Michael Lambek
Portrait courtesy of Ken Jones
In an article as relevant now as when it was written, Aleida Assmann (1996: 94) asks: “How in a world of divided creeds is one to find out which is the true belief?” She draws from Gotthold Lessing’s character Nathan the Wise to say (ibid.: 95):

There are two possible solutions to the problem, that of the fundamentalist and that of the sage. The fundamentalist overcomes the problem of multiplicity by a return to the One. Truth can be restored only if rivals are eliminated and false pretenders unmasked. Truth and order are founded on the tyranny of the One. The solution of the sage is founded on the metaphysics of absence … Under these conditions, multiplicity cannot be overcome. It has to be endured, tolerated. It is a permanent reminder of the fact that absolute truth is not for this world as we know it. To put it in a paradoxical way: it is the discovery of enlightenment that we are all groping in the dark.

I hold to the sagacious version, in which, Assmann states, “it is not religion that is rebuked but its hegemonic claim to absolute truth” (ibid.: 94). And yet, following Roy Rappaport (1999), I appreciate religion’s core contribution to be the founding of certainty. Indeed, were I forced to distinguish religion, I would place under that description precisely those structures of thought and practice that lay the foundations for truth and certainty for their adherents.

The tension between fundamentalism and sagacity is intrinsic to the study of religion. To defer to the One is to reject all the others. If I accept the truths of one group whom I study, what am I to do with the next, and what am I to do with internal debates about truth or correct forms of practice? Yet I cannot simply reject the other’s truths either. As Hans-Georg Gadamer ([1960] 1975) says, we must go as far as we can to accept the reasoning or acknowledge the reasonableness of the other’s position in order to understand it.1 To be an anthropologist is to forgo the comforts of certainty—but this includes certainty about fundamentalism. Perhaps there are paradoxes from which we cannot escape.2 Acknowledgment of paradox is required of the sage and is doubtless central to religion as well, a necessary accompaniment to truth and certainty.

Insofar as we resist succumbing to certainties, our profession is ascetic. But rather than something to be endured, multiplicity is intellectually, ethically, and aesthetically provocative, at times even exhilarating. The position I am describing could be called irony. Assmann (1996: 97–98) attends to Thomas Mann, who, she says, “defines irony technically as ‘pathos of the middle,’ meaning not the golden mean but the open space between fixed positions. Mann invokes
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the god Hermes as the deity of this intermediary realm; the go-between and trickster, patron of thieves, translators, and interpreters.”¹ Hermes, of course, is the eponym of hermeneutics, patron of an anthropology that neither looks down from above, as objectivists would have it, nor sees from within, as romanticists might claim, but ideally moves between. Hermes is also like the spirits of the Western Indian Ocean world who have so attracted my attention, beings who not only operate within that “open space between fixed positions” but serve to produce it.

I take irony in this sense, not as lack of commitment, but precisely as a principled intellectual and ethical stance, one that acknowledges multiplicity, undecidability, ambivalence, and finitude. I ended Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte (1993) with the sentence: “In conclusion, inconclusion.” However, that does not mean that anything goes, or that there are no sources of meaningful order in the world or commitments to stand by. Religion is a source of both order and commitment, a bulwark against anomie and ethical failure. But as Rappaport (1999; esp. chap. 14) also argues, religion becomes a negative force when it overly specifies truth, sliding into fundamentalism.

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My professional trajectory has been subject to fortuitous events, yet, in retrospect, not without a certain consistency. The intellectual preferences evidently have deep roots in my character, but becoming identified with the study of religion developed by happenstance. Raised by a father actively opposed to religion and a mother simply uninterested in it, I had no formative experience of religious participation. During the 1950s, school boards in the province of Québec were strictly divided according to religious denomination. I was sent to Protestant schools as they purportedly taught less religion than the Catholic equivalents. Despite years of collective recitation of the Lord’s Prayer at the beginning of every school day, I never managed to memorize beyond the first two lines. My parents, each a European refugee, never specifically told me we were Jewish. We celebrated Christmas with a tree, presents, and good food,¹¹ and I never observed a Jewish holiday or set foot in a synagogue. The only churches I entered were in Europe, where my mother wanted me to experience their beauty.

At the age of 17, I set out to work for three months on a non-religious kibbutz and ended up staying for a year. Not only was it the cheapest way to leave home, but I was attracted to the communal existence and utopian adventure, to paraphrase Mel Spiro’s ([1956] 1975) Kibbutz: Venture in Utopia, the first book of anthropology I subsequently read. The kibbutz gave me the time and impetus to discover both anthropology and a talent at translating between worlds. It also gestated a modest sentimental and ethical identification as Jewish, albeit I rejected both Zionism and religious practice. I cheered at the story I eventually learned concerning my paternal grandfather, Oscar, whose sister cut off his peyes while he slept. Liberated as a youth from the sidelocks that mark an Orthodox Jew, Oscar fought in World War I for Austria and tried to become a modern German. Photos show him as a dapper dresser.

In Leipzig today there is a small square filled with rows of empty chairs. Approaching it some years ago to see whether there would be a concert that evening, I discovered the chairs are a permanent memorial to the reform synagogue that once stood at the spot—the very place where my father celebrated his bar mitzvah. Shortly after that event, Oscar was interned. My father left for England on the Kindertransport in 1939, only to be designated an “enemy alien” by the British and shipped off to prison camps in Canada.² By that time he had developed into a complete rationalist, even initiating correspondence with Willard Quine from the camp. He became a logician and mathematician, subjects well beyond my capacity. He approved of my studying anthropology but was perplexed by the subsequent interest in religion, not least my defense of other peoples’ ostensibly irrational beliefs. He also refused to attend the
graduation ceremonies of his children and grandchildren, telling my wife, Jackie Solway, that the observation of Nazi parades as a boy had left him with a visceral antipathy for all forms of public ceremony.

