

Moral Borderlands

Moral Change and Ethical Normativity in Liminal Spaces

Cecilie Eriksen

When Gregor Samsa awoke from troubled dreams one morning, he found that he had been transformed in his bed into an enormous bug ... ‘What’s happened to me?’ he thought. It was no dream.

—Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*

Can Liminal Spaces Be Ethical Voids?

When life changes in major ways, unknown moral territories open up. This can happen during periods of war, if we become severely mentally ill or when our loved ones enter the terminal phase of life. In such liminal situations, humans often experience ethical disorientation and a lack of clarity in figuring out how to go on, as their ordinary moral compass and practical judgement seem to be of little use. If ordinary ethics does not suffice, how shall we then understand the ethics of liminal spaces? Are liminal spaces ethical vacuums, where there are no moral obligations or ethical guidance as to how to go on? Or do we find forms of ethical normativity even in the most radically liminal situations imaginable? These are the questions this chapter addresses.

In the following, I philosophically investigate the nature of ethical normativity in liminal spaces by introducing Jarrett Zigon’s concept of ‘a moral breakdown’, Jonathan Lear’s work on ‘irony’ and Anne O’Byrne’s idea of ‘the end of ethics’. Using these concepts, I consider examples of care in three cases of life in the borderlands of human communities, namely, the life of homeless people, the life of the *Muselmänner* in the concentration camps of the Second World War and the post-transformation life of Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s short story ‘The Metamorphosis’. Against this background, I conclude that no matter

how radical the liminal spaces of human lives are, they are never ethical vacuums. There will thus always be ethical guidance to find during and after any moral change.¹

Moral Breakdowns, Irony and the End of Ethics

And for a little while he lay there calmly, breathing very gently, as if perhaps expecting the total silence to restore him to his real, understandable condition. ... it occurred to him how simple everything would be if someone came to help him. ... Now, completely apart from the fact that the doors were locked [from the inside and he no longer had hands able to unlock them], should he really have called for help? Despite all his tribulations, he was unable to suppress a smile at that thought.

—Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*

The concept of ‘liminality’ originated in anthropology around 1900 in Arnold van Gennep’s work on ritual theory and was further developed by Victor Turner in the 1960s. Liminality here designates the middle period in a ritual of passage, where the participant has left their old status but has not yet completed the ritual and therefore not entered a new role in society, for example, as ‘adult’ or ‘married’ (Van Gennep 2004: 21; Turner 1967: 93–111). The person’s status in this ‘in-between space’ is thus undetermined and ambiguous, even though the ritual itself entails a strict adherence to rules and a clear hierarchical distinction between, for example, the priest and the participant. Since Van Gennep coined the term, it has travelled beyond anthropology and into other academic fields, such as sociology, philosophy, and psychology (Thomassen 2014: 1–109; Rothem and Fischer 2018). On its journey, the meaning of the term has broadened; it can now designate the dissolution of order in many kinds of change and ‘in-between spaces’, as well as the resulting normative uncertainty and ambiguity (O’Reilly 2018; Thomassen 2014: 113–229). In this chapter, the term has the broad modern sense and is used to designate traits of the lives of people living on the border of or outside the ‘normal life’ of the society they live in, in ways that, to a greater degree than ordinarily, make it an open question what is ethically at stake in their lives.

In the following sections, I give an account of three concepts that can serve as analytical prisms to highlight nuances in our thinking on the ethical normativity of liminal spaces, namely, Zigon’s notion of ‘a moral breakdown’, Lear’s concept of ‘irony’ and O’Byrne’s idea of ‘the end of ethics’.

Moral Breakdowns: When Ordinary Morality Comes into View

‘God forbid,’ called his mother, who was weeping by this time, ‘he may be seriously ill, and we’re torturing him. Grete! ... fetch the doctor fast! Did you hear Gregor speaking just now?’ ‘That was an animal’s voice,’ said the chief clerk.

—Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*

In many situations in ordinary life in stable cultural contexts, adults unreflectively act in ways that are considered morally acceptable. In current Danish society, this could amount to taking care of our children, helping our neighbours if needed, not misleading a stranger who asks for directions, keeping our word, etc. But occasionally, even in highly stable cultural contexts, people experience a ‘moral breakdown,’ that is, ‘a moment that shakes one out of the unreflective everydayness of being moral’ (Zigon 2007: 133).

