



Geography and ethics II: Justification and the ethics of anti-oppression

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Progress in Human Geography

2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–11

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DOI: 10.1177/03091325231174965

journals.sagepub.com/home/phg



Abstract

This report on geography and ethics focusses on the justification of normative evaluations. Justifying why actions are right or wrong often relies on appeals to high-order principles, such as the common good. But this is not always the case, as this report shows by identifying an ethics of anti-oppression that relies instead on struggles against individual and social harms and the conditions that generate them. Through resistance, ethics of anti-oppression also shift the terms of normative justification across a range of considerations within geography and beyond it, from refugees and asylum seekers to food production and blockades against extractive infrastructure.

Keywords

justification, oppression, ethics, mobility, food, blockades

I Introduction

In 1967, Philippa Foot crystallised what is now known as the trolley problem: Imagine being on a tram headed towards five people who cannot move. Maybe they are stuck in a vehicle or maybe they've been tied down. It doesn't matter. What matters is that the tram cannot stop and will kill them unless you pull a lever that switches it to another track. On that track, however, a single person is similarly fated to die should the tram change course. Should you pull the lever?

The trolley problem is as straightforward as it is trauma-inducing. So, inevitably, it has become a popular meme in the dark-humour genre of social media. It also animates some of the more gruesome scenes on the television sitcom about ethics in a world entangled through inequality, NBC's *The Good Place*. Foot (1967) likely wouldn't have minded comedic takes; she signed off her original article by noting that the levity of her own variations

on the trolley problem were not meant to offend (in one, she quipped that there is no duty to stop the tram to dispatch would-be victims should they somehow escape their fate). Sarcasm contrasted sharply with Foot's (1967: 5) substantive concerns over what she termed the doctrine of double effect: the difficulty when an action has two effects, 'the one aimed at, and the one foreseen but in no way desired'. Foot's formulation of the trolley problem resonates powerfully in complex cases precisely through its spatial set up.¹ Two tracks, a hurtling tram, immobilised victims, and a forced choice that focusses attention on the distinction Jeremy Bentham made between what is directly intended by an action versus 'oblique

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intentions' that bring something about even without direct intention.

In this context – a world where not all consequences of intentional actions are necessarily desirable – this second report on geography and ethics focuses on relations of normative evaluation to justification. Accounting for why an action is morally acceptable or not is a longstanding issue in moral geography. Sayer and Storper (1997: 1) claimed early on in geography's 'moral turn' in the 1990s that 'critical theorists have been coy about talking about values'. Their critique was that critical geographers were at home making evaluative claims – pull the trolley lever or don't – yet often demurred when it came to explicitly justifying normative evaluations on topics like racism or democracy. A similar issue animated Barnett's (2012: 2) earlier report on ethics and geography, which contrasted accounts of practical reasoning in everyday life with the 'ontological one-upmanship' of ethical explanations in non-representational geographies (and others) that draw on continental philosophies. Relations between normative evaluations and their justification, as Foot keenly showed, reduce neither to counterfactual thought experiments (like the trolley-problem) nor to ontology. They require grappling with complex moral ecologies of the kind that she, together with Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch focussed on as they drove western ethics away from abstract theorising in the latter half of the 20th century (Lipscomb 2021). They of course were not alone. One theme of my first report (Schmidt 2022) was how metaethical boundaries shift when unequal drivers of planetary change alter the conditions of social life; those changed conditions, as many Black, Indigenous and feminist scholars point out, are neither abstract nor new even if their planetary scale presents unprecedented challenges.

