional challenge when working in health care counselling. In this way, the effect of counselling as an improvement of accessibility of services is limited by the preponderance of cultural assumptions which inhibit the use of these services.

2.4 Reflection

In the examples given above concerning care ethics, the researcher was not initially examining culture or cultural assumptions. On the contrary, the original aim was to find ways to establish a fair elderly care on the level of the society. After years of learning about the subject in question and thinking over promising ideas, it has been a frustrating experience to end up with the conclusion that all these problems remain stubbornly entrenched because we ultimately hit the "hard rock": cultural assumptions.[9] Even when they perpetuate suffering amidst parts of the society (e.g. overburdened caring relatives), cultural assumptions tend to remain fatalistically unchallenged. The way people are brought up to live and think is something very intimate and it may give security especially in frightening times and intersecting crises (e.g. climate change/familial hardship). So, individuals and societies cling on to what is actually blocking recovery – like confusing a rock with a life preserver.

There seems to be a barrier of the imaginable regarding how we are used to living our lives within a society that sets the limit for what is a realistic option for each individual. All three examples sketched above reflect a conception that does not imagine alternatives. This is a problem of cultural assumptions. In this sense, the problem is also a problem of a hindered imagination, which is to say an inability to think beyond or imagine more; indeed, this is a failure even to imagine that more even can be imagined.

The abovementioned examples show that justice for all in a society relies as much on socio-cultural grounds as it does on restructuring political institutions. To scrutinize cultural norms and habits ("Sozialformen") as to their usefulness for personal realization is a recognized task for social ethics (Hausmanninger 2006, 39). We argue that these are manifestations of cultural assumptions, which remain unconscious, and are therefore hard to challenge. If social ethics claims to follow the primate of the practice (Filipović, in publication process), it cannot simply stop at the point at which it identifies deficient social practices or inadequate realization of values. Even if the main task of social ethics is the

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[8] This is again an insight gained in the interview study in the current DFG-Project „Zukunftsfähige Altenpflege. Sozialethische Reflexionen zu Bedeutung und Organisation personenbezogener Dienstleistungen". It can be backed up with the insight from psychology that people of lower social class tend to accept hardship as fate and seldom try to alter their environments (Cohen 2009, 202) and also with the result of a recent study which evaluated the German system of health care counselling following § 7a paragraph 9 SGB XI. Half of the people receiving counselling don't want a copy of the developed scheme of care measures. One third of the persons who received the scheme of care measures put it to their files without further use (Wolff et al. 2020, 257). There seems to be a vast potential left to be exploited with regard to the effectiveness of health care counselling.
For similar reflections with regard to use of child care services, see: Pavolini/Van Lancker (2018).

[9] Similar experiences are discussed in the field of public health care and prevention under the term (non-)compliance. Culture is observed as a factor in non-compliance of patients to treatment (McConnel 2003), but also of health staff to safety regulations (Rosenweg/Langan-Fox 2009).

provision of orientating knowledge ("Orientierungswissen") (Frühbauer/Heimbach-Steins 2022, 44), the norms of the field should aspire to go further and include practical suggestions. So far, practical suggestions with view on cultural norms have mostly fallen within the category of changes to social policy – in social ethics (Emunds u. a. 2022, 129 ff.) as well as in political science (Gärtner/Lange/Stahlmann 2020, 102-104), even though the same studies noted that social change will not be attainable by lawmaking alone (Emunds u. a. 2022, 50; Gärtner/Lange/Stahlmann 2020, 81). Social ethics should scrutinize ways to put forward practical suggestions directly oriented on cultural assumptions. But how?

3. Reflection of cultural assumptions as an asset – an example from ecological ethics

As has been shown, cultural assumptions can be a source of problematic practices. They can also, however, for that very reason, be a source of repair. This is because reflection on cultural assumptions provides an opportunity for the ethicist to diagnose problems in a more promising way. Responses which take into account the mechanisms of cultural assumptions can be more constructive as they speak directly to the culture from which the assumptions have emerged. We contend, then, that foregrounding cultural assumptions as a productive challenge facilitates for the ethicist sharper and more empathetic diagnoses, even as it provides an opportunity for communicating actually eligible solutions in a more effective message likely to be heard and received constructively by a given audience. Reflection of cultural assumptions is therefore a potential asset to social ethical reasoning.

