Chapter 1

Introduction: The Anthropological Study of Morality in Melanesia¹

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The chapters in this book are concerned with the ways Melanesians experience and deal with moral dilemmas and with the ways anthropologists make sense of the particularities of others’ and their own moral choices. In a variety of ethnographic and theoretical locations, we focus upon public situations and types of persons that exemplify key ethical contradictions for members of moral communities. Such moments and figures serve to make visible central moral assumptions that are otherwise secreted in daily routines and commonsense notions of right and wrong. They do so by threatening the viability of key values, forcing people to make choices which confirm, adjust, or abandon established norms of good and bad conduct. Ethical dilemmas, as entailed in everyday conflicts within communities or enacted by figures like political leaders and religious evangelists, thus provide a strategic point of entry for the study of the key value orientations of a culture. They reveal such orientations, however, at their most vulnerable moments and thus are equally important for what they can tell us about the ways persons and communities react and adjust to changing social conditions. Our main concern here is with Melanesian experience, especially the interface between values associated with indigenous village life and the ethical orientations associated with “modernity.” However, we also recognize that anthropologists, missionaries, and other interlocutors engaged with Melanesian peoples also experience characteristic dilemmas that evoke and endanger deeply assumed values. This volume thus ultimately seeks to go beyond Melanesia by drawing attention to the ethical lenses through which outsiders as much as Melanesians come to understand the moral choices that experience throws up before them.

These are not new concerns. Several of the giant figures who laid the foundations of anthropology—Lewis Henry Morgan and Emile Durkheim, for instance—placed the moral at the center of the quest to understand the nature of society. Further, ethnographers have long documented the highly moralistic content of Melanesians’

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discourses and actions in response to everyday conflicts, the challenges thrown up by colonial and post-colonial intrusions and displacements, and aspirations for a better life. All the same, morality has only periodically emerged as a focal concern in anthropological writings. Instead, the tendency has been to subordinate moral issues and experiences to discussions of social control, law, politics, social change or, most broadly, power. Without downplaying social and political contexts, our aim in this book is to elevate morality as a focal concern in the hope of spurring further discussion and opening new lines of research.

Kenelm Burridge is an exception to the above generalization. His scholarly contributions, spanning more than a half century, remains uniquely important for understanding the play of morality in human culture and history. Burridge’s pioneering work on “the moralities” in Melanesia and beyond provides the inspiration and starting point for the essays in this volume. Specifically, we work from four “Burridgean” themes. First, rather than detailing codes of conduct or ethical rules, we focus upon dilemmas, conflicts, and confrontations as situations in which moral assumptions are tested, affirmed or changed. Moral conventions, from this point of view, are provisional: subject to modification or abandonment in the face of experience. Second, we pay special attention to types of persons who exemplify neither pure virtue nor evil but rather the moral compromises and contradictions that inform social lives. Third, a subset of the essays builds upon Burridge’s writings on millenarian movements to plumb the moral dynamics of Melanesian struggles with modernity, a struggle that has at its core the still unresolved conflict between an ethics founded in reciprocal obligation and one founded upon individualism as mediated by money, consumerism, and Christianity. Finally, a number of the contributors, again following Burridge’s lead, examine the figure of the Christian missionary as a key exemplar for Melanesians of the moral perils and promises of the present.

Burridge’s seminal contributions provide the essays in this volume with a common touchstone. Still, our purpose is not to pay homage but to bring new insights to a core dimension of Melanesian experience and, more generally, to the anthropological study of morality. All of the authors in this volume are well-established scholars whose contributions draw upon a deep well of fieldwork in specific communities and knowledge of wider regional and theoretical literatures. Most take issue with key aspects of Burridge’s thought, not least Robert Tonkinson and F. G. Bailey, who provide lively critiques of Burridge’s writings on missionaries, anthropologists, and morality in general. On the whole, the essays engage broadly in current discussions of how we best understand indigenous cultural systems, the historic impacts of colonial and post-colonial agencies, and the moral and political agency of Melanesians themselves.

The remainder of this Introduction is divided into two parts that can be read independently. I begin with an overview of past and current research on morality in Melanesia, particularly in Papua New Guinea and with a focus upon the place of Burridge’s writings.2 Those who wish to get to the essays immediately can safely

2 While all of the chapters grapple with issues of morality, those by Lohmann, Lutkehaus and Tonkinson more specifically address Burridge’s seminal work on Christian missionaries and, to a lesser extent, his related treatise on individuality (Burridge 1979).
Anthropological Approaches to Melanesian Morality

The student of morality in Melanesian societies encounters an interesting conundrum: too much and too little information. On the one hand, she or he faces a daunting mountain of relevant data and analysis. Just about any ethnographic study includes information on morality. Indeed, many provide richly textured descriptions of moral precepts, ethical decision-making, and stereotypes. One encounters as well careful explorations of vernacular terms for key moral values that systematically unveil shades of meaning through the exploration of cognate terms, narratives, and contexts in which they are spoken or evoked. The student of morality also faces a wealth of approaches from the varied perspectives of social psychology, cultural symbolism, the logistics of economic systems, and the historical encounter with white people and colonialism, to list a few. The same is true of ethnographic work elsewhere. It is thus misleading to suggest, as some recently have, that anthropologists have neglected morality in ethnographic research, at least in an empirical sense.

Yet it is also the case that until recently few anthropologists writing about Melanesian societies made morality a conceptual center for social analysis. This quickly becomes apparent by examining such justly celebrated studies such as Nancy Munn’s *The Fame of Gawa* (1986) or Edward Schieffelin’s *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers* (1976). Few if any ethnographies more vividly convey key moral orientations in Melanesian societies. Yet, the terms “moral” and “ethics” rarely appear in their texts and not at all in the indexes. Perhaps because of the challenges of digging out information on morality from most ethnographies, comparative studies are notable by their near complete absence. In my research for this essay, I came up with only two synthetic accounts: Gary Tromp’s (1994) massive compilation of information on “payback” across Melanesia and L. L. Langness’ (1973) forty-year-old survey of indigenous ethical systems in Papua New Guinea. As in the case of ethnographies, a great deal of comparative analysis does exist relevant to an understanding of morality in the region, but it tends to be embedded in discussions of topics such as social organization, religion, sexuality, and exchange. A number of critics have noted similar patterns in anthropological studies in other regions. James Laidlaw (2002, 312) concludes that “the category of the moral has...almost invariably collapsed in the hands of anthropologists into whatever other terms we have been enthusiastically using to explain collectively sanctioned rules, beliefs, and opinion.”