I experienced anthropology as a sort of salvation from adolescent despair, but ‘religion’ as a subject was not central to my appreciation for the expansiveness of culture and the minute particularities and array of differences, nor for the qualities of communal sociality. I did not have a concept of religion in mind when I first set out for the field. Educated at Antioch, McGill, and Michigan, I was shaped by what might seem an incoherent combination of interests in materialist cultural evolution, British social anthropology, and symbolic anthropology. I was planning to explore a monarchy (what the evolutionists called a ‘chiefdom’ or ‘proto-state’) in northwest Madagascar in order to investigate its articulation with Malagasy polities at other scales and thereby discern the roots of political inequality and centralization, albeit with the recursion Edmund Leach ([1954] 2004) had analyzed for highland Burma and the kind of oscillating historical movements Owen Lattimore ([1940] 1988) had depicted for Inner Asia. Madagascar was attractive for the diversity of its pre-colonial political systems and its distance from home, and my research was supported by faculty interests and an NSF grant at Michigan. But I was also overtaken by a reading of Clifford Geertz’s (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures* and acknowledged that what interested me was the distinctive ways given sets of people constructed their worlds and lived in them. *The Imagination of Reality*, the title of an important book edited by two of my teachers, Alton (Pete) Becker and Aram Yengoyan (1979), captures that orientation. In any case, just as I was setting off, there was a coup in Madagascar, and I was rerouted to the small French-controlled island of Mayotte where I found myself doing a kind of Malinowskian village study of Malagasy-speaking post-plantation cultivators who were also third- or fourth-generation Muslims (Lambek 2018). During the first year I was naive enough to participate in Friday prayers (as I once had mumbled the Christian prayer), without grasping the import of my actions for those around me.

I stumbled into spirit possession entirely by chance, and it fascinated me not as an instance of ‘religion’ but in the ways it addressed and manifested selfhood and relationality and in the comic, ironic, and tragic ways it spoke to the world. The music to call up a Malagasy spirit, which I first heard one dark night in 1975 plucked on a home-made wooden lute, cried plangent sadness and longing. My task was not to explain possession or to commensurate it with religious faith, devotion, or spirituality, but to understand it (pace Paul Ricoeur 1971) with respect to the structure it drew upon and the world it opened up.

It was only after doctoral fieldwork that I followed a course specifically on the anthropology of religion. Attending Rappaport’s undergraduate lectures, I was captivated by the serious, systematic, and entirely unromanticized way he approached the subject. My comprehensive notes became the basis for my own lectures when I was first asked to teach the subject. Some years later I helped Keith Hart tidy Rappaport’s posthumous manuscript for publication as *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999). I continue to believe that this is a brilliant and unduly neglected work. Rappaport told me shortly before he died that I was one of only a very few people who understood his arguments, and at some moments I have felt the responsibility to speak for them.

Some of Rappaport’s ideas—notably, the effects of the illocutionary force of ritual, the conjunction of what he called the indexical and canonical in liturgical performances, and the truth foundational aspects of what he saw as ultimate sacred postulates—became very useful to me. However, none of my full-length ethnographies have been on religion in a formal or narrow sense. Rather, they are hermeneutic engagements with the concepts and practices I found in the field, those that mattered most to people and those that puzzled me and drew me in.
Human Spirits (Lambek 1981) was one of the first books to understand spirit possession on its own terms rather than as something aberrant that needed causal, functionalist, instrumental, or psychological explanation. In it, I argue that trance (dissociation) is a human capacity that can be positively enabled by cultural models, and that it is the cultural models rather than some innate proclivity, interest, or failure that generate the phenomena I observed. I show, in the first place, that as a system of communication that is minimally triadic, spirit possession enables the transmission of diverse messages along multiple routes. When someone is actively possessed by a spirit, new things can be said and repeated in different voices through different channels. Possession draws upon the redundancy of messages insofar as practitioners and clients respectively enter and exit trance, becoming different persons who need to be informed of what has transpired in their absence. Relationships, especially between spouses, are thickened, intimacy enhanced, urgent and divergent views expressed, while acknowledging the conflict, ambivalence, and indecision manifest between different voices. (Things can also go badly.) Today I would say, following Stanley Cavell’s (2005) “Performative and Passionate Utterance,” that possession exhibits both the persuasiveness and the precarity of perlocutionary utterance. In Human Spirits I also demonstrate the illocutionary force that realizes—makes real—the presence of spirits and their relationships with particular hosts in the course of initiatory ceremonies. Overall, the book treats possession as a cultural text to be interpreted. Drawing on a form of structuralist hermeneutics inspired by Ricoeur, I offer a reading of what might be understood by the presence and performances of spirits for people in Mayotte more generally, which is ultimately a tension between the moral and the amoral. This is equivalent to the kind of ethical sensibility afforded by strong literature.

Hermeneutics is often caricatured as though it were either seeking and claiming to find the ultimate meaning beneath fixed texts or, conversely, leaving everything open and, in effect, meaningless. With respect to possession, the texts are neither literal nor fixed; the point is to reveal how performances enable people to personally and collectively draw meaning from them, not to discover specific meanings hidden within them. (Spirit possession is neither spiritual nor esoteric in the Western use of those terms.) The significance of a hermeneutic approach for anthropology is, in the first instance, to take people’s creative forms and acts seriously and respectfully, not to reduce them to some extraneous force, cause, interest, or function. Furthermore, it concerns the formation of understanding. This is brought out in the thought of Gadamer ([1960] 1975) that informed my second book, Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte (Lambek 1993), in which I argue that the way I came to understand different forms of knowledge was shaped by the distinct models of learning that underlay each of them. In other words, education (through conversation, discipline, etc.) is central not only to the work of ethnography, but also to our subjects. Understanding involves a complex and never-ending process of cultivating and translating between the concepts and practices of distinct traditions located within a particular political economy of knowledge. I argue that local knowledge in Mayotte was formed by the conjunction of three incommensurable (and trans-local) traditions—Islam, astrology, and spirit possession. The book describes both their articulation in practice and the limitations of my own access to each of them. The possibility for misunderstanding, in the sense of misguided attempts at commensuration or committing category mistakes, is explored in my recent book Concepts and Persons (Lambek 2021).

In Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte, hermeneutics is less about the abstract reading of texts than about ongoing conversations among people, each more or less attentive to understanding each other and their traditions, and each more or less engaged in specific practices and projects. Articulation shifts, according to the immediate orientations that Alfred Schutz (1964) distinguishes as ‘the expert’, ‘the well-informed citizen’, and ‘the man on the street’. These three ideal
types are not roles but perspectives in relation to a given body of knowledge at a given time. As an ‘expert’, I actively deploy the warranted knowledge distinct to my field, whereas, as a ‘person on the path’ (as I revised ‘man on the street’), I approach knowledge pragmatically on a need-to-know basis. Schutz says that ‘well-informed citizen’ is short for the “the citizen who aims at being well informed” (ibid.: 122). In describing people’s attachments to things such as religious knowledge or practices, it is critical to address the matter of shifting perspectives. It seems to me now that perhaps an attentive but disinterested and ironic position (call it ‘the anthropologist’) could be added as a fourth orientation.