In order to illustrate this claim, take the following example from the field of ecological ethics. Susan Drake Emmerich was a researcher who was able to foster ecologically sustainable practices among the fishing community of the Chesapeake Bay's Tangier Island. What made Emmerich's work so effective was her ability to engage with the evangelical Christian perspective that shapes the assumptions of the Tangier Island community. In a community characterized by its deeply ingrained practices, its hostility to environmentalist encroachments on the basis of arguments for economic livelihood, and its staunch evangelical commitment, Emmerich was able to work with the fisherman to create what is known as the Watermen's Stewardship Covenant (2003). As Tracy A. Scheffler puts it, "Resolution of the issue occurred because the worldview of the Tangier community was used to work towards the Chesapeake's societal goal of living resource conservation" (2001). What Emmerich's example demonstrates is what Willis Jenkins has called the power "to help make cultural values do new things within the communities that hold them" (2013, 175). Self-conscious engagement with cultural assumptions initiates a link between assumptions and habits, a link that traverses distances between encompassing ecological behaviors and public persuasion, or between academic studies and embedded communities.

3.1 Reflection

As shown in the examples in chapter 2, the culturally derived narrowing down of imagined options is a significant problem which leads to an exclusion of actually more promising ways of thinking and acting. What we observe in our examples is a lack of imagination, of the ability to consider alternatives

even if these would promote a realization of proclaimed values. This grounds in a psychologically explicable inertia of established customs and unconscious assumptions on the individual as well as on the social level (Baig 2009).
Yet if cultural assumptions represent a problem with respect to the issues surveyed here, this is also a kind of a good problem, as the example in chapter 3 shows. The problem is good because it provides an opportunity for self-conscious, methodological reflection on a matter that is obvious at a commonsense level, which is that we cannot live without thinking in categories and based on assumptions we have grown to internalize to a point at which we cannot look at them anymore, but look "through" these conceptions at the world around us. These concepts are useful at times and problematic at other instances. To recognize this is not to express a position of relativism, which is to say that the fundamental ethical distinction between right and wrong can only be asserted meaningfully within a narrow set of cultural conditions. Such a position has been criticized by Bharat Ranganathan, who holds that, "Absent strong normative claims [...] the options [of the ethicist] seem to be either an uncomfortable toleration or an unbridgeable relativism" (Ranganathan 2020, 474). What we are expressing does not succumb to the options Ranganathan is criticizing. Rather, it is simply to acknowledge that between right and wrong considered at broad or abstract levels and the personal decisions of an individual agent, there is an essential intermediary, and that is the level of cultural assumptions. In the case of the evangelical culture of Tangier Island, for example, Emmerich was able to achieve ecologically positive outcomes without sacrificing normative commitments to sustainability. She was able to do this not by averring strong normative claims, at least if the phrase "strong normative claims" suggests admonishing or lecturing the fishing community for its unsustainable practices. On the contrary, Emmerich was effective precisely because she avoided such overt judgment; to extend the framing of looking at/looking through: rather than "talking at" the community, she was able to "talk through" the community to realize normative commitments of real moral value.

4. Suggestions for social ethics

Appreciating the role of culture enables a better understanding of problems in many domains, especially when it comes to a practical or applied perspective (Cohen 2009, 202).
A recent study from the part of the feminist ethical philosopher Asha Bhandary claims that in order to reach autonomous choice in care-giving, educational interventions are needed to counteract the effects of gendered socialization (Bhandary 2020). This points in the direction in which the authors of this paper tend to think. But what does this mean spelled out in action? Bhandary herself doesn't go beyond vaguely naming the measures (education) and the targeted skills, which are "threshold levels" of caregiving and autonomy skills (Bhandary 2020, 140-146). If social ethics goes as far as making concrete policy suggestions in the political realm, scholars in this field should be able to provide more substantial orientating knowledge also with regard to socio-cultural injustices caused by cultural assumptions.
As social ethicists we thus feel obliged to work towards more flexibility and creativity in imagining alternative ways of living and thinking in order to come closer to social values of justice and sustainability. We suggest that in order to make effective suggestions for social interventions apart from

changes to social policy, social ethics should draw on research for example in cultural anthropology, cognitive and social psychology (e.g. Baig 2009), and practical experience in pedagogy (e.g. SCHLAU NRW) and social work (e.g. Spetsmann-Kunkel/Frieters-Reermann 2013). Such research serves social ethics by furnishing empirical data that give the social ethicist a more accurate and nuanced perspective of socio-cultural conditions. Together with these other disciplines and practitioners, social ethics could and should develop concepts and programs in the field of education and self-reflexion which can bring about change in cultural assumptions by making them visible, accessible, addressable. In doing so, we have to avoid a number of paternalist cliffs:

4.1 Paternalism (towards individuals)

When we criticize cultural practices or ways of thinking, it can look like telling people they make the wrong choices (e.g. caring for relatives without professional support even if it means the caring person is constantly overburdened). We don't want to override people's autonomous choices. However, it seems that some cultural norms strongly affect the aspect of autonomy. Decisions to take responsibility for the care for elder relatives (in that specific setting/way) may not be autonomous in a full sense. Cultural assumptions manifest in stereotypes and narrow down individual (and societal) options of action via what is called adaptive preferences (Khader 2011) or deformed desires (Superson 2005). In this way, it is an ethical imperative to interfere in a critical way with socio-cultural norms in order to make autonomous decisions (to care or not to care and how to care) possible in the first place.[10]

4.2 Paternalism between different social groups (Classism)

In the field of care and sustainability, different scopes of thinking and behavior can be observed along the lines of education and wealth. Researchers obviously have more educational resources than most other people and are frequently well off. That being said, resistance to the use of social services like child care or elderly care seems to be more frequent in low-income households. The charge of paternalizing other social groups and trying to convince everyone of the superiority of the own views isn't farfetched if some researchers propose measures that will probably have the most effect on other social groups. However, as the proposed measures consist mainly in educational resources, another aspect comes into view: the opportunity to redress a prior injustice with view on access to time and space for (self-)reflection.

4.3 Paternalism on a societal level (Totalitarism)

Attempts to change culture must be aware of some corrupt ancestry. In many totalitarian systems, attempts to procure and consolidate political power were accompanied by efforts to shape culture (social practices and convictions) accordingly. For example, the Third Reich was very active, using all

[10] It is admittedly very difficult to abolish an instance which infringes on individual autonomy by implicitly telling people what to do (e.g. women stay at home and care for family) by in turn explicitly telling them to consider doing something else. This paradox has to be resolved by the concrete means chosen to promote cultural change.

kinds of media (from radio to cartoons) and taking over social structures to influence people's view on the world, and for the people raised in this context: their cultural assumptions.

4.4 Paternalism between national cultures (Colonialism)

Problematic cultural assumptions can and should be tackled by members of the same cultural group. It should be our concern to work on our own practice and thinking, not prescribe cultural change to others. This perspective has been spelled out for social ethics recently (Heimbach-Steins (Ed.) 2020) and should be kept in mind when developing concepts or programs to address socio-cultural problems.

5. Conclusion

We see that cultural assumptions are at the basis of many problems of justice in todays' societies, even apart from questions of care and ecological devastation: "rape culture", femicide, discrimination (of LGTBQ; based on different religious identity or ethnic background) are only a few of many more examples. In conclusion, we claim that social ethics should pay more attention to cultural assumptions and work on pragmatic propositions to bring about change in situations of cultural "blockade." We think that social ethics can make more meaningful and effective suggestions for just societies if it acknowledges and tackles the barrier of cultural habits and assumptions in interdisciplinary cooperation with cognitive and social psychologists, cultural anthropologists, social workers and pedagogues. As is hopefully clear, foregrounding cultural assumptions does not in any way mean that meaningful debates over public policy, or even deontological debates over intrinsic rightness or wrongness for a given issue, do simply disappear. For example, the "burden" of living an ecologically sustainable lifestyle is one that should not simply be reduced to one's own relationship with a particular culture. These problems are complicated, and they resonate at many levels. But in terms of rhetoric, attitudes, individual assumptions, showing alternative possibilities and bracketing the cultural stuff without denying it – indeed, highlighting it to go beyond it--is a limited-but-valuable contribution.

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