

“I Exist in Believing”: Anthropology as a Theological and Emancipative Pursuit

Brian Brock, 23/12/16 submitted version

I begin by admitting to having once performed one of the oldest clichés in the modern Atlantic world— becoming the American on a quest who travels to the old world to become educated. After a few twists and turns I ended up in London studying, of all things, Christian ethics. Most of the teaching I received took place in invariably ugly seminar rooms in the bowels of the outwardly stunning King’s College, which sits resplendently on London’s Embankment, overlooking the Thames, Waterloo bridge, and Big Ben.

A few hazy memories of classroom lectures from this time of my impressionable youth are still available to me, happily. In one of them a lecturer stands at a whiteboard drawing a pie chart with three equal segments. These, he explained, represent the methodological options facing the Christian ethicist according to Alasdair MacIntyre. One could either continue down the road of modernity, dubbed the encyclopaedic option, in which it is assumed that everything we do or can know will in the end finally fit into the overarching schema that is universal rationality. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was the glory of this approach. The ethics that follows is characterized as the search to define those actions which conform to universal rationality. A rival option was offered by the so-called genealogists—Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, and supremely, Nietzsche. In this counter-Enlightenment understanding of rationality construed the task of ethics very differently. For them ethics itself arises from political and often antagonistic relationships embedded in concrete histories. At bottom, the genealogists believed, ethics is one of the most obvious cultural domains in which we use words to get ahead of other people by winning them around to our vision of how the world should be. MacIntyre, the lecturer continued, is proposing a third way, an Aristotelian-Thomistic virtue route, in which it is assumed that our talk of morality is shaped by habit and carried forward by our character in a manner that neither presumes a basic metaphysical agonism (as

assumed by the genealogists) nor a static universal rationality available to all people of good will (as assumed by the encyclopaedists).

MacIntyre, the lecturer explained, poses the basic question that should make Christians think very hard about the rationality of Christian ethical thinking. He usefully reminds Christians, since they too are moderns, that it might be prudent for them to consider the possibility that they too might be alienated from their own moral language. The evidence that we might exist in this alienated state is displayed every time we deploy moral language without being able to account for how it works. The lecturer then went on to tell MacIntyre's famous story about Captain Cook. On his third Polynesian voyage Cook and his crew were stunned to discover that the inhabitants of one island practiced what seemed to them remarkably lax sexual habits side by side with remarkably strict rules about what could and could not be eaten. When asked by the sailors why they weren't more sexually chaste or more promiscuous in their eating, they replied that this was "taboo". For our purposes it is worth dwelling on how MacIntyre presents the import of this problem of anthropological description.

...when [the sailors] inquired further what *taboo* meant, they could get little further information. Clearly *taboo* did not simply mean *prohibited*; for to say that something—person or practice or theory—is *taboo* is to give some particular sort of reason for its prohibition. But what sort of reason? It has not only been Cook's seamen who have had trouble with that question; from Frazer and Tylor to Franz Steiner and Mary Douglas the anthropologists have had to struggle with it. From that struggle two keys to the problem emerge. The first is the significance of the fact that Cook's seamen were unable to get an intelligible reply to their queries from their native informants. What this *suggests* is—and any hypothesis is to some degree speculative—that the native informants did not really understand the word they were using, and this suggestion is reinforced by the ease with

which Kamehameha II abolished the taboos in Hawaii forty years later in 1819 and the lack of social consequence when he did.¹

The Polynesians show us what happens when moral prescriptions drift free of the rational understanding which holds them in place, MacIntyre contends. If, as good postmoderns, we decide that we do not want to take the stance of universal rationality in order to teach the Polynesians what they “really” meant when they used the word taboo, then the best we can aspire to in order to explain what is going on is to develop some account of how what we are seeing is a decaying relic of a more coherent earlier set of practices with their own rationality and supported by characteristic forms of virtue and vice.