My third ethnography, *The Weight of the Past* (Lambek 2002b), concerns possession activities in and around Mahajanga in northwest Madagascar, at the heart of the northern Sakalava kingdom of Boina. Here, where the public political significance of possession remains salient, I began to understand the complex ideas and history that underlay some of the possession activity I had observed in Mayotte. *The Weight of the Past* takes chronotope and historicity as central concepts and shows the maze-like spaces and folded aspects of temporality that possession entails. The spirits—each a historical figure located in a royal genealogy extending back many generations—come together for events in the present, engaging their living descendants, entourage, and members of the public and enabling conversations that include pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial voices and modes of habitus. This is much as a dramatist brings together characters with different perspectives, generating what Kenneth Burke (1945) calls ‘dramatic irony’. For Sakalava, this is also mythopraxis, and it includes elements of pathos and tragedy as well as broad and sly comedy. Although portrayals are not as circumscribed as on the ancient Greek stage, many of the themes are similar.

Malagasy spirits must be in character, but they do not simply perform scripts: they can also *act* in the world and intervene politically. Meaning is not only relatively fixed in texts but alive in the world, in the sense of what people mean by what they say and do, whether and how they *mean* it, while taking into account irony and shifts of voice. In my Geertz Lecture (published as Lambek 2014) I argue that interpretation can be understood not only as something relatively passive or private, analogous to reading a text, but actively and publicly in the ways in which people draw on cultural forms in the living of their lives, much as musicians interpret a score, actors a role, and anthropologists or philosophers their tradition in the course of practicing it. *The Weight of the Past* describes the great skill, responsibility, and artistry evident in some mediums’ interpretations of their characters, as well as in the ways their voices were constrained in the political milieu. Possession in northwest Madagascar—along with its imbrication within royal politics, division of labor, systems of exchange, registers of status hierarchy, and local, regional, mercantile, colonial, and national histories, none of which are fully past—is enormously rich but also extremely complex. While I am very happy with the book, I know that I did not grasp everything. Moreover, the system is dynamic. Spirits move with their mediums to Europe and manifest in new ways at home. The appearance in 2012 of multiple bandit spirits in the bodies of adolescents amazed not only my co-researcher Sarah Gould and me, but the broader community, demonstrating the creative potential of a system with dormant resources ready to irrupt (quite literally) at the right historical moment (see Lambek 2016).

The path I have tried to follow is precipitous, falling neither into reductive and banal explanation on one side, nor into exoticizing or romantic over-identification on the other. This is particularly tricky when it comes to spirit possession, which can be understood only when approached in a non-condescending manner as socially real and autonomous and yet simultaneously as a human construction. Hence the title *Human Spirits*. In 1981, Geertz had to argue to get the book past the Cambridge syndics. A sociologist wanted to deny me tenure for seemingly accepting possession on its own terms, while a reviewer for an article published in *American
Ethnologist in 1988 accused me of ontological imperialism (a surprisingly early use of the concept!) for taking the opposite position. I remain, like possession itself, ironically and, I hope, dynamically between.

Having worked to understand spirit possession on its own terms and in context, I have likewise used it over the course of many essays to think with—that is, to think about things such as historicity and memory, intergenerational succession, projection and introjection, mind and body, forensic and mimetic concepts and enactments of personhood, reason and passion, agency and self-deception, after life and after death, exotic and ordinary, and concepts and persons.10

What turned me into a recognized expert on the subject of religion were, again, two fortuitous and unexpected events. The first was being invited by Parker Shipton and then seduced by Jane Huber into compiling A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion (Lambek 2002a), which more or less succeeded the classic Lessa and Vogt (1997) compilation. This was an intense and enjoyable experience of selecting and excerpting from essays that I felt were most important in advancing or illustrating anthropological perspectives on the subject and that had been significant for my own education. The second event was a request to assist Rappaport in establishing the Society for the Anthropology of Religion (SAR) within the American Anthropological Association (AAA). One thing I did inherit from my father was an antipathy to claims for the paranormal, and so the SAR extricated itself from what became the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness.

While I eventually became President of the SAR, and although I edited the Reader and subsequently co-edited with Janice Boddy A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion (Boddy and Lambek 2013), I have always been uncomfortable with the domaining these entailed.11 I held this view before Talal Asad so lucidly articulated it, but unlike Asad, I don't think that Geertz objectified religion (or precluded looking at power). My ethnographic monographs each circumvent essentialized sub-disciplinary slots. Knowledge and Practice is organized around the social reproduction of knowledge and explores practices of prayer, divination, healing, and harming. In attending closely to the practice and self-understanding of curers, it falls between religion and medical anthropology. The Weight of the Past is as much about historicity and politics as it is about religion.

My approach thus developed from an articulation of Geertzian interpretation of cultural forms and Rappaport’s analytic focus on ritual. Rappaport’s most decisive influence was his attention to J. L. Austin (1962) and the illocutionary property of speech acts. These have the ability simultaneously to produce ontological beings, ethical subjects, persons, relations, and states and to mystify the role of human action in their production, while remaining vulnerable to infelicity and outright failure. The cumulative illocutionary force embedded in liturgical order appeared to resolve the puzzle Geertz had left concerning the conjunction of models of the world and models for action within it. Geertz led me, via Richard Bernstein’s (1983) Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, to Gadamer, and Gadamer, in turn, led me further back to Aristotle and to ethics, while simultaneously Austin and conversations in the early 1990s with Paul Antze, Ian Hacking, and others around questions of memory (Antze and Lambek 1996) led again to ethics. So my approach to ethics is an idiosyncratic mix from Aristotle and Gadamer on one side and Austin and Cavell on the other, coming together in the articulation of Aristotelian practical judgment with Austinian performance (Lambek 2015b). Cheryl Mattingly (2012) gets it right when she distinguishes this line of virtue ethics from the one that emerges from readings of Foucault and cultivation of the self.
The argument in *Ordinary Ethics* (Lambek 2010) that social theorists should attend to ethical concerns as well as to power and interest in understanding action was, in a way, a return to questions of culture and meaning by other terms. What I described as the ethical is close to Weberian conceptions of the meaningful dimension of action. If ‘ontology’ is another word for ‘culture’, so perhaps ‘ethical’ is another word for ‘cultural’ insofar as it concerns the criteria, values, and virtues that orient people and by means of which they exercise practical judgment, both with respect to carrying out their own acts and describing those of others. In *Concepts and Persons* (Lambek 2021), I draw from Elizabeth Anscombe to suggest that what anthropologists of my sort do is first to observe how people put their acts under description (and the kinds of descriptions they put them under) and then, in the course of translation, abstraction, and theory making, to put those acts of description under further description of our own. At the same time, as I note in *The Ethical Condition* (Lambek 2015b), reading my work retrospectively, much of it was concerned with the ethical all along. I treat ethics adverbially rather than nominally and have never sought to carve out an anthropology of ethics (even less than an anthropology of religion), but rather to understand the ethical as a dimension of everything we do. It is not to see good everywhere, but rather to acknowledge the pervasiveness of ethical discrimination, criteria, judgment, and concern. I argue this not solely on empirical grounds, and not at all on naturalist or metaphysical ones, but through the entailments of the indexical, illocutionary, and perlocutionary dimensions of speaking, including the necessity of drawing on criteria and of acknowledging what I say and what is said to me. The ethical is indissociable from speaking, and, following Cora Diamond (1996), it may be indissociable from drawing on concepts—that is, from thinking itself.