The most obvious objection against treating morality as a distinct category of analysis is that what we call morality is hopelessly mixed up with other domains, such as kinship and politics. Yet to raise this objection is to refute it, for the opposite is also true; yet only the most relativist of anthropologists object to kinship or political...
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studies. The reluctance to focus on morality, I suspect, derives from a sensitivity to the uncomfortable moral ambiguities of cultural relativism. Anthropologists generally reject the accusation of critics that they are moral relativists: yet those who insist that humans are, at their core, moral beings open themselves up to suspicions that they projecting their own moral assumptions onto others. Burridge’s sympathetic treatment of Christian missionaries raises such concerns, as Robert Tonkinson shows in Chapter Ten. In his concluding chapter, F. G. Bailey goes further by suggesting an elevation of the moral in the study of the human condition too easily merges with an authoritarianism. Ironically in the face of such concerns, anthropologists display far less reticence in discussing the ethical pitfalls of their own endeavor, perhaps most vividly displayed in the rows over professional conduct that have periodically rocked the American Anthropological Association since the time of the Vietnam War (Gregor and Gross 2004; Robin 2004). Indeed, the deep and abiding concern with the ethics of anthropology stands in sharp contrast to the aversion to thinking about the ethics of anthropological subjects.

It was not always so. E. B. Tylor wrote a section on morality for the third edition of the venerable handbook for anthropological research, Notes and Queries on Anthropology (Garson and Read 1899). Pioneer ethnographers like Diamond Jenness (Jenness and Ballantyne 1920), Bronislaw Malinowski (1929), and F. E. Williams (1930) catalogued moral rules in the societies they studied. A number of later anthropologists such as Meyers Fortes and Kenelm Burridge directly explored the moral dimensions of social and religious life; but most anthropologists tended to deal with morality indirectly, as an aspect of religion, kinship, or social structure. The situation is now changing. A new focus upon morality as an important dimension of social life is clearly emerging, both in the Melanesian literature (e.g., Bashkow 2006; Brison 1992; Kuchling 2005; Robbins 2004; Smith 1994) and in the form of theoretical critiques and programmatic statements (e.g., Cook 1999; Howell 1997; Karlström 2004; Laidlaw 2002; Lambek 2000), reopening old questions and offering new directions of inquiry.

Summarizing what anthropologists have actually written about morality in Melanesian societies is, alas, beyond my abilities for the reasons suggested above: there is too much detail, too many approaches, and too few overviews. In addition, I am keenly aware that the concept of morality can be defined in a wide variety of ways and that these inevitably color one’s own perceptions (the same, of course, is true of “politics” or “kinship”). My review focuses on approaches and contributions that appear the most directly relevant to understanding Burridge’s framework and, by extension, the analyses developed by the authors of this volume: that is to say, studies that focus on the social dimensions of morality. I thus neglect a variety of other powerful approaches to the subject, notably the work of psychologists and ethno-psychologists (e.g., Epstein 1991; Tietjen and Walker 1985; White 1985); studies focused on semantic and symbolic dimensions of the person, the body, gender, landscapes, and so forth (e.g., Leach 2003; Lepowsky 1993; Strathern 1988); and those dealing with the moral dimensions of economic systems (e.g., Akin and Robbins 1999; Gregory 1982). As for a definition, my preference is to choose an admittedly broad one: morality as that domain of action pertaining to “collectively sanctioned rules, beliefs, and opinions” (Laidlaw 2002, 312).
Thus constrained, anthropological writings on morality in Melanesian societies can be divided into two general categories: those focused upon indigenous societies and those concerned with the entanglements between Melanesians and the colonial and postcolonial world.

**Indigenous Moral Systems**

Langness’s (1973) ethnological survey of ethical systems across Papua New Guinea reveals a great deal of variation in regards to specific rules and expectations, especially regarding sexual activities and spiritual sanctions. Underneath the details, however, lie broad regional patterns. Roughly speaking, anthropologists have approached these patterns from three perspectives: practical ethics dictated by social position, moral rules upholding the social order, and ethical choices thrown up by the typical dilemmas of social life.

I begin with practical ethics. Melanesians have often been characterized as “pragmatic.” As Joel Robbins points out in Chapter Two, this has been especially the case in studies of traditional big men, who often as not are described as “master politicians” motivated primarily by the desire to maximize their own authority and prestige. Similarly, many analysts have portrayed local societies as generated out of the actions of individuals who work, interact, and compete not only to survive but to assure the greatest benefits, tangible and intangible, to themselves and their dependents. Hence, many observers have assumed that Melanesian reactions to capitalism, Christianity or the imposition of colonial control have been governed mainly by rational self-interest and a desire for material gain.

While such appraisals of Melanesian as pragmatists tend to sideline considerations of morality, this need not be so. Reo Fortune’s early studies of sorcery on Dobu and the Sir Ghost religion of Manus provided textured accounts of two very distinctive systems of practical ethics based respectively on individual resort to malicious magic and the social bounds of households (Fortune 1932; 1936). Fortune’s writings, vivid as they are, contain little explicit theoretical commentary. K. E. Read was the first Melanesianist to directly address morality as a theoretical issue, in a justly influential essay on the Gahuku-Gama of the Eastern Highlands. Read’s careful analysis is built upon a contrast between the dominant Western and Gahuku-Gama conceptions of the moral person. Westerners tend to view the person as a “unique centre of rationality and free-will” who is subject to a set of moral principles that transcend particular social relationships (Read 1955, 247). The Gakuku-Gama, in contrast, experience themselves as embedded within social relationships; morality is thus dependent “on the position [a person occupies] within a system of inter-personal and inter-group relationships” (1955, 260). In sum, “morality is primarily contextual. The moral judgment does not operate from the fixed perspective of universal obligation for the moral assessment of behavior varies in different social contexts, according, that is, to the different values placed on different individuals in different contexts” (1955, 262). Lacking over-arching moral rules, Gahuku-Gama moral reasoning focuses upon practical consequences of actions: accountable only to each other, individuals experience shame for amoral actions, but not sin (1955, 271).
In a fascinating discussion that anticipates by decades current research on the cultural construction of the person (e.g., Stephen 1995; Strathern 1988), Read explores the correspondence between local conceptions of the physical and psychic body and ethics. His article has been most influential, however, as a demonstration of the effects of social distance on the intensity of moral obligation and the importance of relationships in defining ethical standards. Read’s sophisticated study is important in showing that Melanesian “pragmatism” is not simply a matter of “tribalism,” of an opposition between an in-group that is unquestionably supported and an out-group perceived as beyond the moral pale. Nor can it be equated to Western utilitarianism or to a universal practical reason (an observation also made by Doug Dalton in Chapter Three). While the Gahuku-Gama evaluate behavior in terms of its consequences, their pragmatism is given shape in specific cultural conceptions of the person and vary according to the relationship in play. Read’s analysis, then, opens a rich vein of possibilities for the sustained investigation of moral character in a context defined by shifting social relationships rather than set ethical rules.

Anthropologists have more commonly conceptualized morality as a system of rules regulating social behavior, the second of the three orientations. In one of the earliest anthropological discussions of Melanesian morality, F. E. Williams noted that the unrestrained hostility that Orokaiva displayed towards outsiders formed the outward manifestation of “an intense pride in the group itself” (1930, 313). Behavior within that small circle of kin, affines and allies—later dubbed the “security circle” by Peter Lawrence (1971)—was intensely regulated, mostly by informal but highly effective moral sanctions conveyed in gossip or the threat of sorcery but also by a positive loyalty that Williams attributed to a somewhat mystical “group sentiment” (Williams 1941). From a functionalist perspective, moral dogmas were understood primarily as a type of social mechanism imposing social control by the group over individuals, a set of “quasi-legal sanctions” that both defined and regulated socially-approved behavior (Langness 1973, 195; Lawrence 1984; Malinowski 1926; Young 1971).