The function of this historical accounting in MacIntyre’s story is to break the discussion of moral language out from the atemporal space of concepts preferred by the analytic and utilitarian philosophers by pointing out how deeply it matters that moral language can only be deployed within historical contexts with their inescapable developmental trajectories. The point of this detour into 19th century anthropological confusions in Polynesia becomes clear when MacIntyre uses the tale to expose what he considers the vacuous and senseless aridity of modern analytic philosophy.

...why should we think about real analytical moral philosophers such as Moore, Ross, Pritchard, Stevenson, Hare and the rest in any different way from that in which we were thinking just now about their imaginary Polynesian counterparts? Why should we think about our modern uses of *good*, *right*, and *obligatory* in any different way from that in which we think about late eighteenth-century Polynesian uses of *taboo*? And why should we not think of Nietzsche as the Kamehameha II of the European tradition?²

Retracing this set of arguments from MacIntyre reminds us of a couple of important facts. The first is that his main concern is contemporary English-speaking analytic philosophers (who, incidentally,

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (London: Duckworth, 2007), 111.

² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed., 113.

have generally ignored him). The second is that in his quest to undermine the certainty of this specific group of modern analytic moral philosophers, he has drawn on discussions in anthropology about a case that is apparently being offered in order to reveal something more universal about how moral language works. In essence anthropology is being drafted in, “used” even, in order to make a point in inter-philosophical debates. The upshot, third, is that he ends up making a good point about the poverty of modern analytic philosophy—that they didn’t really know how moral language works—by way of a stunningly jaded view of 19th century Polynesians and a pretty superficial view of how anthropology might work as an activity that might be pursued with more rigor than could be ascribed to a bunch of seamen talking to locals in a port town. This, as Michael Banner has pointed out, is probably one of the least appealing ways to engage anthropology that might be pursued by the contemporary ethicist.

The lecturer who told me this story was, of course, was Michael Banner himself, and as he hints in the pregnant aside in his paper, his rejection of the story with which he once opened his own course on Christian ethics is a noticeable change of tack. For the slightly younger Michael Banner, MacIntyre’s story paved the way for his proposal that we take Karl Barth more seriously. I will briefly return in my conclusion to indicate the role that I think Barth continues to play in situating his project as a whole. Up to this point, however my interest has only been to situate Banner’s call for more engagement with anthropology by Christian theologians as an intervention in inner-disciplinary debates in Christian (protestant) ethics. In the context of these skirmishes it is important to know that MacIntyre remains an influential figure within our guild, making Banner’s labelling him a “siren” a provocative and minority position.

That long preface out of the way, my interest in the remainder of this short reply is to clarify why, given this starting point, Banner should be understood as intentionally going beyond MacIntyre’s rather superficial plundering of anthropology for examples that can further his position in the debates between moral philosophers and theologians. Though Banner does not fundamentally alter

the “plundering” relationship to anthropology, his aim in this plundering, I want to suggest, is organized by an *empathy* largely absent in MacIntyre, who seems generally satisfied to point out the sorry plight of the modern victims of alienation.

As he very eloquently explained in *The Ethics of Everyday Life*, Banner found himself drawn to anthropology out of the realization that most of what we call moral theology and philosophy, as well as how we practice medicine and politics in modern liberal societies, is painfully and systematically dismissive of the serious moral work going on in all sorts of everyday domains, such as childbearing, transplant medicine, and surrogacy. His suggestion is not, please note, a proposal that we take the descriptions of anthropologists to be capable of establishing normative moral parameters. Even if there is “moral work” going on “out there” in everyday lives, and that we can learn important things by describing it by the means and methods of empirical research, the suggestion is not that most of us really have the “right ideas” and if we would just pay more attention we could get ourselves out of the moral perplexities that beset us. Nor is his suggestion that all moral work is equivalent. The crucial point is that Banner does assume something genuinely positive and therefore momentous: that substantive rejections and reformulations of contemporary moral norms and conventions are indeed already going on in discreet regions of human life that are out to be discovered if we pay the right kind of attention. Like MacIntyre, the basic assumption of his project is that morality is inextricably interwoven and handed on in speech which shapes imagination and practice, and therefore that it can be accessed through the medium of speech. The difference, as I see it, has to do with what we are to hope for as we attend to the confused and confusing moral languages used by ourselves and our peers.