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I was very lucky to gain a one-year teaching position at the University of Toronto Scarborough upon finishing my dissertation in 1978. This was followed by four more years of limited contracts, at which point one colleague died, another retired, and a third quit, leaving open one tenure stream position that I landed. Having been insecure long enough, I asked to go up for tenure the following year. I sometimes felt disdained by senior faculty on the main campus, but their attitude changed when I was invited as a visiting Centennial Professor at the London School of Economics (LSE) in 1997 and subsequently as an ongoing Professor in 2006. I took a split appointment for three years before returning full-time to Toronto as a Canada Research Chair (CRC). Again luck intervened. I had chaired the search for the CRC, and when the selected candidate precipitously declined to follow through, the administration feared that they would lose the position and so decided to offer it to an internal candidate. The result for me personally was more time to write, but it also meant the renewal of the anthropology faculty at Scarborough and the formation of our Centre for Ethnography as a hub of activity. I’m very proud of the department, which I was able to shape with the help of colleagues.

I have been very fortunate in my interlocutors. It was my teacher and friend Aram Yengoyan who directed me to Ricoeur, Gadamer, and Cavell. It was also Yengoyan who suggested reading Alexander Nehamas, who helped me understand irony as a modality of both possession and, following Jonathan Lear, of life more generally. Yengoyan was an eccentric, lovable man who had a great breadth of knowledge. He found it difficult to write, but he had an unerring sense of what was important to read (at least for me). Other faculty at Michigan (Ray Kelly, Sherry Ortner, and Henry Wright) and fellow students (Bob Hefner, Michael Peletz, and Howard Norman) have been significant. I subsequently worked out ideas in conversations and seminars with close colleagues, especially Paul Antze, Janice Boddy, and Jack Sidnell, among many others in Toronto.

Jackie Solway has been throughout an important interlocutor and at key periods a co-fieldworker. Through her own research, I was able to encounter Jean and John Comaroff and their
students and also secured invitations to Dick Werbner’s rich and sometimes surreal workshops on African religion. There I met scholars like Filip De Boeck, Wendy James, and Malcolm Ruel, who became further valued interlocutors. Malcolm's work is particularly important (and under-acknowledged). He was one of the first to show explicitly that what we call religion is often a set of practices concerned not with another (transcendent) world but immanently with life in this one. Wendy describes a Foucauldian archive in small-scale societies, and Filip raises the bar for intrepid fieldwork and aesthetic sensibility. In 1985, while tracking down Isaac Schapera at the LSE, Jackie also encouraged me to knock on Maurice Bloch’s office door, an encounter that changed my life: a deep friendship and a long association with the LSE and its wonderful anthropology faculty ensued. Maurice and I have overlapping but distinct perspectives, and I have learned enormously in debating our differences.

I've also been tremendously inspired by people I met in Mayotte and Madagascar, including those who both gave voice and body to various spirits and reflected on them with me. In Mayotte, Boura Moïha and Mamazaza Oramby were particularly fine teachers, mentors, and friends; I am hoping to complete a book that recounts their lives in cohabitation with spirits. I began research in Mahajanga at the invitation of another fine interlocutor, Pastor Emmanuel Tehindrazanarivo. Among many others there, I worked with Amana Ibrahim and with spirit practitioners known fondly as Dady Bonbon (Mme Doso) and Dadilahy Kassim Tolondraza and the spirits with whom they separately cohabited. I've often said that writing is easy for me since it is my interlocutors—the hosts and spirits—who do the creative work. The possibilities are endless because possession remains continuously creative and surprising.

Finally, there are my students. I have learned from each of them but single out Andrew Walsh, Sarah Gould, and Shirley Yeung, who shared periods of fieldwork with me, respectively, in Ambatoharana, Mahajanga, and Geneva.

I have tried to produce rich ethnography that speaks for itself. My approach has been to start with what matters to people rather than with an external question or hypothesis. I focus on the local as the primary arena in which action takes place and is received, described, and responded to. I am receptive to psychoanalytic and sociological modes of analysis but refuse reductionism. I see spirit possession as a human capacity that, like making music or writing fiction, is dependent on genre, tradition, technique, and context. One can understand spirit mediums, spirits, and their performances much as one can understand novelists, characters, and their fiction. For this, both literary criticism and philosophy are invaluable.

In a more analytic register, I’ve offered arguments concerning sacrifice as both a form of beginning and instantiation of commitment and as a ground of value; the temporality of exchange systems; taboo as practice and identification by negation; Islamic knowledge and authority; and the relationship of mind and body. I have proposed attending to the deictic quality of ‘deity’ and have made incommensurability central to thinking about adjacent traditions, about ethical judgment, and about the use of concepts that are not in binary relation to each other. This corrects a certain reading of Lévi-Strauss in which oppositions are understood exclusively as minimal binary pairs, on the analogy of phonemes. There are non-binary dualisms, like nature and culture or body and mind, that cannot be conclusively transcended in human thought and hence provoke continuous attempts to work through them. This is not because they are contradictory but because they are incommensurable. The challenge is renewed but not resolved at each generation, and the responses vary, producing cultural and historical difference. In sum, the human condition raises existential and conceptual dilemmas. Cultural differences are found in the variety of ways we formulate and live with them.
I see fieldwork as attending to what people say and do when; how they put things under description and how they live under description. My ethnographic practice tends to be person-centered. I interact with many people, but I return to key interlocutors day after day and year after year, and often to the same topics we spoke about previously. What they tell me—or what I am able to hear—shifts and perhaps deepens over time. In coming to understand their lives, I reflect on how character, circumstances, culture and history, action, thought, practice, and existential dilemmas shape each other, much as I have briefly illustrated from my own life.