The orthodox Durkheimian model which posed “the sacred as the ultimate repository of sociality and moral sentiment” (Jorgensen 1994, 10) likely precluded an expanded place for morality in functionalist studies of Melanesian society. For it seemed to many that, with the exception of a few groups like the Huli or Manus islanders, in Melanesia “there is no relationship between moral rules and supernatural sanctions” (Langness 1973, 189). In the absence of a higher spiritual authority, Melanesian moral codes appeared as a mix of the practical—rules that assure the peace and cooperation necessary for a community’s survival—and the arbitrary, a matter of custom. Yet while it is true that the indigenous religions of Melanesians generally lacked deities that enforced moral rules, it is far from evident that the connection between morality and religion was “entirely absent,” as has recently been claimed by Jared Diamond (2003; cf. Barker 2004b). Many Melanesians attributed spiritual attacks by sorcerers, spirits, and ghosts to breeches of moral codes. In turn, many people interpreted the health of their bodies or success in subsistence activities as indices of the moral condition of their communities (Frankel 1986). Landscapes, rituals or decorated bodies were also read as as embodiments of the moral health of a community (O’Hanlon 1989).
Perhaps no dimension of indigenous Melanesian life varied as much as religious beliefs and practices. Still, one wonders whether the tendency to downplay or dismiss the religious aspects of Melanesian moral sensibilities derives not so much from the ethnography as from an overly restrictive conception of religion. Consider Raymond C. Kelly’s (1993) monumental study of the inequality among the Etoro and their neighbors. Kelly’s analysis is complex, providing nuanced assessments of Etoro attitudes and practices concerning conception, gender, witchcraft, politics and marriage. He concludes that the moral order ultimately rests with the “cosmological system [that] provides the foundation for a scheme of social differentiation in which moral evaluation is intrinsically embedded. Social inequality is thus fabricated as a moral hierarchy or hierarchy of virtue” (Kelly 1993, 13). Kelly’s book beautifully illustrates the potential of an expanded Durkheimian approach, one that pursues collective representations across the entire spectrum of a people’s cosmology.

We come now to the third perspective which focuses upon the dynamics of moral choice. A number of anthropologists advocating a renewal of attention to morality have called for a deployment of “the Aristotelian conception of moral praxis to counterbalance Durkheimian collectivism with a focus on conscious moral agency” (Karlstrom 2004, 609; e.g., Laidlaw 2002; Lambe 2000; Robbins 2004). Social experience continually yields up situations that force individuals to make ethical decisions. They may arise in reaction to individuals who break the rules, to changed circumstances that bring moral certainties into doubts, to contingencies that compel choices between moral alternatives. From this perspective, moral orders are always tentative, based upon a shifting consensus that members return to and revise in the face of experience. It is this perspective that mainly informs the studies in this volume.

Reo Fortune’s (1936) superb ethnography of the Sir Ghost religion of Peri village on Manus Island provides the earliest fully realized study of the moral dynamics of a Melanesian society. More than two thirds of the monograph is taken up by a “Diary of Religious Events” detailing some 43 case studies of moral breaches and conflicts. The Manus, the reader learns, are profoundly concerned with morality, not least because it is near impossible to live up to its requirements in the face of competing interests and the inconstant attention of one’s spiritual patron. The same insight informs much of Kenelm Burridge’s ethnographic work on the Tangu of Madang Province in the early 1950s. Like Fortune (and very much like his contemporaries in the Manchester school of anthropology), Burridge focused much of his attention upon social conflicts. Burridge’s approach, however, was far more schematic, making it easier to generalize from his ethnographic findings. Indeed, Burridge makes clear in his most read book, Mambu (1960) as well as later work, that he regards the Tangu as a template for the general moral predicament of Melanesian societies.

As Bruce Knauff shows in Chapter Four, the Tangu are one of several Melanesian cultures (including the Gebusi) who place an extraordinarily high value upon reciprocal equivalence. The Tangu speak of an idealized (if unpronounceable!) state of mngwotngwotiki: a perfect balance between reciprocating partners who thus transcend the obligations of ordinary life. This is an “Utopian” position of social amity—that is to say, a realizable ideal that “designates a place of happiness
and order” (Karlström 2004, 596). The problem for Tangu is that reciprocity in general, and equivalence in particular, form a flimsy basis for securing the social world. The social order is constantly challenged by contingencies and self-interested actions—the failure of a garden, the refusal of a sibling to share food, a big man’s efforts at self-promotion—and by the sheer impossibility of maintaining balanced reciprocity with more than a few people at a time. Beyond this, the moral world as imagined and experienced, is subject to transformative interventions by forces that impinge upon its boundaries: non-reciprocal entities like ghosts, sorcerers, mythical figures, dreams, and Europeans. Tangu place these in the category of *imbatekas*—“uncontrollable, odd, unobligeū, queer, singular, anomalous, evil, wicked, bad”—the key characteristics, Burridge argues, of the Melanesian conception of the “divine” (Burridge 1969b, 134). The moral order is thus inherently provisional (Jørgensen 1994, 13). Tangu face a double predicament: the near impossibility of achieving social amity within the moral community and the inherently tentative nature of that same order in the face of divine interventions and revelations.

The Tangu represent an extreme instance of a more general pattern across Melanesia. The point is not merely that reciprocity forms the pivot of Melanesian epistemologies (Trompf 1994), but that the contradictions and limitations of reciprocal moral orders generate characteristic social dilemmas that ramify widely within witchcraft and sorcery beliefs (Knauf 1985; Schieffelin 1976), mythologies (Burridge 1969a; LeRoy 1985; Schwimmer 1973), and warfare and peacemaking (Harrison 1993; Meggitt 1977; Strathern 1971).

In his approach to understanding the dynamics of Tangu morality, Burridge emphasizes subjectivity: the developing awareness of moral actors rather than pragmatic schemes or abstracted ethical rules. This leads him to focus upon types of persons—big men, sorcerers, ordinary men and rubbish men—who are important not so much for what they accomplish as for what they exemplify for those who observe and interact with them. And what they exemplify, as Robbins and Dalton show in their contributions to this volume, is not so much ideals as the characteristic perils, contradictions, potentialities, and follies of social life. Big men and sorcerers are of special fascination for community members and anthropologists alike, as they operate on the edges of the moral community, taking on aspects of the divine themselves as they both reinforce and transcend moral limits. Nowhere has this perspective been more powerfully evoked than in Michele Stephen’s (1995) empathic study of Mekeo chiefs and sorcerers, the inherently fascinating, inspirational, frightening, and ultimately tragic “men of kindness” and “men of sorrow.” Such figures, real and imagined, act as moral exemplars, instructing both members of the community and the anthropologists peering over their shoulders as to the limits of the moral order.