This report makes a gambit for moral geographers to consider; namely, that there is a new thread of spatial explanation taking shape in what I term an ethics of anti-oppression. I outline this idea in two steps. The first considers how geographers are reworking the relation of normative evaluation to justification in alliance with anti-racist, anti-fascist, anti-colonial, anti-caste and non-anthropocentric values (a non-exhaustive list). The second

considers how these reworkings are agile but not merely ad hoc; that is, they respond to shifts in the conditions of ethics not only as needed but also in ways that demonstrate the contribution geography might make to broader discussions about new spatial arrangements of injustice. These sections direct attention to trolley-problem spaces, where normalised violence and oblique intentions catalyse ethics of anti-oppression that do not so much speak *back* to western ethics as shift the terms of normative justification.

II Ethics of anti-oppression

Berta Cáceres was assassinated in 2016 for defending her community's land (Lakhani 2020). Her murder, and the conviction of eight people for it, is among the most well-known cases of violence against land defenders, especially Indigenous women. Hers is not an outlier case, as Menton and Le Billon (2021) show in their study of global violence against land defenders (Middeldorp and Le Billon 2019; Tran et al., 2020). Why begin here? Partly, it is because unequal anthropogenic impacts on the planet affect ethical conditions in ways that make such cases formidable for re-examining the relation of normative evaluation to justification. As Boltanski and Thévant (2006) detail, dominant theories of justification often rely on reasons that appeal to higher-order principles or ultimate values – what Rorty (1989) termed the 'final vocabularies' of metaphysics or dogmatic religion. When conditions for agreement on higher-order items are unstable, however, so too are justifications premised on them. Yet harms persist. Resisting harms and the conditions enabling them forms the basis for ethics of anti-oppression that, I argue in this section, shifts the terms of normative justification.

A clarion call for an ethics of anti-oppression is geographic work confronting anti-Blackness, which as Noxolo (2022) showed in her progress report on race and ethnicity has been driven by the emergence of Black geographies (cf. Bledsoe 2021). White (2021) presents a powerful case for why reworking the relation of normative evaluation to justification is necessary by targeting the insufficiency of accounts that identify environmental racism without reckoning how anti-Black violence is committed

through different environments and not merely upon or in them. [Vickers \(2022\)](#) provides a powerful account of the moral geographies through which swamps were derided as places of death, as well as ecological and social denudation, to legitimise violence against Black peoples and ecologies in the United States. These harms persist through oppressive social structures and in ecological afterlives of anti-Black violence, what [Bruno \(2022\)](#) describes as an ecological memory of U.S. slavery that closer engagement with critical physical geography would help disclose and address (cf. [Sharp et al., 2022](#)). [Freshour and Williams \(2022\)](#) argue that recovering Black ecologies and anti-oppressive practices are critical to stewardship and collective ethical flourishing. [Roane \(2022, 2023: 4\)](#), focuses on how subaquatic and urban insurgencies of Black collectives organised through kinship, labour and religion enabled geographic alternatives – creativity, solidarity, life – to ‘state-sanctioned majoritarian publics’.

Tentatively naming an ethics of anti-oppression helps organise diverse moral geographies reworking the justification of normative evaluations. Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2023: 205) argues Geography’s disciplinary breadth makes it ripe for a disposition wherein ‘interdisciplinarity and coalition building are, like recognition and redistribution, two sides of a singular capacity’. Such arguments are made in solidarity with Black, Chicana, Dalit, Indigenous, Latinx and feminist commitments to non-domination for all equity-deserving groups ([McEwan and Goodman 2010](#); [MacLeavy et al., 2021](#)). These arguments also resonate with multiple geographies resisting oppression: [Heynen and Ybarra \(2021\)](#) argue, following Gilmore, for abolition ecologies that anchor freedom in coalitions of land-based politics. [Ranganathan and Bratman \(2021\)](#) highlight how an abolitionist ethic of care might complicate and expand notions of ‘being affected’ by climate change to incorporate intersectional and historical concerns. [Bruno and Faiver-Serna \(2022\)](#) argue that addressing issues of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity within Geography is key to climate ethics and justice. [Ferretti \(2022\)](#) calls for enhanced attention to antifascism and an emphasis on values of civic virtue (cf. [Ince 2019](#)). [Daigle and Ramírez](#)