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NOTES

1. See also Michael Lambek (2015c). Of course, to acknowledge another’s point of view is not necessarily to accept it.
2. Elsewhere I discuss paradoxes with respect to the relationship between formulations of ‘both/and’ and ‘either/or’ (Lambek 2015a, 2021).
3. In the inter-war period, Mann noted the eclipse of liberal humanism. Assmann’s (1996: 97–98) passage begins: “Antiliberal values are vigor and violence, firm resolution, decision and stern commitment; Mann extols their very opposites: versatility and suppleness, deference, the prolonged stage of ‘not yet,’ the suspension of the end, and a Janus-faced irony which plays in the space between the harsh opposites.” By irony here I do not mean a literary trope or anything akin to sarcasm. For more in-depth discussions on irony, see Jonathan Lear (2014), Alexander Nehamas (1998), and Michael Lambek and Paul Antze (2003).
4. It was a secular and pagan celebration, as Ann Gold put it in her marvelous Portrait essay in volume 16, but not, as she added, “all-American.” We followed European custom as my mother’s assimilated family had celebrated Christmas in her childhood. On the impact of my mother’s family, see Lambek (2022).
5. My grandparents were able to follow their children to London, where they survived the blitz but ignorant of my father’s fate. Oscar died there before I was born.
6. Life on the kibbutz exhibited both positive and negative aspects of small-scale sociality; among the latter, intolerance of internal ‘deviance’.
7. The book would not have appeared without the dedication of both Keith and Jessica Kuper, then the anthropology editor at Cambridge University Press.
8. I have never given the wider ecological and political implications of Rappaport’s arguments their due. See Messer and Lambek (2001).


10. References to the essays on these topics are available on request.

11. As distinct from the Reader, the Companion is composed of original articles.

12. See suggested publications in note 3.


14. My fieldwork in Switzerland remains largely unpublished, but see Lambek (2007a).

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Two of the most striking features of Michael Lambek’s scholarship are, first, its topical continuity over more than four decades and, second, the fact that when returning to a sub-field he helped establish, he always brings new theoretical insights to the revisitation. The combination of these two achievements has ensured that over the course of his career Lambek has been not only the architect of several of the most important theoretical sub-fields in our discipline, but also—dare I say?—their prophetic renewer.

I first met Michael in the winter of 1974 during my last semester of undergraduate study at the University of Michigan (where I would also do my graduate study). I was a double major at the time, specializing in cultural anthropology and French language and literature, the latter with a primary focus on post-structuralist Marxism (read Louis Althusser) and theories of knowledge. My undergraduate and future graduate advisor in anthropology, Aram Yengoyan, was also Michael’s graduate advisor. Michael was already advanced in his graduate program and would head off for dissertation research in Mayotte the year after we met. But Michael’s imminent departure only made Aram all the more insistent that I meet his grad advisee. Although Aram shared my interest in philosophical Marxism and post-structuralist epistemologies, he told me in no uncertain terms that he was worried that I was pursuing these interests to the detriment of my training as an anthropologist. He was right. In November 1973, Aram had given me a copy of Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* in an effort to draw me into current anthropological theory. With a senior undergraduate’s trademark impatience, I read the book and told Aram that Lévi-Strauss’s work had been rendered obsolete by Jacques Derrida’s (1973) critical reading of Husserlian phenomenology in *Speech and Phenomena*. My response seemed only to harden Aram’s conviction that I better get to know Michael soon.

On this and so many other matters, Aram was right. I have a vivid memory of two long conversations with Michael in Aram’s downstairs living room early in the winter of 1974. In the course of those conversations, I, the reluctant anthropologist, finally began to understand and appreciate Lévi-Strauss—albeit in a manner that reflected Michael’s expansive contextualization as much as it did Lévi-Strauss’s prose itself. As Aram had hoped, Michael also helped me to understand how ethnography can explore the questions of signifying practice highlighted in philosophical post-structuralism, but in an ontologically cross-cultural manner.

I mention this distant personal history because it illustrates one of the great virtues of Michael’s long career as an anthropologist and scholar. If we jump ahead from the mid-1970s to Michael’s Tanner Lecture in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Michigan in
January 2019 (see Lambek 2021), one re-encounters Michael’s thick reading of theoretical topics, now reworked and refined over a great expanse of time. One author discussed in this lecture is again Lévi-Strauss, whom Michael cites to explain how anthropologists understand and report on “meaning, order, reason, beauty, and eudaimonia in remote and distinctive worlds” (Lambek 2021: 3). Although there’s continuity in the reference to Lévi-Strauss, there’s also theoretical novelty and extension, not least with regard to anthropology and philosophy.

One sees this pattern of continuity-with-refinement in most of the sub-fields Michael has helped to create. When he returned from fieldwork in Mayotte in 1976, his discussions with me made it clear that he was intent on reconstructing the then somewhat faded sub-field of spirit possession and trance. With his 1978 dissertation and the publication of his first book, Human Spirits, in 1981, Lambek succeeded masterfully in that ambition. In this case, Michael revitalized the field by demonstrating the relevance of spirit possession for understanding cross-cultural concepts of personhood, subjectivity, and the heterogeneous phenomena we call ‘religion’.

Michael’s second achievement is to have crafted such core theoretical constructs in not one but several major theoretical fields. In addition to spirit possession and personhood, these include the anthropology of knowledge, religion and ritual, and morality. By my reading, all of these fields owe a good portion of their quality and excitement today to Michael’s revitalizing labors. It is also surprising to realize that most of these theoretical achievements were anticipated in one of Michael’s earliest books, Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte: Local Discourses of Islam, Sorcery, and Spirit Possession (Lambek 1993). This publication provides an original and, by my reading, new framework for the anthropology of knowledge. The book preserves the latter field’s trademark emphasis on distributional models of culture. But it also explores how the social infrastructuring for different traditions of knowledge at times results not merely in incommensurability across domains, but also in periodic efforts on the part of high-minded reformists to abolish diversity of knowledge and practice through the forceful imposition of a rationalized and unitarian tradition. In my interpretation, this book remains one of the core achievements in the anthropology of knowledge and the anthropology of Islam.

The theoretical field with which Michael is most widely identified today is of course the anthropology of ethics. Here again, a focus on ethics was broadly apparent in Lambek’s earlier work, but it took a more ambitious turn in the early 2000s, not least with the publication of Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action (Lambek 2010). These more recent essays show the clear imprint of Michael’s deepened engagement with the philosophy of language, especially the wing that begins with Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin and culminates with Stanley Cavell. While building on these philosophers, Lambek—no less original—links his insights into ordinary ethics to theoretical arguments in the anthropology of ritual and religion, including in particular the work of one of our teachers at the University of Michigan, the late Roy Rappaport.