I have raised these questions in my response because what I think confuses many about Banner’s project is that it does not look much like the positivist influenced university anthropology that is most familiar to us—at least as practiced over the last few decades in English speaking universities. I now want to turn to suggest that the assumptions he (and MacIntyre) make about the ways our

language shapes our ethics was a core premise of a broad set of modern Marxist traditions that have funded most contemporary critical cultural studies. If Marx's most famous line (from his "Theses on Feuerbach") was "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it," one of the most influential responses has been that of a group of German Marxists who came to be called the Frankfurt School and who responded, "To reinterpret daily life is to change it."³ Between them lay a third option: that daily life was already being reinterpreted, and the point was to capitalize on these ongoing experiments in resistance.

It is this latter strategy that was most closely associated with the term "everyday life". One of its most influential proponents was the French Marxist Henri Lefebvre, who wrote a three volume analysis of modern consumer society bearing this name.⁴ Under the heading "critical analysis of everyday life" Lefebvre creatively reappropriated Marx's account of alienation for a post-consumerist society. Very much like MacIntyre's Marxist presumptions, Lefebvre saw that the problem of modern alienation is one that occurs in the thick of daily life and so it is only logical that if any resistance to modern alienation is going to happen this too has to take place in daily life. Both the alienation and the resistance, he held, could best be brought to visibility if we attend to material practices as well as the morally evaluative valences of language.

This procedure only works if we have some faith that a different world is not only possible, but is afoot. Thus, unlike the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, and also unlike the later McIntyre, Lefebvre's account is not fundamentally a decay narrative, but is an attempt to provoke a sympathetic hunt for that which is not alienated, the smaller ways in which resistance to the status quo is already being hammered out. If we approach daily life as a hopeful search for alternatives to the regnant order, one scholar points out, this is to situate the task of the critic as setting free "the latent wealth, to

³ Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School* (London: Verso, 2016), Ch. 3.

⁴ The three volumes were *Critique de la vie quotidienne I: Introduction* (Paris: Grasset, 1947), *Critique de la vie quotidienne II: Fondements d'une sociologie de la quotidienneté* (Paris: L'Arche Editeur, 1961); and *Critique de la vie quotidienne III: De la modernité au modernisme (pour une métaphilosophie du quotidien)* (Paris: L'Arche Editeur, 1981)

bring out the implicit, unexplored content of daily life, valorising it.”⁵ Because such investigations are pursued amongst people rendered fragile by alienation they must not only be oriented by appropriate questions, but also a sensitive investigative stance: “Studying daily life (its details) at a given moment bypasses the concept, simulates apprehension of the concrete, goes no further than what is immediate [and so]... must proceed with caution, restraint, respect. It must respect lived experience, rather than belabouring it as the domain of ignorance and error, rather than absorbing it into positive knowledge as vanquished ignorance.”⁶ This is why, I would suggest, Lefebvre sounds at pivotal points more like Banner the theologian than most academic anthropologists:

Everyday discourse...has a stable content...which is bound up not (as the classical thesis has it) with an unchanging human nature, but with the fact that social relations have for a long time, if not always, been relations of force, authority and power, dependency, inequality in power and wealth. Such relations are tolerable only when they are masked. Daily life and its ambiguity, simultaneously effect and cause, conceal these relations between parents and children, men and women, bosses and workers, governors and governed. For its part critical knowledge removes the screens and unveils the meaning of metaphors. It demonstrates that what makes the functioning of society possible is neither self-interest on its own, nor violence, nor the imaginary, but the ethics inherent in discourse. At the heart of daily life and its speech we find ethical values, which are supports of social life in that they make it tolerable.⁷

In other words, and using biblical terminology he occasionally deploys, in seeking out these pockets of resistance to the denuding patterns of our world, Banner is “plundering the [wealth of the] Egyptians”. Taking his orientation from a theological narrative, he is looking for counter-practices that are significantly richer and more humane than those which characterize many domains of

⁵ Michael Trebitch, “Presentation: Twenty Years After,” preface to Henri Lefebvre, *The Critique of Everyday Life, Volume III: From Modernity to Modernism (Towards a Metaphilosophy of Daily Life)*, Gregory Elliot trans. (London: Verso, 2005), 15.