(2019) make the case for liberation through decolonial geographies that combine colonial refusal with the embrace of alternative and Indigenous relationalities (cf. [Curley et al., 2022](#); [Maynard and Simpson 2022](#)). [Pasternak et al. \(2023\)](#) argue for anti-colonial approaches to extractive infrastructure through Indigenous refusals and assemblages of feminist and Indigenous practices (cf. [LaDuke and Cowen 2020](#)). [Srinivasan \(2021\)](#) shows how food-based politics act as an ethical medium for moral geographies in India and in ways critical to resisting caste oppression. Finally, [Doshi and Ranganathan \(2019\)](#) problematise ‘corruption’ in the Global South to examine how ethics are mobilised to transform urban contests, state legitimacy and capitalist rationale.²

Geographic work prioritising anti-oppressive concerns resonates with work by philosophers and theorists challenging oppression. [Glazebrook and Opoku \(2018\)](#) argue that violence against land defenders demands justice in the legal sense, and a moral shift that recognises how land defenders sustain ethical goods, and the conditions for them, by mitigating environmental harms.³ [Stockdale \(2021\)](#) examines ‘hope under oppression’, through intersectional analysis of gender, race, class and climate oppression that threatens the possibilities of hope itself. In her extension of the Capabilities Approach from human to animal justice, [Nussbaum \(2022: 1\)](#) argues for joint attention to individual goods and the conditions that ‘make it possible for a creature to pursue those without damage or blockage’. [Giraud \(2019: 4\)](#), by contrast, argues that after the condition of human and more-than-human entanglements is accepted, ethics must take up the task of understanding how prioritising some entangled relations means that ‘any attempt to highlight or oppose systems that are perceived to be oppressive necessarily creates exclusions of its own’.

Reworking relations of normative justification has focused attention on values. Freedom, care, liberation and civic virtue mentioned above often act, like other values, to backstop justification. Kant’s dictum to not treat others as ends and never means, for instance, anchors his categorical imperative in the value of human dignity. These concerns occupy Geography too. The 1974 report, *Values in*

Geography, by the Association of American Geographers (as it was then known) mobilised existentialism to avoid dichotomies that treat values as either objective and universal or as subjectively constructed and a slipway to relativism. It can be recalled, here, that Simone de Beauvoir (1948) agonised over an existential ethics that, contra Kant, grappled with moral relationships that treat others as both means and ends. Reflecting this tension, Buttimer (1974: 1) wrote that neither objective or subjective approaches to ethics ‘deals adequately with the ambiguous arena of ideals and conflicts’ in geographic praxis. Recent debates over American geography’s relation to the U.S. military show these considerations continue to matter, such as whether human dignity is an absolute value, or whether some oblique harms are justified given the situational contexts of ethics (see the exchange: Wainwright and Weaver 2021, 2022; Rose-Redwood et al., 2022).

Lake (2023) rejects the dichotomy of objective versus subjective values and seeks to reformulate attention to values in urban processes through the pragmatist John Dewey. In Lake’s formulation, values arise in particular contexts and social contests termed ‘transactional’ practices.⁴ Dewey’s influence on Geography is often highlighted by environmental geographers (e.g. Wescoat 1992), but another salient consideration is how Dewey’s work travels in anti-caste scholarship. As Stroud (2023) compellingly shows, Dewey significantly influenced the anti-caste philosophy of B.R. Ambedkar (2014), and many places of the latter’s *Annihilation of Caste* echo Dewey. As Crowley (2022) argues, geographies of anti-caste struggles, in which Ambedkar figured prominently, have important environmental mediums in struggles for nature and space. Narayanan (2021) details how the bodies and environments of animals, such as pigs, figure in caste and anti-caste politics that are also struggles about relations of good lives to the justifications for different forms of life.