This is arguably one of the boldest theoretical bridgings ever attempted in the anthropology of ethics and religion. It is also arguably the most intensely debated among anthropologists of ethics today. In his introduction to Ordinary Ethics, Lambek (2010: 2) explains that “ordinary’ implies an ethics that is relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself.” In the same passage Lambek makes clear that ethics can at times be made explicit, most commonly in relation to “its breaches,” as well as in public contentions, prophetic movements, and the labors of religious virtuosos intent on rationalizing a tradition for often hesitant fellow travelers. Drawing on Hannah Arendt and (most extensively) Aristotle, Lambek emphasizes that most of our ethical lives are ordinary in the sense that ethical acts exhaust their meaning in performance. With virtue ethics as inspiration, this approach is premised on Aristotle’s “locating ethics first in practice and action” rather than a Kantian recourse to “reason and its objectification in
propositional language” (ibid.: 7). Where ethics is elaborated as values or rules, these build on “an abstraction or rationalization of what is found in ordinary action” (ibid.: 14).

In response to a thoughtful comment by Joel Robbins (2021) on his 2019 Tanner Lecture, Lambek provides an additional detail with regard to the rationale behind his ordinary ethics approach: “I turned to ethics because I realized that people's actions are shaped as much by virtue or judgment ... as by power, interest, or desire, the dominant modes of explaining action in anthropology at the time” (Lambek 2021: 116). This statement is illustrative of a de-essentializing approach to human subjectivity that informs the entirety of Lambek's scholarship. It is a perspective whose spirit I applaud and share.

Anthropological critics of the ordinary ethics approach have not typically taken exception to the de-essentializing aspiration. But some have argued that such an effort is not best realized by elevating one moment in our broader ethical life-course above all others. Although not specifically directed at Lambek, Webb Keane's (2016: 25) summary observations speak to the latter conviction, namely, that ethics is not defined by any single quality of consciousness or action but "draws on a heterogeneous set of psychological and sociological resources." A fuller anthropology of ethics, in Keane's view, would begin as Lambek recommends and would examine the ways in which ethical judgments are drawn up into "publicly known descriptions and categories and their role in people's own ability to reflect on themselves and their situations” (ibid.: 26). But it would do so while not losing sight of the myriad "looping effects” (ibid.: 27) that operate across moral life, from unconscious psychological processes to social interactions and morality-remaking social movements. Jing Xu's (2017) study of the 'good child' in contemporary China offers a family-resemblant and brilliant illustration of the trans-domain approach Keane has in mind. Xu examines the ways in which moral sensibilities native to young Chinese children are "activated and nurtured in culturally specific ways” (ibid.: 26), only later to be drawn up into moral panics over capitalism and egoist materialism.

Other commentators on the ordinary ethics thesis similarly note that the uptake moves in multiple directions, as tacit normativities and language-based ethics are linked to broader assemblages and “far-flung materials” (Lempert 2013: 373). As a student of shariah law and ethical plurality in Muslim societies (Hefner 2011, 2016), I am rather inclined to agree with this point. Few ethical realities are more dispersively entangled than Islamic ethics and law. Scholars of Islam recognize that what transpires as ordinary moral evaluations in Muslim societies (like all others) shows the decentered and deferred influence of contingencies and histories not immediately ‘present’ to the act of ethical evaluation, but significantly constitutive of its ‘ordinary’ apprehension nonetheless (see also Clarke 2015).

Scholars are as much defined by the quality and intensity of the discussion they inspire as by the details of their arguments as such. By this and any other measure, Michael Lambek is one of the most influential anthropologists of our generation. He has shaped several of our discipline's most important sub-fields and has helped launch many scholarly ships. That's a greatness that, I believe, Aram Yengoyan sensed all those years ago. And in this and so many other respects, I believe Aram got it right.

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In the opening paragraph of *Concepts and Persons*, Michael Lambek (2021: 1) tells us that he studies the human condition (“what humans face and what we do”) rather than human nature (“what we are”). This declaration speaks to his long-held view that one can speak intelligibly about the human condition as such, although not in essentialist terms. In *The Ethical Condition*, Lambek (2015) notes that although he has “has tried to be finely attuned to cultural difference” in all his ethnographic work, his aim has never been simply to demonstrate difference. Instead, he has “tried to show that through difference, by the very act of acknowledging difference, one can glimpse similarity. At the end of the day, things come down to the human condition, not to radically different ontologies” (ibid.: xiv). In *Concepts and Persons*, he strengthens his case for a culturally inflected, non-essentialist portrait of the human condition—a version of humanism, as I see it. I consider this a brave and important venture in a largely anti-humanist and post-humanist scholarly climate (Wentzer and Mattingly 2018).

Lambek (2021) also insists that anthropology’s particular angle on the human condition involves—or should involve—investigating the concepts, or ‘language games’, that people in particular social communities live with and how they live with them. He thinks about concepts as actions that ‘put things under description’ in a socially specific way. Investigating this ‘placing under description’ business presents a key task for the anthropologist. Apprehending the salient language games or concepts or ways of putting things under description that people call upon is essential to understanding their lives. “Anthropological description,” Lambek asserts, is precisely about “people putting things under description and living with the descriptions they have made or been subject to” (ibid.: 51). But understanding also involves the additional anthropological work of putting things under further, or other, description. Lambek maintains that “understanding is a matter not only of empathy or (literal) translation but of placing things under further description, finding better terms and criteria with which to do so, and discerning different levels of description” (ibid.: 17). Interpreting interpretations, as Geertz (1973) once put it. Lambek takes people’s conceptual life seriously, something that Joel Robbins (2021) also applauds in light of what Robbins fears is an abandonment of that project in contemporary anthropology.

These are but two of Lambek’s many intellectual contributions to a wide range of topics in which religious practice often plays a central, but not exclusive, role. He tends to think hermeneutically, often focusing “on the public, social, and imaginative forms through which individual identities are, in part, formed” (Lambek 2015: 41). Religious practices frequently provide the imaginative forms that catch his attention. But Lambek is a capacious thinker and considers
matters that might not, at first blush, appear to be especially religious: cultural difference, personhood, concept trouble, and the human situation writ large. In my short piece, I will primarily consider Lambek’s contributions to ethics, focusing on the two book publications I have already cited: The Ethical Condition: Essays on Action, Person and Value (2015) and his published Tanner Lecture, Concepts and Persons (2021). The former gathers together scholarship that spans much of his career, while the latter articulates, in the clearest possible prose, arguments that are central to his oeuvre while forwarding new considerations of the life of concepts.