A moral breakdown occurs, and Zigon is here using Heidegger’s terms, ‘when something that is usually ready-to-hand becomes present-to-hand’ – such as when the hammer we are using suddenly breaks and we are forced to reflect on how to proceed (Zigon 2007: 136). A moral breakdown can be viewed as opening a mild form of liminal space, as we are uncertain of how to proceed. Reflection can lead us to find a way forward that is well within the ordinary ethics of our society, but sometimes it reveals a need to transform our own or our culture’s moral ideas, values or practices.

The examples of moral breakdowns that Zigon offers are ethical dilemmas, such as being asked a troubling question that one does not want to answer, having an opportunity to steal or responding when a disagreement arises (Zigon 2007: 137). All are situations that most of us encounter at some point in our lives. Moral breakdowns, and the mild form of liminality they entail, are more prone to occur in connection with changes in life. For instance, when our offspring transition from childhood into young adulthood, parents must bring an end to what has, for some years, been their ordinary treatment of their child and reflect on how to balance, for example, ‘taking care’ and ‘making room for independence’ in moving forward. Becoming an apprentice, taking up a new job, moving to another area and death all constitute typical changes in a normal lifetime that can initiate halts in our ordinary moral ways of going about.

A moral breakdown is thus not – as the term could suggest to those of us who are a wee bit dramatically inclined – a radical break with ordinary everyday life. Zigon’s concept of a moral breakdown is, rather, ‘a phenomenological description of the experience of coming to a moral halt and having to reflect before being able to go on’ (Zigon 2007: 144; see also 2018a: 122, 2018b: 146–49). It is a normal part of our practices and everyday lives with each other, not a rupture (Robbins 2015: 770–71).²

Irony: What Has *Any* of This, Past and Present, to Do with Teaching?

But Gregor had become much calmer. To be sure, he now realized that his speech was no longer intelligible ... But anyway they were now believing that there was something wrong with him and they were ready to help him ... He felt that he was once more drawn into the circle of humanity.

—Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*

Sometimes, it goes without saying what we morally ought to do and we do it without giving it any thought. At other times, we come to a halt and have to reflect on what is morally required, or the right thing to do in this particular situation, before we can go on. Through the concept of ‘irony’, Lear seeks to capture experiences that are different from the kinds of moral reflection that are part of the normal everyday practices and life of a particular community (Lear 2011: 5, 119).³

For instance, as a Christian believer or as a primary-school teacher, we can – and are also encouraged to – step back from our ordinary life and practice and ask, ‘What does a proper Christian life consist in?’ or ‘What does good teaching consist in?’ These are not cases of ironic reflection and experience because such forms of stepping back and reflecting are part of what being a good Christian and a good teacher involves. Both are part of living up to the ideal of being a teacher or a Christian. We are thus still inside, not outside, Christendom or the practice of teaching (Lear 2011: 7–8), because we are still perfectly sure that there is such a thing as ‘being a proper Christian’ or ‘being a good teacher’.

Irony, on the other hand, is the experience of ‘a breakdown in the perspective one has hereto taken oneself to have’ and to find oneself asking: among all the teachers, has there ever been a teacher (Lear 2011: 5, 22–23, 183)? ‘With irony’, Lear explains, ‘my experience is not that all my acts fall miserably short of my principle, rather, my experience is of my principle falling weirdly short of itself’ (2011: 101). The ironic experience is not an experience of distance, disengagement or nihilistic meaninglessness. It is an experience of commitment to one’s practices. One has come to a disorienting halt, because one cares – cares about being a Christian or about teaching, etc. But, according to Lear, the experience of irony does not in itself lead us in any particular direction. It is an ‘immanent form of longing for transcendence’ (Lear 2011: 117):

I may have only the barest inkling of the transformations I would have to undergo to be someone capable of such [Christian] love; but at the same time, I vividly recognize that the range of possibilities that Christendom has put forward as the field of loving one’s neighbor is wildly inadequate to the task. (Lear 2011: 14–15)

Irony does express a longing to go in a certain direction, but one does not yet know what that direction could be and one’s understanding of the past does not provide any basis for what to do next (Lear 2011: 18, 19).