*Morality in Contemporary Melanesia*

The three perspectives on indigenous morality in Melanesian societies are by no means mutually exclusive, yet they lead in different directions. This becomes apparent when they are applied to understanding the Melanesian confrontation with

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3 The term was originally coined by Thomas More in the Foreword to *Utopia*. 
modernity in its various guises. From the perspective of practical ethics, Melanesians appear malleable, ready to adjust their value orientations to take as much advantage as they can of the opportunities that have come their way following colonization. Indeed, to many observers during the heady period of business expansion in the late colonial period, it seemed that indigenous culture had pre-adapted many Melanesians (particularly Highlands big men) to the aggressively individualistic ethos of capitalism (Finney 1973). For those who take the second position—viewing morality as a system of rules upholding local social systems—compromise between indigenous and Western systems appear far more difficult, if not impossible. Their studies thus tend to divide between those emphasizing the persistence of old values in modern settings (e.g., Kahn 1986; Leach 2003; Lawrence 1964) and, alternatively, those documenting the collapse of indigenous orders followed either by the wholesale adoption of Western values or a descent into chaos (e.g., Mead 1966; Tuzin 1997).

The third perspective—the one we pursue in this volume—shifts the focus of attention from particular values and systems to the existential problem of moral integrity. It is still possible to discern broad differences in orientation between indigenous and Western values, but the focus upon subjectivity works to destabilize the assumption of moral coherence we find in the other two frameworks. Moral integrity founded on equivalence among Tangu, Burridge insists, is not a given but an obligatory ideal impossible to achieve. While self-willed action is circumscribed and subject to moral denunciation, it is all the same necessary for survival. Big men are intensely scrutinized precisely because they fines the contradictions between collective morality and individualism. The implication, according to Dan Jorgensen (1994, 133), is that in Melanesia “the conventions of human order are always provisional,” subject to modification by self-willed actions of individuals and the ultimately unknowable transcendent (amoral) interventions of the “divine.” The upshot is that Melanesian societies have a radically “improvisatory nature” (Jorgensen 1994, 135; cf. Wagner 1972, 1981). The perspective thus “gives us a means of understanding how a supposedly traditional people can generate radical transformations in thoroughly traditional ways” (Jorgensen 1994, 133).

The paradox identified by Jorgensen lies at the heart of Burridge’s (1960; 1969b) seminal work on cargo cults. During the colonial period, Europeans—particularly patrol officers and missionaries—entered the Melanesian pantheon of moral exemplars, scrutinized like big men, sorcerers, and rubbish men. As Dalton notes in Chapter Three, Europeans acted much like sorcerers: powerful, autonomous, and unencumbered by any sense of obligation to share their great wealth with villagers. At the same time, their imposition of authority and refusal to engage in reciprocity brought intense shame in its suggestion that Melanesians were both unequal and unworthy, merely rubbish. The arrival of European colonial agents, in sum, posed a radical challenge in its suggestion that the reciprocities that grounded communities might no longer apply, a prospect that was at once threatening and liberating. Already primed to the embrace of change in the face of newly revealed truths, Melanesians responded to the challenge with a remarkable creativity. Some generated new mythologies out of older narratives and snatches of the Bible, attempting to discern the deeper truths of their unsettled times; many embraced the new churches and took up the challenge of rebuilding their moral communities around cooperative
economic enterprises; and still others followed the siren call of cargo prophets who embodied in their teachings and actions the promise of a new moral integrity, a new heaven and new earth.

Although focused upon events that occurred more than a half century ago, Burridge’s diagnosis of the key moral dilemmas engendered by colonialism has turned out to be remarkably prescient of the current situation. Writing in 2006, Ira Bashkow observes:

People throughout Melanesia display a similar ambivalence toward individual autonomy, which, while necessary for personal influence and success, is inherently undermining of the ideal of egalitarian unity and the social harmony necessary for collective wealth and well-being; and they share a dependence on land as a symbolic anchor for people’s identity, as well as the only truly reliable source of wealth and security. All Papua New Guineans comfortably contrast themselves with whitesmen from the viewpoint of such premises (Bashkow 2006, 220-21).

Bashkow’s generalization is well documented in the ethnographic literature on local communities in Papua New Guinea, including the case studies in this volume. Further, the literature suggests that many communities feel the contradictions between the ideal of egalitarian unity and individual autonomy extremely intensely. They anticipate momentous change: the breakdown of the old sociality leading either to chaos or its total replacement with something new. This exists mainly as a kind of low-level buzz much of the time—a condition Joel Robbins describes as “everyday millenarianism” (2001a; cf. Bashkow 2000; Burridge 1960, 1-13)—periodically breaking out into open into full-scale millenarian movements, although these days more likely to be expressed in terms of Christian apocalyptic themes than classic cargoism (Kocher-Schmid 1999; Stewart and Strathern 2000).

That Melanesians continue to grapple with the tensions between, broadly speaking, communitarian values founded on reciprocal exchange and individualism can be partly explained, as Bashkow suggests, by the strong attachment people have for their ancestral lands. An estimated 80 percent of Papua New Guineans live in rural areas, almost entirely on ancestral lands, and most of the urban-based populations also maintain strong sentimental and practical connections to their communities of origin. The increasing exposure and dependence upon money and commodities, the ever expanding presence of major research extraction projects, participation in Western-based educational and political systems, and encounters with global consumer images and fundamentalist Christianity—these and other facets of modernity accentuate the moral contradiction by posing a direct challenge to the types of sociality based upon communal ownership of land. Without downplaying such factors, however, the pervasiveness of the moral contradiction Melanesians feel between communal and individual values suggests we are also dealing with a deep-set cultural pattern. By this, I don’t mean to suggest that Melanesians are locked into a “traditional” epistemology, at least as long as they mostly depend upon subsistence gardening on communally-owned lands (Lawrence 1964, 273). Rather, the point is that Melanesians experience the contradiction of values as a “point of concern”: something worth arguing over in large part because it is experienced as commonsensical and fundamental (Laitin 1986, 175). As Burridge’s analysis suggests,
this focal concern pre-dates the arrival of Europeans and, from the beginning of the colonial era, has both driven and shaped the ways Melanesians have confronted the challenges of the colonial and postcolonial world.

Neoliberal advocates for "progress," including much of the tiny business and political elite in independent Melanesian states, tend to view the strong ties most Melanesians feel towards the land and their insistence on compensation for its use as signs of backwardness, or an inability to make the transition from a traditional to modern society (Gewertz and Errington 1999; Smith 2002). Ethnographic analysis suggests a very different picture. Considered as a morally-charged point of concern, the tension between communal and individual values has been remarkably productive, ramifying into a wide variety of accommodations and, often, radical changes. Significant as they often are, the changes do not obviate the underlying point of concern, giving the outcomes a distinctly Melanesian cast.

The dilemma of reconciling moral equivalence with individual willfulness is most apparent—or, perhaps more accurately, mostly studied—at the level of local communities. Yet Melanesians, like most other people, live out their lives in reference to several social and ideological contexts. The primary dilemma of Melanesian morality assumes different forms and propels different outcomes depending upon the type and scale of the context in which it occurs. Roughly, one can distinguish four such contexts: local communities, wantok networks,4 modernist institutions, and "imagined communities" (the nation, Christendom, indigenous peoples, and so forth).