The topic of ethics runs throughout Lambek’s work. He finds it axiomatic that ethics is ordinary and pervasive. It cannot be isolated (Lambek 2010). The ethical conditions life. It is not “a distinct compartment of social life” (Lambek 2015: x). The human condition just is an ethical condition. His most crucial justification for an ethics inextricable from the living of everyday life is that ethics is entailed in action itself. For him, ethics is acted. This is so central to his position that if I had to choose one phrase to describe what he offers, it would be ‘a theory of action’. Even the way he attends to individuals reveals his concern with selves in action. He notes, for example, that despite his anthropological training, which taught him to attend to structure, he had always been interested in individuals as well, in “following individuals as they address contingencies and face challenges, acting in the world, reflecting on their actions, and, in the process, growing in maturity” (ibid.: xvii). Over the course of decades, he has offered sustained, careful considerations of the philosophy of action, ordinary language philosophy, and Aristotelian ethics as these bear upon key anthropological topics and the everyday lives of his interlocutors (Mattingly 2019a).

In exploring ethics as intrinsic to everyday life, Lambek turns to Aristotle as well as moral philosophers who, in the mid-twentieth century, revived and amended the virtue ethics of Greek antiquity. I read Lambek as a virtue ethics scholar who takes an Aristotelian picture of judgment seriously, making several claims about it. First, that discerning what is right to do, in any given circumstance, is not always obvious—hence the need for exercising judgment rather than simply following a standardized rule. Judgment, in this sense, does not refer to something like a court decree (imposed from the outside) but rather is an inevitable aspect of everyday, practical life. As Lambek (2021: 116) puts it, judgment is “immanent to action.” Second, ethical life is not simply a matter of making judgments or decisions in the moment. It also demands cultivating practical wisdom, virtues—character development, in other words. Third (building upon philosophical voices in virtue ethics who emphasize this far more than Aristotle), a sobering reality of ethical life is that we hold multiple values that may not be commensurable. When they conflict, this can cause a great deal of uncertainty and anguish. If I emphasize these three claims, perhaps even more strongly than Lambek would, it is because they are ones I have also tried to articulate in my own work (Mattingly 1998, 2014). I know the challenge of doing so because words like ‘judgment’, ‘practice’, and ‘practical reasoning’ have distinct meanings in an Aristotelian scheme that are easily misunderstood.¹

Lambek (2015) finds an Aristotelian version of virtue ethics more satisfying than either Kantian ethics (emphasizing duty and obligation) or utilitarian ethics (emphasizing calculation) because it works better empirically. “Virtue” as a key ethical term “marks a shift in anthropological discussions of ethics away from the dominant Durkheimian view of rule and obligation toward practice and character” (ibid.: 240). But it also challenges utilitarian ethics because an Aristotelian framework does not treat values as commensurable (and thereby subject to calculation). Lambek tells us that “incommensurability is as fundamental to culture, society, and human experience as commensurable value is to the functioning of the market” (ibid.: 222). His focus on action offers several theoretical advantages. By taking situated action as central to his analysis, he is able to reveal the dilemmas, conflicts, ironies, and paradoxes that so often
dominate people’s lives. The human condition is nothing if not fraught, as Lambek shows time and again through his ethnographic material. By attending to particular people in particular situations, he is able to call upon what is culturally shared and, at the same time, to disturb the kind of typification that can reduce cultural analysis to reification.

In Concepts and Persons, Lambek (2021) does not leave his focus on ethical action behind. He contends that calling upon concepts to make sense of the world is an act of ethical judgment. But this does not simply mean that concepts inform ethics. His stronger claim is that part of the human condition involves living with concepts, and this living with imperfect concepts (or with the imperfection that concepts inevitably carry) can generate crucial ethical struggles. He is especially intrigued with the problem of ethical conflicts that arise when people’s concepts are themselves ethically incommensurable, or at least are perceived to be so. He takes up the case of a young Mayotte man, Salim, whose mother has recently died and who is haunted not only by her death but also by the spirits with whom she was long engaged—spirits that he, as a pious Muslim, regards as devils. Lambek considers Salim’s moral anguish through the lens of conceptual incommensurability. Lambek is attracted to concepts as a terminological frame because he believes that “living with concepts suggests a less rigid mode of existence than one of adhering to rules, holding beliefs, acceding to norms, or subjecting to discipline” (ibid.: 3). If concepts are less rigid, as in Lambek’s view, this has everything to do with how he approaches them, privileging their active presence in our lives. He makes clear that he is not speaking of concepts treated as elements of abstract systems but rather as lived in the day to day, as elements of ordinary life. Living with concepts “depicts acts and conversations, investments in given and new concepts and modes of practice or play, and the embrace of ambiguity, imagination, and experiment” (ibid.: 3).

I conclude by suggesting there is something Lambek could make more central in his already rich framework: the way that lived experience can, as Gadamer puts it, ‘elude concepts’. Lambek recognizes the limitations of considering the messiness of people’s lives through a lens of concepts as language games. Not everything can be put into language, after all, and the metaphor of the ‘game’ can suggest an orderliness that lived experience may not have (Ortner 2021). “Messiness is sometimes less distorting than clarity,” Lambek declares (2021: 26). Citing a work by Ann Stoler (2016), Lambek briefly raises the issue of power, acknowledging Stoler’s concern that concepts are embedded in “relations of force” and that “the fictions of their ‘stability’ … entail violences of their own” (Lambek 2021: 17). His hesitation about the relation between concepts and experience is especially apparent in a series of footnotes to Concepts and Persons. In one, citing Wittgenstein, Lambek points out that there is a fundamental incommensurability between concepts and experience (ibid.: 25n67). Lambek also refers to a personal communication with Juliet Floyd, the gist of which is that concepts are supposed to be general while experiences are singular, and this means that there is an unavoidable mismatch between them (ibid.).