Values matter to moral consideration. Debates over intrinsic versus instrumental values have long occupied geographers and environmental philosophers (Castree 2003; O’Neill 2003). Recent iterations, however, further unsettle questions of value, such as through stands of anti-violence against speciesism in arguments for veganism (Hodge et al.,

2022). Hodgetts and Lorimer (2020) consider how extending ethics to animals may yield incommensurable goods—where the mobility of some animals harms others. As Mouatt et al. (2019) argue, ethics lie at the heart of new economic geographies that give form to moral values of food free of environmental degradation and animal killing. As Sexton et al. (2022) argue, the rise of ‘Big Veganism’ carries with it both race and class-based value considerations. As can be anticipated from Narayanan and Srinivasan’s work above, some anti-animal diets are vehicles for caste, ethnic, and religious oppression. Here, context is crucial. So too elsewhere. Gilbert and Williams (2020) argue, for instance, that demands for reparations in the United States overlap with food justice movements owing to how efforts to transform oppressive systems requires recognising the ways values are anchored both in relations to land and the need for spaces to heal from trauma (cf. Brown et al., 2020). Reese (2018) focusses on how ethics of self-reliance take shape through provisions of food in Black community gardens of Washington D.C.

Debates over sentience remain central to ethical debates. For Lawrence (2021), sentience often betrays a *zoonotic* exceptionalism that prioritises animal pain at the expense of scientific knowledge of plant lives (cf. Srinivasan 2022; Chao 2022). Nussbaum (2022), by contrast, excludes plants in ways geographers might wish to engage, particularly since her position is that experiencing pain does not, alone, suffice for sentience. An adjacent consideration is the use of plant science to backstop moral claims, particularly as scientists debate findings regarding plant communication and resource sharing (see Karst et al., 2023). These debates highlight the stakes of normative justification. Other justifications are possible: Baker (2021) shows the sentience of berries in relation to the normative ethos of speech, action and obligation among Indigenous peoples in Northern Alberta, Canada. Nixon (2021) follows Indigenous scholars (i.e. Kimmerer 2013) to identify how trees and plants prompt a different mode of concern, not only because of what plants may or may not do but because the very idea of ‘less selfish’ genes opens space to counter capitalist norms (cf. Winter 2022).

III Ethical agility

Ethics of anti-oppression challenge moral justifications that intentionally or obliquely normalise violence. They also alter the scope of justification in ways the trolley problem helps illuminate. Ethics of anti-oppression do not assume, for instance, that those immobilised in front of the trolley passively await the fate assigned to them. By struggling against and altering their circumstances those once foreseen as victims rearrange the moral calculus of decision making. Here there is a need for what might be termed ethical agility – a shift of praxis that responds to changing ways injustice is spatialised. This need is evident in debates around mobility, which previous reports by [Olson \(2015\)](#) considered in terms of both the waiting and urgency of migration. These long-standing concerns have not dissipated: [Midgley \(2023\)](#) shows how it remains the case that humanitarian values, such as solidarity and care, are often subject to economising practices of valuation. And [Crane and Lawson \(2020\)](#) explore, there is a kind of ‘conflicted-care’ that characterises the management of, and negotiations with, asylum seekers that encounter state programs that are designed to return them to their home countries. There can also be discerned, however, a shift in ethical praxis that is not only about migration per se but also about multiple spectrums of concern that arise at the juncture of mobility, immobility and ethics.