Ethnographic monographs produced over the past twenty years or so provide the most vivid examples of "radical transformations generated in thoroughly traditional ways" in local contexts. The market economy, state institutions like schools and medical services, and churches have expanded into even the most remote parts of the region, although the nature and degree of local exposure has been quite uneven. A tiny number of traditionalists have erected barriers around their communities, most famously the mountain Kwaio of Malaita (Keesing 1992). The vast majority, however, have either succumbed to or eagerly embraced such economic opportunities and new identities as have come their way. The historical depth and density of connections to state and global networks and institutions play a large role in conditioning adjustments in the local communities. At the same time, case studies reveal that even in the communities most tightly integrated into the cash economy or urbanized environments, indigenous customs, social institutions, and values remain vital to people's lives (Goddard 2005; Tateyama 2006). Forms of kinship grouping or exchange obligations, for instance, may radically change but persist in recognizable forms (Carrier and Carrier 1989). As Bruce Knauf and many others have argued, the persistence of indigenous elements should not be understood in a simple sense as resistance to modernity but rather as subaltern patterns of being "locally modern" (Knauf 2002a; cf. Englund and Leach 2000).

Anthropologists have a proclivity to view the persistence of indigenous patterns as evidence of cultural continuity. This has long been challenged by neo-Marxist and

4 Neo-Melanesian for "one talk," those who share a common language and tribal identity.
world systems theorists, who observe correctly that capitalism is quite compatible with a wide variety of local social arrangements. More recently, it has been challenged by ethnographers who have pointed to the centrality of rupture in the ways that many Melanesians describe their relationship with their pre-modern past (Robbins 2007). Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of change in many places has been the often violent rejection of formerly central cults and associated material culture and exchanges, usually condemned as "of Satan" (Jebens 2005; Tuzin 1997). What is not in dispute is that Melanesians experience the social challenges they face not as a simple choice between two types of society or economies, but as moral conflict, a matter of what it means to be a good person. The tension between the reciprocal values that make life secure in still largely subsistence-based communities and the enlarging sphere of individual choice resists resolution and is often experienced as an ongoing state of moral crisis or turmoil (Brison 1992; Robbins 2004). Interestingly, as Knauft suggests in Chapter Four, a common sense of crisis appears to be generating different patterns of response. Coastal areas that have had the earliest exposure to colonial rule and are most deeply integrated into national and international networks tend to be more tolerant of moral ambiguity. Many, like the Maisin (Chapter Five), assume pluralistic identities as villagers, citizens, and Christians (e.g., White 1991). Groups that are less well-integrated are more likely to adopt radical solutions, usually strongly colored by Christian fundamentalism, as a means of overcoming their intense shame and of achieving their desires (e.g., Kulick 1992).5

A majority of Melanesians today have spent a least part of their lives living outside their ancestral communities and a rapidly growing minority now resides permanently in the towns. Most maintain contacts with kin and tribesmen back home and in their new locations. Such wantok networks form a second level of social inclusion with its own distinctive moral dynamics. While moral equivalence is a central theme at all four levels, here it assumes its most insistent expression. For many rural families, the export of labor provides a key and often the only means of securing cash and commodities. The moral dogma of reciprocal obligation is the chief mechanism by which rural folk pressure those kin fortunate enough to secure jobs to remit a large part of their earnings back home (Carrier and Carrier 1989). For their part, migrants rely on the same moral logic to get assistance from employed kin in finding work, to compel assistance in illegal activities especially from unemployed wantoks, and to insure a welcome back home if and when they return. The stakes and associated pressures are immense. Even the most conscientious migrants usually fail to meet the high expectations of their relatives and, of course, many succumb to the various opportunities and temptations of life outside of the villages. As Jorgensen's evocative portrait of a returning mine worker in Chapter Seven shows, individuals caught in the moral contradictions of the wantok system often pay a high psychological price.

5 The distinction I'm making is most poignantly illustrated in Errington and Gewertz's description of an educational visit by a Mari delegation, on whose lands sits the giant Ramu Sugar project, to the Tolai. Greatly depreciating their own cultural traditions, the Mari were amazed by the evident wealth of the Tolai and their pride in their own ancestral customs (Errington and Gewertz 2004).
The two higher levels of social inclusion have received far less scholarly attention, especially from anthropologists. Yet they have clearly have become very important in postcolonial times as state institutions, global church networks, commodities and migration to urban areas have increased their hold over the population. By “modernist institutions”—my third level—I mean those organizations funded from within the cash economy, that arrange their operations according to rationalized codes and rules that set out individual duties and expectations and that bring together, as employees and recipients, people without regard to their indigenous cultural affiliations. Such organizations include schools, medical facilities, banks, and private businesses. As Errington and Gewertz show in their compelling analysis of the clashes and settlements sought by various parties associated with the massive Ramu sugar project (Chapter Six), such institutions seem to invite the most acute conflicts. While much more research is required, their study along with what can be picked up from newspaper reports and anecdotal evidence suggests that the clashes pivot on two points of tension. The first and most severe is between moral claims based upon indigenous dogmas of equivalence and the instrumental orientations (providing educational services, making a profit and so forth) that guide the institutions. Such claims can be made by any person engaged with the institution, but the most typical and difficult clashes concern compensation demands by local peoples to reciprocate for land and other resources used by the institution in question. The second point of tension lies in contrary moral expectations, based in large part on different customary practices, of the various people brought together within modernist institutions. The notion of what constitutes an ethical breach as much as the appropriate response can vary considerably between different groups of Melanesians.

Those on the receiving end of claims are likely to view them as forms of extortion—and not without reason. Compensation claims quickly escalate to extravagant levels and are often accompanied by threats of violence (Filer 1998). For all of their political effects, however, they clearly draw from a deep well of strongly moralized assumptions contemporary Melanesians make concerning their affiliations with and obligations to their wantoks and ancestral lands. This brings us to the fourth level of social inclusion: the imagined nation and, beyond that, global communities based on shared identities as Christians, consumers, indigenous peoples or human beings sharing certain inalienable rights. From the perspective of such imagined communities, Melanesians find much that is morally troubling: the battles over compensation, the nepotism and corruption entailed in the wantok system, the rising levels of tribal warfare in the rural areas and gang violence in the towns, the spread of prostitution and along with it violence against women and the scourge of AIDS, among much else. Such issues generate a great deal of public talk—in the newspapers, in sermons, in radio shows, in political campaigns—talk that evokes the widest possible range of ethical choice. It is also at this level that one encounters the most explicit formulations of moral codes and causes, often in competition for the hearts and minds of the people. Thus Melanesians find themselves confronted not just with moral choices but choices between moralists ranging from Christian fundamentalists, who promote stringent personal behavioral codes based on denial, to the creators of consumer advertising who celebrate the joys of material hedonism (Foster 2002; Gibbs 2000). Increasingly, the elite is drawn into a globally
based politics of morality that insists upon a sharp distinction between indigenous and "Western" values but agrees on little else (Bennett and Shapiro 2002). Thus environmentalists celebrate the supposed communal values of "traditional" society even as human rights activists call for changes in supposedly traditional customs that deny political and economic security to women (Barker 2004a; Douglas 2003). Debates within Melanesian elites often focus on the presumed opposition between traditional and modern values (Narakobi 1980), whether the subject is the payment of bridewealth (Filer 1985), the causes of gang violence (Dinnen 2001), women's rights (Macintyre 1998), economic failure in the rural areas (Gewertz and Errington 1999), or the spreading HIV/AIDS pandemic (Hammar 1998). From this perspective, the claim to moral legitimacy based upon one's cultural heritage begins to appear as one item in a marketplace of alternative ethical codes.