The ironic experience is thus, as I interpret Lear, the experience of a radical liminal space opening up; one is now in between everything one formerly took to be, for example, Christianity or teaching and an unknown future form of Christendom or teaching.⁴ Thus, either what Lear describes is a more radical form of liminality than what we see in Zigon’s moral breakdowns, or ironic experiences are a radical form of moral breakdowns. Even more radical still, however, is O’Byrne’s idea of ‘the end of ethics.’

The End of Ethics: ‘It Was Impossible to Do Right by Them’

The sharp sound of the [door] lock, as it finally snapped back, woke Gregor up completely. ... he heard the chief clerk utter a loud ‘Oh!’ – it sounded like the wind howling – ... [the clerk] stepped slowly backward as if driven away by some invisible force ... Gregor’s mother ... took two steps toward Gregor and collapsed in the midst of her petticoats ... His father clenched his fist with a hostile expression ...; then he looked around the parlor in uncertainty, shaded his eyes with his hands and wept so hard that it shook his powerful chest. ... Next, the door was slammed shut with the stick ...

—Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*

Human life can involve situations in which we not only come to particular forms of moral halts but also lose our moral bearings in life. Such encompassing losses of moral orientation happen, for instance, during prolonged periods of starvation, rapid colonization and civil war (Turnbull 1976; Lear 2008; Meinert forthcoming). In these situations, we, according to O’Byrne, come to ‘the end of ethics’. The end of ethics is contexts in which ‘ethics no longer applies’ and ‘familiar ethical categories are quickly exhausted’ (O’Byrne 2018: 5, 2). At the end of ethics, not only do humans experience a total loss of moral orientation, but the context is also such that ethical concepts have no meaningful application.

O’Byrne points to genocides as settings in which everything becomes possible and therefore places where ‘neither political nor historical nor simply moral standards’ (2018: 7) can be meaningfully used: ‘Survivors of genocide sometimes describe the moment when they realize that ethics no longer applies. ... For all concerned [both Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994], in their different ways, ethics is finished’ (2018: 5). Such was also the situation for the Second World War concentration camp prisoners on the verge of death from hunger and overwork, the so-called *Muselmänner*:⁵ ‘It was impossible to do right by the *Muselmann*’ (O’Byrne 2018: 6). The *Muselmann* was considered someone who could not be ‘done right by’ or helped because the *Muselmann* had been transformed into ‘a non-human’ (Agamben 1999: 47, 52) and because the *Muselmänner* were believed to be doomed to die (Ryn and Klodzinaki 1987: 150).⁶ With these examples, O’Byrne argues that human life can contain situations in which it is not possible to come up with an ethical response and our ethical concepts cannot get a hold. Here, we are at the end of ethics.

I understand the concept of ‘the end of ethics’ in a radical manner. That is, I interpret it as designating an ethical vacuum – a context in which there is no ethical normativity. It is thus not only a ‘name signaling that ethics *as we know it* has been foreclosed’ (O’Byrne 2018: 8, my emphasis), which is also what happens in an ironic experience. But, as the ironic experience opens for a rebirth of an ethics that is able to deal with the issue that brought ‘ethics as we know it’ to a halt, this does not seem to capture O’Byrne’s idea. At ‘the end of ethics’, we are beyond any possible ethics.⁷

Life in the Borderlands of Human Community

It was only when he had reached the door that he noticed what had really lured him there; ... a basin stood there, filled with milk in which little slices of white bread were floating. He could almost have laughed for joy, because he was even hungrier than in the morning, and immediately he plunged his head into the milk.

—Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*

Before I bring the concepts of moral breakdown, irony and the end of ethics to bear on a discussion of normativity, I will supplement the ongoing story of Gregor Samsa's post-transformation life with real-life cases of existence at the edges of the normal human community, namely, the life of the homeless in the United States, London and Paris today and the life of prisoners in the concentration camps during the Second World War.⁸ These cases have been chosen because they all involve life transformations that give rise to liminality with ethical implications. They can therefore function as moral laboratories, allowing us to witness, investigate or be reminded of the ethical normativity of such spaces (Mattingly 2014). I have chosen mainly to focus on examples of care in the stories. This is not because I consider care to be ethically the most salient trait of these cases or the essential core of ethics.⁹ Rather, I have done so because care in various forms showed up in all three cases and because 'care' is a term that has a normative use and it is often, though not exclusively, used to refer to something we consider important and morally positive (Frankfurt 1995: 80–94; Lenhard 2017).¹⁰

Homeless Life

But soon he pulled it out again in disappointment ... he didn't at all like the milk, which was formerly his favorite beverage and which had therefore surely been placed there by his sister for that very reason.

—Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*

Homeless people in Western societies today are often seen by others and by themselves as 'estranged from society' (Desjarlais 1994: 886) and homeless life can, in some respects, be said to unfold in a liminal space at the fringes of, or outside, the ordinary life of these societies. Homeless people have often lost contact with their families and former circle of friends; they have lost their jobs, most of their possessions and a permanent place to claim as home. Dave explains his situation as follows:

I am twenty-eight years young now. I have had it all – job, home, so-called normal life, and time after time ... well, not so hard to guess. I have lost it all, job, home, family, friends, anyone I cared for or cared for me. ... My family is from up in North London and I haven't seen them for ages now. That's where I grew up, where my childhood was and stuff. And my friends. I would really love to see them. ... But, yeah, they live in a different world. (Lenhard 2017: 316)

Like all people, the homeless spend a good portion of their days taking care of basic needs, such as the need for food, drink, sleep, shelter and a toilet, but the conditions under which they do so are very different to those of the majority of people in their society. They often include being at odds with ordinary morality through breaking the law by begging, stealing, trespassing, littering, sleeping rough and being involved in ‘disturbances of the peace’. For many, they also involve taking care of a drug habit (Lenhard 2017).

When Robert Desjarlais’s homeless informants from Boston describe the character of their lives, they use terms like ‘struggling along’, enduring ‘a singular forced sensorium of cold weather, fear, anonymity, transience’, and getting ‘beat up, cheated, robbed, disrespected’, so one has to be alert at all times. As a result, the homeless end up being hypersensitive, unable to deal with distractions, unable to gather their thoughts and unable to remember when things happened, what happened and who they were with (Desjarlais 1994: 886, 891–97). The liminality of homeless life is thus not only characteristic of the social, material and legal conditions, but also of one’s inner life, in the form of, for example, scattered memories, thoughts and feelings. As Julie explains: ‘You lose everything but a sense of survival’ (Desjarlais 1994: 890).

Yet, despite being a life of struggling along, in which it is hard to hold on to anything other than a sense of survival, there are still forms of care. Desjarlais describes several instances of ‘self-care’, in which the homeless have found ways to calm and comfort themselves in the midst of a life that is anything but calm and comfortable:

Jimmy says he used to pick up a newspaper and hold onto a word and that would calm him down. Chuck works on puzzles for the same reason. ... Some try to stay calm by holding onto a thought, a word, a gesture, or a cigarette ... People pace, play dead or hold onto ... the Bible to get through the day. ... ‘If I can just read the Bible for 15, 16 hours a day’, Alice says ‘and just block out all the rest, then I’m okay.’ (Desjarlais 1994: 891, 892, 886)

Homeless life is described as an isolated and lonely existence, but Desjarlais also recounts examples of relational care given and received among the homeless (see also Lenhard 2017). One example is what seems to be Matthew’s first surprised and then respectful response to Barbara’s need for solitude:

One day Matthew, a middle-aged man from Mississippi, sat down at a table where Barbara was seated. ‘I want to be alone,’ she said. ‘Alone?’ he asked. ‘How can you be alone here [in the shelter]? Everybody’s together. You could be off somewhere by yourself.’ A minute later, Matthew walked off. (Desjarlais 1994: 891)

Another example is Bruce’s advice-giving: ‘Bruce tells Larry not to be too stern in lending out money. You have to “work in international waters”, give “some room in between”, and tend to “the give and take”’ (Desjarlais 1994: 893). As Desjarlais notes, ‘The advice captures well the ethics of a place where money can be tight and debts are not soon forgotten’ (1994: 893). Even though adults

can experience the unasked-for advice given by other adults not as caring, but as annoying paternalism, in this case, passing on what practical judgement amounts to with respect to a certain aspect of homeless life can be a form of care-taking, as homelessness is not a form of life most Americans are raised to navigate. And then there is the care provided by passers-by in the form of money and positive attention when the homeless are begging: ‘Many people think, that if they give, that keeps me on the street – but it really makes life bearable. It’s not all about money ... What I appreciate is respect. Respect and understanding make me feel like a human being’ (Lenhard 2019a: 1).