[Cole \(2021\)](#) argues that the entanglement of current and past violence with the dominant moral geographies of refugee and asylum seekers urgently requires a new ethical vocabulary capacious enough to connect normative categories of refuge, protection, and hospitality to varied experiences. As [Gökarksel and Secor \(2020\)](#) show, any such vocabulary also requires capacity to understand how affective aspects of refugee encounters involve ethical considerations regarding the pain of others. These encounters are not limited to social or individual experiences of harm. As [Darling \(2022\)](#) argues, political efforts to deter and disperse asylum seekers through ‘systems of suffering’ that institutionalise violence require an ethic of care in response. Such cruelty, as [Shklar \(1984\)](#) argued, is the most intolerable political vice. Nevertheless,

efforts to immobilise refugee and asylum seekers proceed by politicising the justification of norms in new ways, and through arguments that put ethics to work for state ends. For instance, [Watkins \(2020\)](#) considers how states seek to ethically delegitimize the movement of irregular migrants through moral geographies that scrutinise those facilitating their movement and by promoting legal frameworks of immobilisation. By contrast, [Tedeschi \(2021\)](#) focusses on how an ethics of irregular migration might take shape through attention to how migrants respond to hardship and build (temporary) communal stability.

Immobilisation takes place not only in particular environments but also *through* them. [Kanngieser \(2020\)](#) shows how the offshoring of Australian refugees and asylum seekers in Nauru is entangled with histories of ecological and colonial violence against the island’s Indigenous peoples. Relatedly, [Watkins \(2021\)](#) shows how offshoring combined with a particular spatialisation of the ‘region,’ and moral obligations to asylum seekers within it, that Australia came to reject over the 20th century. As [Collins \(2021: 79\)](#) original emphasis) argues, understanding how ‘the environment is *both* internal *and* external to individuals’ is key to an ethics of migration that confronts the ways violent forms of immobility operate through environmental borders – such as uses of covid-19 pathogens to discipline migrant labour. [Kahn \(2019: 12\)](#) traces how ocean environments are mobilised in moral geographies that combine the interception of Haitian vessels bound for the U.S. and the offshore warehousing of asylum seekers into joint matters of ‘sovereign exigency and moral humanitarianism’ – saving people from the sea and putting them in cells. For [Pallister-Wilkins \(2022\)](#), there is a deep racial component to humanitarianism and its notion of the ‘human’, which remains anchored in colonial hierarchies that inscribe normative values into racialised differences, the legitimacy of which is also undermined through movements for racial justice. The attention of these authors to how moral geographies of mobility work through different environments contrasts starkly with the privileged mobilities of elite labour that capitalise on inequality ([Duplan and Cranston 2023](#)).

Mobility ethics work in multiple registers. [Head et al. \(2019\)](#) show how migrants bring their morals with them in ways that can challenge dominant norms, such as land ethics among migrant agricultural labourers. [Baldwin \(2022\)](#) is explicit about how historical injustices were enrolled through forms of immobility justified by racialised notions of environmental determinism in his arguments about how similar injustice may manifest anew in the ethics of climate change migration. For [Smith \(2021\)](#), the disappearance of ice owing to climate change recalls histories of environmental determinism that racialised Indigenous peoples in icy environments and naturalised the ‘temperate-normativity’ of colonisers. For Smith, to reclaim Indigenous notions of transit and migration in ethical terms of kinship and reciprocity is to engage more-than-human relations. Impacts of ice and environmental loss also require appreciating how environmental loss is differentially experienced and known, as [Schmidt \(2021\)](#) argues in his analysis of the growing phenomenon of holding funerals for melted glaciers. [Matthews et al. \(2022\)](#) argue that conservation efforts targeting ‘species on the move’ in response to environmental change must not come at expense of Indigenous and local peoples. As [Luo and Gao \(2022\)](#) show in their analysis of international trade in elephant ivory, there is an important role for ethics and values that spans contexts, borders and transnational spaces affecting both humans and more-than-human relations. [Collard \(2020\)](#) likewise focuses on how market mobility in the exotic pet trade requires renewed ethical attention to the treatment of animals as both individuals and situated ecological beings.