The national and global moral ideologies circulating in modern Melanesia, however, appeal to much wider populations than the elites. People have quite diverse reasons and opportunities for engagement. For some, membership in a group with a strong exclusivist identity enforced by a restrictive moral code, like the Seventh-Day Adventists or the Mormons, provides at least a partial release from the moral obligations of the wantok system. Many are attracted to creeds like the Prosperity Gospel (Coleman 2000), accepting at least for a time its strictures on personal behavior in the hopes of material returns in the near future. The moral rhetoric employed by environmental and human rights activists has also been taken up by local peoples as they battle to extract support or to protect themselves from projects hatched by government agencies and corporations (West 2006; cf. Tsing 2005). Ironically, the conditions that encourage receptivity to moral identities based upon imagined national and global communities have contributed to the social and political fracturing of the region by giving voice to a diversity of moral dogmas, ideologies and agendas that exist in varying states of tension with each other.

The conditions of modernity that have fractured local communities and created new layers of real and imagined social orders also give rise to new types of morally exemplary persons. As noted earlier, the most pervasive is the figure of the "whiteman." The actual European presence in most parts of Melanesia has declined dramatically since the 1970s and it is doubtful that most Melanesians have had much direct interaction with the dwindling number who remain. Still, the "whiteman" has proven good to think with: a stereotype upon which to project ambivalent feelings about the hard moral choices of the present (Bashkow 2006; Smith 1994). Today the whiteman shares the contemporary moral stage with a host of other figures such as politicians, businessmen, and church leaders. As Nancy Lutkehaus's evocative account of a young indigenous nun suggests in Chapter Nine suggests, the range of figures is expanding in tandem with the fracturing of social experience.

As with the traditional figures of big men and sorcerers, modern moral exemplars serve not so much as role models as visible manifestations of the potentials, paradoxes, and limits of moral action. Such figures fascinate, inspire, and repel as they test the edges of morality, whether in terms of obligations to wantoks or the ethical dogmas of the church. Politicians provide an instructive example. They are often reviled by the populace for corruption; yet every election cycle in Papua New Guinea attracts hordes of contenders for office, all promising and many no doubt sincerely believing
in their own integrity. Flawed and inspirational, prominent politicians like Michael Somare or the late Lambakey Okuk6 come across as larger than life for many citizens. Although the topic has barely been explored, it is likely that other classes of moral exemplars are emerging that, like the sorcerer or rubbish man, are seen as crossing over into the dark side of immorality. In a brief but very suggestive discussion, Akin and Robbins (1999, 36-37) nominate a figure they call a “bitter man.” The bitter man is someone who attracts wealth but uses it exclusively for his own selfish benefit, obscenely mixing aspects of big and rubbish men. A bitter man may appear as a monster to many, but at the same time “a pillar of the community in its transition to modernity” for others (ibid). By the same token, even the most saintly of moral exemplars, given their access to personal riches or the favor of God, can very easily cross over the line of acceptable ethical action and take on the appearance of a bitter man. As Lohmann illustrates in Chapter Eight, with a poignant account of the rise and fall of an indigenous evangelist, modern exemplars as much as their traditional forebears are often, in the final analysis, tragic figures. For many, they stand for moral certainty and thus the crushing disappointment (or secret delight) when they come up short or fall. Ultimately, they represent the inherent contradictions of moral obligation, the paradoxes of ethical choice.

The Chapters

The general purpose of this Introduction is to explore some of the ways anthropologists have thought about the moral dimensions of Melanesian society and to suggest their continuing relevance to our understandings of contemporary life. The chapters that follow illustrate some of the main dimensions of an anthropological exploration of the moral aspects of Melanesian experience in terms of dilemmas and the persons who exemplify them. The first eight studies range across Papua New Guinea (unfortunately excluding the Highlands region). They further range across a variety of typical moral exemplars, beginning with indigenous big men and ending with a Catholic nun, as well as the types of moral dilemmas people encounter within contemporary village communities, multi-ethnic work settings, and regional networks. The final two chapters take a more theoretical stance, going beyond the detailed ethnography of Melanesia to consider the ethical implications of Kenelm Burridge’s writings on Melanesians, missionaries, and anthropologists. The volume concludes with a brief Epilogue by Kenelm Burridge, reflecting upon the major themes.

The volume opens with two studies that explore aspects of indigenous moral systems operating at the village level. Recalling Burridge’s seminal work on big men and sorcerers, both Robbins and Dalton position their analyses to highlight not just the cultural particulars of the Urupmin and Rawa but to comment on what

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6 One of the most colorful and certainly controversial of Papua New Guinea’s first generation of politicians, Okuk established his big man credentials in national elections by spectacular public ceremonies in which he gave away hundreds of cases of beer accompanied by lavish promises of development projects. Segments of his mostly Highland supporters went on a rampage when Okuk died of cancer in 1986, convinced that he had been poisoned (Dorney 2000).
they perceive as the intrinsic connections between morality, power, and the human condition.

Chapter 2, "Morality, Politics and the Melanesian Big Man" by Joel Robbins, opens the volume with a reconsideration of the moral position occupied by that most famous of Melanesian figures, the big man. Big men have usually been represented in ethnographic writing as the epitome of pragmatic politicking, as actors who through superior personal attributes seek mainly to advance their own authority and prestige. Robbins argues that this is an impoverished view that reflects a tacit assumption, drawn from experience in Western societies, of an essentialized division between politics and morality. Taking up an argument first advanced by Burridge (1975) in his essay on "The Melanesian Manager," Robbins shows that among the Urupmin, a Min group in Sandaun (West Sepik) Province, that big men are important to their followers as much for the way they model the moral difficulties of social life in their communities as for their shrewd sense of the demands of realpolitik. The chapter moves toward a demand for a renewed politicial anthropology that refuses to take the modern separation between the realm of politics and the morality of everyday social life for granted.

In Chapter 3, Doug Dalton's "When is it Moral to Be a Sorcerer?" takes up Burridge's other key figure. While the sorcerer would at first blush appear to be a figure of evil in contrast to the moral uprightness of the big man or manager, his position is ethically ambiguous. Drawing from fieldwork among the Rawa as well as the rich literature on sorcery and witchcraft across Melanesia, Dalton explores the mutually defining relationship between sorcerers and leaders in indigenous thought and experience. Viewed in historical perspective, Rawa sorcerers have tended to gain prominence at times of social upheaval during which they have served as moral change agents. From their own perspective, Rawa sorcerers are as much captured by their social circumstances as their victims and thus, in their own lights, act morally even as, to others, they appear as the epitome of evil. The conundrum of the moral sorcerer, Dalton argues, poses a challenge to some of the fundamental assumptions of the main schools of ethical theory in the Western tradition. He provocatively suggests that the "emotivist" or intuitive ethics exemplified by the Rawa sorcerer resonates best with the ethical writings of certain existential thinkers, particularly Kierkegaard.