⁶ Trebitch “Presentation,” 16-17.

⁷ Lefebvre, *The Critique of Everyday Life, Volume III*, 65.

modern western culture that he understands to threaten genuinely flourishing human life.

Anthropologists can help Christians and others imagine ways of thinking and enacting forms of life that the moral common sense of modernity apparently rules out of court—but only a certain kind of anthropology, and only as attended to by a certain kind of theology.

My proposed reading of Banner's work assumes that his basic constructive move is a rather subtle one: he is asking his readers to think more systematically about what was going on as Christians through the ages have imagined what Christ's life and death might mean for their own—so that we can pursue a similarly liberative trajectory. This first move is teamed with a second, the suggestion that we take seriously *all* the media in which Christians have attempted to imagine Jesus' reshaping of their everyday lives. It was not only the theologians down through the ages who imagined what Christ's life meant for their own, but also Christian artists, musicians, politicians and laypeople. The traces of these imaginative grapplings with Jesus' counter-colonization of everyday sensibilities are visible in all sorts of texts and artifacts from material culture.⁸ In Banner's view the politically and ethically engaged contemporary writer of Christian ethics has a core duty that must not be shirked: to provoke us as readers to attend to Jesus' life in order to open up courses of action we are told are impossible by the authorities and cultural forces in which we are immersed.

That Banner's project is fundamentally theological is also indicated by the central role played by his reflections on Augustine's life and work, which I would suggest serve as the theological backbone of the book. Without explicitly stating his orienting dependence on Augustine, Banner clearly takes Augustine's life as an exemplification of a life progressively opened up by continual imaginative consideration of the life of Jesus Christ. Banner ranges widely across the whole corpus of Augustine's letters, sermons and theological tracts. By displaying how Augustine's speech and writings were interventions in the conventional patterns of the day to day life in his times, Banner gives flesh to his claim that Christians today ought move beyond overly narrow views that the shaping of the Christian

⁸ In common with several other British theologians, in taking this approach Banner parallels contemporary work being done in Germany in a much more systematic manner. See Alex Stock's 8 volume *Poetische Dogmatik*.

imagination can be reduced to intellectual assent to a set of theological beliefs or a knowledge set handling a set of set academic doctrinal texts.

This is all done so deftly and succinctly that only the recurrence of these engagements at pivotal points signals the essential role they are playing in orienting the treatments of the various chapters.

We have here a political Augustinianism that is important today because of the depth of the Augustine being presented, the critical distance that is being maintained to the political and ideological lords of our age, and the exemplary fashion in which his example is being drawn upon not to talk *about*, but to speak *within* contested political and ethical debates.

Thus, despite Banner's rhetoric of a call to a new disciplinary alliance with cultural anthropology, it is clear that what he is proposing is not a simple valorization by the theologian of the status quo in the main streams of contemporary Anglophone academic anthropology. Its practitioners are constantly preoccupied with overcoming the positivist observer-observed dichotomy, which the most thoughtful observers attack in a range of ingenious ways. Yet even as they do so they do not relinquish the desire to bring phenomena "out there" in the world of human culture into focus on the written page. Here Banner diverges markedly from his conversation partner James Faubion, whose texts are highly determined by the desire responsibly to handle and overcome the tendency of anthropologists to objectify those whom they are attempting to describe. A cognate effort closer to Banner's approach is differently prosecuted in Tim Ingold's work, which nevertheless positions itself to produce texts that tell us what the world is like for "those people".⁹ Unlike these attempts by anthropologists to overcome the observer-object paradigm, Banner never "merges" his point of view with those whose lives he is describing, nor, it seems, is he particularly worried that professional anthropologists sometime objectify those they observe.

⁹ See James D. Faubion, *An Anthropology of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Tim Ingold, "Anthropology is *not* Ethnography," in *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011), 229-243.