The limitation of concepts to illuminate or make sense of experience comes up, in another way, in a dialogue between Lear and Lambek. Lear (2021) offers a commentary on Lambek’s Tanner Lecture that Lambek then responds to. Their discussion concerns their different reading of Cora Diamond’s (1988) essay “Losing Your Concepts.” Lear says that what Diamond wants to awaken us to is “an experience of inadequacy in human conceptual life itself … an experience of the inadequacy of our concepts to encompass the reality they are meant to encompass” (Lear 2018: 1200–1201). Diamond, and subsequently Lear, consider a poem by Ted Hughes that depicts a scene in which someone looks at an old photograph of six young men in careless poses, catching a moment that does not foretell that they will soon all be dead, killed in a war. The poem highlights the ‘difficulty of reality’, quintessentially the difficulty of death, not as a matter of psychological suffering or mourning, but of the impossibility of any concepts to handle its unthinkability.
Lambek takes Lear's insight to be in the spirit of his entire lecture but admits that while he is focused on mistakes with concepts (“category errors”), Diamond is saying something more “radical, pointing toward those moments when the entire conceptual apparatus is revealed as inadequate” (Lambek 2021: 95). Lambek states that he is not describing this kind of experience so much as people's attempts to avoid it, that is, to be able to find a way to live with the concepts they have. I offer another response to Lear, suggesting that Lambek might reconsider his case of Salim as also a momentary collapse of ethical intelligibility. Perhaps Salim's situation also shows us something about the difficulty of reality at the profound level that Lear and Diamond are after. If people's attempts to ‘put things under description’ carry a potential vulnerability of exposure—their inadequacy to meet the moment—it could be that Salim is being forced to face this hard truth. Salim's anguished perplexity comes at a time, just after his mother's death, in which his experience apparently refuses interpretive satisfaction. At least, this is so if interpretation has the goal of offering a kind of meaning-making that allows us to put an experience to rest, to live with it more easily and comprehensibly.

While Lear and Diamond focus on death as one such intractable hard truth, I head in a rather different direction, building upon Hannah Arendt's consideration of concepts. Perhaps stark, painful moments such as the one Salim faces are important in our lives precisely because they destabilize our concepts, or at least make them hard to live with. In two essays, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” (Arendt 2003b) and “Thinking and Moral Considerations” (Arendt 2003c), Arendt asks, what is thinking? She poses this question phenomenologically, that is, thinking as a form of experience and as a process? (Arendt 2003c: 166). Thinking, she tells us, involves asking questions about concepts, what she calls “invisibles” (ibid.: 183). Concepts are “frozen thoughts” (ibid.: 170) that group together particulars. This clustering together allows for thoughts to be swift—but it also freezes them. It is clear that for Arendt (as for Lambek) even the most ordinary words are candidates for concepts. However, it is also clear that Arendt has certain types of concepts in mind when she considers the potential danger of frozen thought, namely, those political and ethical concepts (or words or categories) that are especially valued in a community and carry substantial normative weight (Mattingly 2019b: 425–426).

Arendt (2003c) finds Socrates a master of defrosting through his relentless style of questioning, and she uses him as an exemplar who can teach us about thinking as a form of experience. From a Socratic perspective, thinking is not definitive. Questions about concepts cannot be answered. They can only be returned to be rethought. Put more strongly, thinking is destructive. It is not merely impractical, but also an obstacle to practice. It interrupts action, no matter what one is doing (ibid.: 164). Furthermore, it is not only destructive of action (interrupting it, halting it), but it is also self-destructive. That is, thinking destroys its own results just as they might crystalize and take on the aura of certainty. It is “out of order,” Arendt says, citing Heidegger (ibid.: 160).

Thinking may be impractical in itself, but it is crucial to ethics. This is rather surprising at first glance. After all, ethics is eminently practical, intimately bound up with everyday social and political life, and directed toward action. Since thinking has such an aversion to its own results as “solid axioms”—Arendt (2003c: 160) quotes Kant here—its results will never yield any final truth, code of conduct, or definition of good and evil, right and wrong. But if thinking is incapable of delivering any decisive rules of practice or providing solid moral codes, how can it be so ethically consequential? Arendt's ingenious proposal shows her debt to phenomenology: it must be the activity itself as an experience rather than its results that are what is at stake in its protective force against evil (ibid.: 167). Experience rather than doctrines are what is ethically crucial. There must be something about the experience of uncertainty, a recognition of the “weakness of
words,” as Plato says (ibid.: 162), the experience of not-knowing that protects. Non-thinking, by contrast, manifests itself in doctrinal certainty (ibid.: 168).3

Rather than looking to Socratic questioning, I have proposed exploring an experience-rich alternative: the ‘perplexing particular’ (Mattingly 2019b). By this, I mean an encounter that not only surprises, in the sense of striking unexpectedly, but also eludes explanation. Such a particular (it could be a person, a scene, an event, an object) emerges with an irreducible singularity. It has a stubborn concreteness that cannot easily be erased by subsuming it under general concepts. And yet it is entangled with concepts. This is because, at the same time that it exudes a singular presence, it confounds or disturbs concepts and categories themselves. Something has happened, we have had an encounter, but what is it that has happened? Who is this person or this object or this scene that confronts me, or engages me, or appears to me in a way that I cannot account for (ibid.: 427)?

In Concepts and Persons, Lambek (2021) presents just such a perplexing particular, the case of Salim, who, in the midst of the deepest disquiet over recent events in his life, strikes up a conversation with the anthropologist to think things over. Lambek does the anthropological work of putting Salim’s descriptions of his situation under further description. But the perplexity of the case seems to exceed or elude the descriptive frameworks that he and Salim offer. Salim’s—and Lambek’s—perplexity engages not only Lear, Ortner, and Robbins (the text commentators), but also the readers who encounter Salim’s story. Our perplexity invites further interpretation but also the sense of inadequacy of all our interpretive efforts. I return to Arendt. She, like Lambek, is concerned about the life of concepts. She is especially concerned about the ethical dangers posed when concepts are not continually questioned but simply function in society as received wisdom. A provocation to question our own ethical certainties is precisely what Lambek’s work invites. This is the ethical gift he offers.

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NOTES

1. It is worth noting that the discussion of judgment I just cited from Lambek’s text was an effort to clarify the Aristotelian way he was calling upon this term in response to Robbins’s (2021) commentary in Concepts and Persons.
2. Arendt (2003c) notes that even the simplest concept—a ‘house’, for example—is a term that collects together many kinds of dwellings.
3. I offer a more elaborated discussion of Arendt’s consideration of concepts in Mattingly (2019).
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A young spirit medium possessed by a bandit spirit (*jiriky*) guards the roya compound at the Great Service in Mahajanga, July 2012. © Sarah Gould

Michael at the Great Service in Mahajanga 2012 with a senior spirit medium (right) and a junior spirit who has playfully exchanged hats with him for the photo. © Sarah Gould

Michael taking notes, speaking to princess Samaraty Said (daughter of Ampanjaka Amina) in Mahajanga 2012. © Sarah Gould