The next three chapters focus upon the historical transition of Melanesian societies into what many gloss as "modernity." The introduction of money and commodities, western education, national political institutions, and Christianity has profoundly affected Melanesian moral consciousness, generally in the direction of more individualistic assumptions concerning agency and responsibility. The transition parallels that found in many other parts of the world. Yet here as elsewhere morality continues to bear the stamp of local moral conceptions and obsessions, often with very deep roots in the indigenous soil. The post-colonial landscape of Melanesia thus makes room for a giddy mix of Christian revivalism, witch crazes, and dreams of massive economic development (Eves 2000; Kocher-Schmid 1999; cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). These three chapters document the roles played by indigenous and imported moral values as different groups of Melanesians struggle to become, in Knauft's (2002a) useful phrase, "locally modern."
Chapter 4, “From Moral Exchange to Exchanging Morals” by Bruce Knauff, provides a detailed comparison of the Tangu and Gebusi peoples of the Western Province. The two groups shared many common features during the early contact period, most notably a radical regime of existential equivalence through direct exchange. For the Gebusi, this included not only sister exchange and direct reciprocity at feasts but frequent retaliatory murders of men suspected of practicing sorcery. The two societies, however, reacted differently to colonial intrusion. While the imposition of government controls, the teachings of missionaries, and the experience of the cash economy challenged Tangu moral assumptions, driving them at times to join in cargo cult activities, the culture remained resolutely fixated on the moral ideal of equivalence. The Gebusi, on the other hand, seem to have been positively eager to surrender their political and moral autonomy—along with many other features of their culture—in return for the hierarchical and non-reciprocal order represented by the government and missions. The differences can be partially explained in terms of a range of localized and historical contingencies: the changes that Knauff traces for the Gebusi occurred some three decades after Burridge completed his study of the Tangu and after Papua New Guinea had gained political Independence and the Gebusi are far more remote from the urban centers of the country than Tangu. Still, Knauff’s study isolates key dynamics and points of comparison which could be fruitfully applied elsewhere in comparative studies of moral transformation. Of these, none seem to be more central than the transformative role played by mission churches and Christianity, a theme taken up more directly in several other chapters.

My chapter, “All Sides Now,” also pursues the theme of adaptations between an indigenous society and colonial and postcolonial agencies, in this case the Maisin people of Oro (Northern) Province. In his classic study Mambu, Burridge argued that cargo cults emerged historically from a “total complex” defined by the interactions of villagers, missionaries, and administrative officers, which he referred to as the “Triangle” (1960, 141). By the early 1980s, the Maisin had localized the Triangle, its sides corresponding to types of leaders and activities in village life. I suggest that the Triangle held more significance to Maisin as a kind of moral framework than political or administrative device, one that reflected their plural identities as a cultural group, as citizens, and as Christians. I discuss the inherent tensions between these identities as imagined by the Maisin both in general terms and in a community meeting. The chapter thus adds an additional counter example to the Gebusi experience by showing how Maisin, like the Tangu and many other long-contacted coastal people, have worked out shifting and often shaky compromises between indigenous and introduced ethical orientations. I speculate at the end that colonial policies in Papua New Guinea in many instances actually enhanced the possibility of pluralism and compromise. This is less true in the post-colonial period. The Maisin have today left the Triangle behind and are both experiencing and experimenting with more individually oriented forms of moral reasoning and behaviors.

In Chapter 6, Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz focus upon an ethnographic site very different the those usually studied by anthropologists in Melanesia: an enormous sugar plantation and factory brought into existence after Papua New Guinea’s Independence and which today provides employment and a home for hundreds of workers from across the country as well as a small number of
expatriate administrators. "Reconfiguring Amity at Ramu Sugar Limited" presents a series of disputes the authors witnessed at Ramu between various parties thrown together by the enterprise. A rhetoric of "amity" based upon notions of balanced reciprocity pervades the quarrels in ways that remind one of Burridge's classic description of disputes among the Tangu. There is thus a strong resonance between the ethical assumptions described by Errington and Gewertz and those one still encounters in the village societies described in other chapters. This suggests that the moral consciousness of diverse Papua New Guineans have together worked to shape interactions at places like Ramu Sugar. At the same time, Ramu Sugar like other "modern" situations creates its own moral possibilities and imperatives. As claims follow counter-claims in the disputes, Errington and Gewertz show how moral appeals to equity shift into shake-downs and calls for mutual engagement slide into struggles for political and economic advantage. As it engages with the emerging new realities of class division and increasing economic inequalities, the old rhetoric of amity based upon moral equivalence has proven agile in taking on a variety of new instrumental uses—as a means of forcing employed relatives to share their money; as a way of compelling companies to part with large sums of cash for compensation; and as a way for politicians to mask over their personal advantages by conspicuous gift-giving to followers.

The final three ethnographic chapters focus upon individuals whose actions exemplify new moral possibilities under the expanding conditions of modernity.

Dan Jorgensen opens this section with "Changing Minds: Hysteria and the History of Spirit Mediumship in Telefolmin." The chapter focuses upon the intriguing figure of the spirit meri—female mediums of the Holy Spirit who precipitated a charismatic movement known as Rebaibal among the Telefolmin and their neighbors (including the Urapmin and Asabano, discussed by Robbins and Lohmann) during the 1970s. During the time of Rebaibal, the spirit women exemplified a capacity for moral critique and the embrace of new moral assumptions that Burridge earlier identified as the central dynamic in millenarian movements. Their actions compelled an entire society to change its minds, abandoning the traditional men's cult for Evangelical Christianity. These historic transformations were preceded and accompanied by moments of hysteria marked by episodes of violent shaking. While observers tended to regard outbreaks of hysteria on the part of most individuals with concern, spirit women convincingly reinterpreted the state as a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence and themselves as conduits for the healing power of the Christian god. They apply such healing, in turn, to deal with the pathologies (including forms of hysteria) suffered by individuals caught in the stresses and strains that have emerged in the wake of the massive Ok Tedi gold and copper project, which employed many local men and created an immediate economic boom.

Chapter 8, "Morals and Missionary Positionality: Diyos of Duramin" by Roger Ivar Lohmann, focuses on one of the key figures leading the Min peoples, including the Telefolmin and Urapmin, to Christianity in the 1970s. Making effective use of interview excerpts accompanied by exegesis based upon his extensive ethnographic research among the Asabano, Lohmann relates the story of the rise and fall of a remarkable indigenous missionary. Diyos first learned of Christianity at the feet of Australian Baptist missionaries. Revelations and visions from the Christian god led
him to establish an independent pastoral college. When Rebaibal started, Diyos was able to send out pastors to guide local people’s passionate rejection of the elaborate male cults into the establishment of locally-run churches. Lohmann extends Burridge’s (1991) analysis of the cultural dynamics of the European missionary movement to Diyos. The move is a significant one. Scholars have long acknowledged that Pacific Island evangelists vastly outnumbered European missionaries and usually played the most immediate and largest role in spreading Christianity (Brock 2005). Yet the tendency has been to sharply distinguish between the two parties, both in terms of their motivations and impacts. While sensitive to cultural nuance and historic contingency, Lohmann’s study discovers a common dynamic at the heart of all missionary endeavors, one that propels missionaries towards moral critique of community but at the same time temps them to conflate their own actions with the will of God.