As his book makes plain, and as reiterated in his paper, it was his engagement with the grief of the Alder Hey parents that provided the germ of this book. The unheard lament of those parents, I want to propose, remains the animating heart of *The Ethics of Everyday Life* and the vanishing point of all of its conceptual lines of sight. It is his relationship with the suffering parents of the deceased children of Alder Hey that, in the end, makes it clear precisely how Banner diverges from social anthropology as it is practiced in the academy today. Nowhere does his gaze turn to observe how their grief impacts him or reshapes his own identity (which it clearly has). He simply takes it as a lived protest against the dominant practices and rationality of our age, and so as a laboriously won work of resistance to the status quo that exposes the moral callousness sustaining it. He simply assumes that it self-evidently levies a moral claim on all who would dare to listen seriously to it.

On what grounds? How can something most people think absurd (grieving a stillbirth badly buried, for instance) be a *starting* point for engaging everyday life? Like MacIntyre, Banner is refusing to apologize for making theological and philosophical points by drawing on the work of the anthropologists who draw such human acts to our attention. That he does so in a discriminating way oriented by his theological comments and his engagement with the grief of those who suffer in our world sets him apart from MacIntyre's more bluntly acquisitive relationship with anthropology.

But again we have to ask: Where does he stand as he makes such moves? It seems particularly dangerous to bypass the important self-critical questions so eloquently raised by the best practitioners of anthropology. I can only hint, in conclusion, that I think that Banner might still be unfolding the theological metaphysics offered by Karl Barth. For Barth, there is no universal Enlightenment rationality on which we might stand as a stable platform allowing us to intervene in social relations from outside. There are only sets of relations in which we find ourselves—meaning that criticism inevitably happens not from outside of relations, but from one set of relations toward

another. Put differently, for Barth “Humans do not exist and also act. They exist in their acts.”¹⁰

Because for Barth there is no human action outside of relations with other humans and creatures, only as we are made members of another community, another communion with different imaginative horizons, are we given the perspective that allow the laments that go unheard in hermetically sealed social orders to become audible.

Banner, like Barth, thinks we cannot escape believing in something, and also that what we believe in fundamentally shapes our imaginative horizons. Living, in short, is permeated by faith: “‘I believe’ means, ‘I exist in believing’.”¹¹ I have suggested that this line of thinking situates him in the vicinity of the Marxist tradition with its concern with alienation, the assumption that the way things are is not the way they have to be. Those who think that the status quo is good enough can rightfully be called alienated in their refusal to contemner the thought that their lives could always be more thoughtfully lived. This suggests, in my view, that Banner’s deepest challenge is his having pressed a question about how what we believe, and who we take to be our “we”, situates our listening to and intervention in the lives of others. The anthropologist and theologian stand on the *same* ground precisely in the work of attempting to formulate their research question—a task that is inextricably shaped by what each one hopes for and believes in. If this is indeed where Banner the Christian and theologian stands as he listens to and responds to the world, it becomes clear why his prioritization of practical over theoretical knowledge—which for Barth amounts to a resistance to all metaphysics

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Ethics*, Dietrich Braun ed., Geoffrey W. Bromily trans. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 16, translation modified.

¹¹ Karl Barth, *The Holy Spirit in the Christian Life: The Theological Basis of Ethics*, R. Birch Hoyle trans., Robin W. Lovin Foreword (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press), 33. In a note Barth makes it clear that this is a reprinting of Luther, who he quotes as writing (in his commentary on Galatians), “‘Doing,’ in theology, is always understood as ‘doing in faith,’ so that ‘faithful doing is a different orbit, and as it were, a new realm compared with ‘moral doing’.” “‘Faith, in theology, should continually be the divinity of the works, and so diffused through the works as divinity is through the humanity in Christ...therefore it is faith that is the *factotum* in the works.” 56 n. 80.

that take up “the attitude of a spectator”¹²—is in the end an entailment of a fundamentally Christological account of reality.¹³

¹² Barth, *Ethics*, 17.

¹³ Robert W. Jenson, “What if it was true?” in *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation*, Stephen John Wright ed. (Eugene: Cascade, 2014), 23-37.