Immobility also has place in ethics of anti-oppression. [McIntyre’s \(2021\)](#) history of environmental blockades, for instance, highlights the ethics of direct action designed to alter the moral calculus of decision makers. [Malm \(2021\)](#) argues there is an ethical duty to take direct action, even violent struggle, against condition altering circumstances like climate change. [Davis \(2021\)](#) argues that it is important to think about the ethics of blockades not only in terms of what is being resisted, but also for the moral imagination that animates alternative futures. As [Spice \(2018\)](#) shows, Indigenous ethics of care manifest through blockades as aspirational

spaces, such as encampments confronting extractive infrastructures. [Simpson \(2021: 4\)](#) examines blockades in reference to anti-colonial resistance and the ethics of harvesting, parenting, stories, ceremony and relationality through which Indigenous peoples mobilise. Blockades are in this sense an ethic of staying put, as [Hardy et al. \(2022\)](#) show in mobilising a land-based ethic of resistance to confront racialised discourses of sea-level rise and flood risk through movements of solidarity with others and through marshes, soils and drainage ditches. Judicial consequences of blockades are centred in [Spiegel’s \(2021\)](#) account of how ethics of anti-colonial solidarity among land defenders take shape through continued resistance in courtrooms.

Considerations of mobility do not exhaust the ethical agility demanded by shifts in normative justifications. [Doherty \(2022\)](#) focuses on the social conditions through which different notions of personhood are produced through digital platforms for ride hailing apps in Uganda (cf. [Verlinghieri and Schwanen 2020](#)). By contrast, [Büscher \(2022; cf. 2020\)](#) takes up [Giraud’s \(2019\)](#) view that prioritising some entangled relations necessarily produces exclusions to argue some relations require being *unmade* for moral reasons. Of concern for Büscher are unethical connections to nature facilitated by digital platforms. As [Bakker \(2022\)](#) argues, however, digital connections should be placed in broader social and historical contexts, such as by situating new listening technologies that track other species and processes with respect to how knowledge of others is witnessed through sounds that are not mere data, but a call to kinship (cf. [Kannigieser 2023](#)). Here, getting to grips with how moral warrant shifts in nonstandard ways is key to thinking across the alliances that anchor ethics of anti-oppression – ways that also need to consider how other species complicate co-existence in ethically important ways ([Wilson 2022](#)). As such, it isn’t necessarily the case that prioritising some entanglements excludes others, as [Giraud \(2019\)](#) claims. As [Fujikane \(2021\)](#) argues, for instance, Kānaka Maoli in Hawai’i combine focused critique on settler colonialism and globalisation with the mo’olelo – storied histories – of the oceans, winds and rain to map new forms of planetary abundance. So, while some entanglements need to be unmade, juxtaposing

exclusion and entanglement isn't necessary to ethics of anti-oppression.

IV Ethics afoot

Ethics of anti-oppression confront normalised violence and harms that arise through oblique intentions. They are agile and instructive as they point to different spectrums of ethical concern. For one, entanglements with unstable ethical conditions do not necessarily yield exclusions in struggles against oppression – few scenarios are as unstable as the whims of oppressors yet movements of solidarity envision new futures beyond them. There is, in other words, no necessary acceptance of one trolley track versus another. Instead, ethics of anti-oppression shift justification from higher-order principles to higher-order praxis; it is through resistance against individual and social harms, and the conditions that generate them, that the moral calculus of decision-making is rearranged. Geographers calling for disciplinary space to support new arrangements can no longer be charged as 'coy' about justifying their normative evaluations.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. Foote's 1967 essay targeted debates about abortion that, as Calkin et al. (2022) show, are especially relevant to contemporary geographies.
2. It is worth highlighting forthcoming work, just out of reach for inclusion in this report. See, Ranganathan

et al.'s (2023) *Corruption plots: stories, ethics, and publics of the late capitalist city*.

3. For instance, social movements contribute towards remaining within the Earth's carbon budget (Thiri et al., 2022).
4. Reckoning with the full pragmatist account of values in Dewey's era would require engaging his contemporary, Clarence Lewis (1946) major work: *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*.

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