Nancy C. Lutkehaus also focuses upon the figure of the indigenous missionary in the next chapter, “‘In the Way’ in Melanesia: Modernity and the ‘New Woman’ in Papua New Guinea as Catholic Missionary Sister.” Lutkehaus’ contribution would be significant even if she limited herself to a basic narration of the central story in her chapter, the entrance of an Iatmul woman into the Sister Servants of the Sacred Heart. Indigenous female missionaries, past and present, are virtually invisible in the literature, although, as Jørgensen’s chapter suggests, women have taken a leading role in Christian conversion and life in Oceanic societies (Douglas 2003). Lutkehaus’ sophisticated analysis goes much further, examining the interconnecting themes of this religious order at the levels of individuals like Gabriella, the communities they come out of (and for which they provide an exemplar of a new type of woman), and the international Church. Drawing creatively upon Burridge’s (1979; 1991) analysis of the cultural dynamics of Christianity, individuality, and missionary endeavors, she argues that the Papua New Guinea women now becoming nuns do so in the context of confrontations between the “traditional” moral systems that greatly constrain the roles available to women and the widening opportunities provided by modern science and economics that led large numbers of women to choose missionary vocations in the West more than a century ago.

The book concludes with two chapters that go literally beyond Melanesia both in subject matter and thematically. Their immediate focus is Burridge’s writings on Christian missionaries and on morality in general. Their observations, however, speak more generally to the ethical quandaries of an anthropology of morality.

In Chapter 10, “Homo Anthropologicus in Aboriginal Australia: ‘Secular Missionaries,’ Christians and Morality in the Field,” Robert Tonkinson returns to Burridge’s analysis of missionaries. Rather than focusing on its implications for understanding missionary motivations, along the lines pursued by Lohmann and Lutkehaus, Tonkinson concerns himself with the moral and political implications of missionary endeavors upon indigenous peoples, comparing both their attitudes and practices with those typical of anthropologists. Much of the chapter is taken up with a close critique of Burridge’s writings on both missionaries and anthropologists, particularly in his classic work Encountering Aborigines (1973), supplemented by a contrast between the ideals described by Burridge and the behavior observed by Tonkinson of a particularly (although not uniquely) domineering fundamentalist sect
operating at Jigalong in the Western Australian desert during the 1960s. Tonkinson notes that Roman Catholic and other missions operating elsewhere in Australia more completely conform to Burridge’s model as well as a general trend towards forms of missionary activities that sustain transcultural interactions and outreach rather than reactive condemnation of traditional ways and the enforcement of assimilation. In the final analysis, the “metacultural” dynamic of individuality, which Burridge places at the heart of missionary endeavors, does not seem to guarantee the movement toward a more just moral order so much as moralism. The goal of “mutual metanoia”—the moral transformation of both missionary and convert—rests upon the same ethical foundation as good anthropological fieldwork: a respect for other cultural traditions, an acceptance of the moral and political autonomy of the subjects of missionary or anthropological activities and a willingness to undertake self-critique.

Chapter 11, “Reaching for the Absolute” by F. G. Bailey, concludes the volume with a lively reflection on the underlying logic and tensions in anthropological studies of morality. Bailey begins by identifying a “double hermeneutic” that he suggests informs social anthropology: “anthropologists construct templates to provide access to the templates that others...construct to make their world meaningful” (Bailey, this volume). Bailey endeavors here to construct a third level hermeneutic that allows him to investigate “the prejudices, preoccupations, ideologies, philosophical underpinnings or conceptual frameworks” employed by anthropologists to gain access to the local templates of their research subjects. His witty commentary focuses specifically upon Burridge’s approach to Melanesian and missionary morality. He notes that this work tends to assume an opposition between “advantage” and “moral-person” templates—that is to say, between an assumption that the actions of individuals are motivated by desires for personal advantage (willfulness) or by a desire to become absorbed within a larger moral community (“participatory values,” in Burridge’s terms). Bailey argues that studies of religion, politics, and morality require the balanced use of both templates, perceived as existing in a dialectical relationship. He warns against the temptation to focus on one or the other, either as an attempt to undermine the opposing template (and thus surreptitiously insert its rival) or to subsume its opposite into a higher synthesis. Such approaches amount to a “bad methodology” that distorts our understanding of local realities. The temptation to seek a transcendent synthesis (which Bailey refers to as the “totality-itch”) is even worse, not only because it is logically flawed but also because it too easily slides into authoritarianism.

Burridge provides an inviting target for such criticisms not only because of his evident sympathy for missionaries—a group most anthropologists view with ambivalence at best—but perhaps even more so because he perceives humans as essentially moral beings. Burridge’s elevation of moral dilemmas as the key dynamic in the human condition is unusual, especially for an anthropologist. Yet, I would insist that Tonkinson and Bailey’s critiques not be read as pertaining just to this one scholar. They expose very deep and abiding ethical tensions that lie at the very heart of the discipline. Whatever one thinks of Burridge’s specific arguments and sympathies, his insistence on the centrality of moral obligation in human experience ultimately places anthropologists on the same moral boat as the people they study. Tonkinson and Bailey’s chapters are not just critiques; they are themselves
engagements in a dilemma that all anthropologists face concerning their own values and responsibilities towards their discipline and research subjects. Significantly, the two authors suggest contrary solutions, with Tonkinson insisting on a vigorous embrace of the moral politics of human rights and Bailey recommending a position of detachment.

The two final essays thus recapitulate the central thrust of this volume by bringing it home to anthropology itself. Human beings everywhere face difficult choices through life. Some people avoid the challenges and others embrace them, but all make choices. In so doing they often refer to moral dogmas, tempered by self-interest and the contingencies of the moment. Those dogmas provide some stability but are at the same time put at risk. Even as they are asserted they become subject to modification, innovation, and even rejection and replacement by competing moral ideologies. We are principally interested in understanding morality as a motivating force, part of the dynamic by which societies renew and change. The study of morality specifically directs our attention to the subjective dimensions of human experience, the ways that people perceive and deal with the challenges that confront them. Power and politics are clearly important. Appeals to morality often cloak a host of less noble ambitions and, perhaps even more dangerously, serve to justify actions that at a minimum do little good and far too often great harm. Little wonder, then, that anthropologists and missionaries often view each others’ ethical stances with the greatest skepticism. But they are not the only ones. Other people’s morality usually seems suspect in the harsh light of one’s own. The appeal we make in these pages is to put aside such justified suspicions for a time in order to better appreciate the power of morality as a motivating force in human experience. Such an appreciation is not meant to replace political or other analytic frameworks but to complement and challenge them by more holistically considering the ways people experience and work through the challenges of their lives.