What I would like to conclude at this point is that ethically positive forms of care can unfold in life at the margin of ordinary life, even though what counts as care here can take not just familiar but also somewhat unfamiliar forms. The next case is what many, such as Giorgio Agamben (2002: 41–86), consider one of the most extreme forms of liminal life that history has witnessed, namely, the life of the *Muselmänner* in the concentration camps during the Second World War.

Muselmänner: ‘The Men in Decay’

But his sister immediately noticed with surprise that the basin was still full. ... In order to test his likings, she brought him a big selection all spread out on an old newspaper. There were old, half-rotten vegetables; bones from their supper, coated with a white gravy that had solidified; a few raisins and almonds; a cheese that two days earlier Gregor would have considered inedible; a dry slice of bread ... And from a feeling of delicacy, since she knew Gregor wouldn’t eat in her presence, she withdrew hastily.

—Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*

Life in the concentration camps of the Nazi regime during the Second World War can be seen as a liminal form of life because of the exceptionally cruel and degrading ways in which the prisoners were treated and the extreme conditions in which they were forced to live (Levi 2008: 21–22, 100–1; Nyiszli 2012: 51, 61). This way of life was not only on the border of or outside the life of the normal society in which the camps were placed (as ‘homelessness’ is). It was, furthermore, a life at the border of any possible human life. It was a form of life leading to the corruption and annihilation of human life, and it was designed thus (Ryn and Klodzinaki 1987: 150; Nyiszli 2012).

In the camps, the millions of prisoners were either murdered immediately upon arrival (by being gassed, shot or burned alive) or – if considered suitable for slave work or medical experiments – separated from their families, stripped of their possessions, clothes, hair and names, and sent into the concentration camps. Camp life meant that they had to, among other things, live in bug- and disease-ridden, overcrowded wooden barracks with poor sanitation; sleep in tiny bunks with several other people; freeze during winter in

extremely insufficient clothing; endure standing for hour-long prisoner counts every morning and evening; do many hours of hard physical work every day; suffer all kinds of physical and mental abuse by the guards; and live on a diet consisting of a slice of bread, a bit of jam and thin cabbage and potato soup each day. There were regular ‘selections’ during which prisoners were picked out to be killed in the gas chambers. The average life span in the camp was only a few months (Iversen, Kjerkegaard and Nielsen 2008; Frankl 2004). The end stage of camp life was, as mentioned earlier, ‘Muselmann-hood’. The *Muselmann* was the prisoner who, due to abuse, starvation and exhaustion, was a walking skeleton, ‘neither dead nor quite alive’ (Ryn and Klodzinaki 1987: 89; Levi 2008: 103):

A real Muselmann didn’t care for his own personal cleanliness nor his food’s. With hands covered in faeces he could eat garbage from the bin, he could drink coffee from a pot others had peed into; under no circumstances did he want to take off the rags and blankets he had wrapped himself into to wash himself or cleanse himself from insects, as if he did not at all feel that the lice was biting him. He did not respond normally, e.g., to frost; he could freeze completely, until his toes, hands, or ears fell off, as long as he did not have to endure any additional effort, such as to stand up from the place where he lay, to stamp his feet, to rub his ears, to ‘beat himself warm’ with his arms etc. ... The Muselmann ate whatever he could lay his hands on, even cold turnip soup, leftovers from raw turnip, cabbage, peels, rotting vegetable waste, moldy bread – he even ate while relieving himself at the same time. (Maria Elzbieta Jezierska, in Ryn and Klodzinaki 1987: 113–14; author’s translation)

The *Muselmänner* died every day and everywhere in the camp. Their bodies gave up during meals, at the latrine, in bed, during work, as they rested in the sun against a wall, during the prisoner counts, in the gas chambers and during beatings by the guards. However, some prisoners returned from ‘Muselmann-hood’ and survived the camps (Ryn and Klodzinaki 1987: 121–24). Here are some of their stories:

I got a pain in the right lung, in the right side, and a high fever. I came back to the sick bay and was placed next to a young man from Copenhagen, Børge. ... He could see that this could be the end. I was becoming what the Germans called a Muselmann. ... Then Børge decided that I was going home. He started to scold me and said, now you have to go and wash yourself, now you have to go to the toilet, now you have to eat. And he picked me up, so that I overcame the crisis. (Nielsen 2012: 131; author’s translation)

That I was able to escape from this state is something I owe to my companions who summoned all means to get me out of this paralysis and stupor ... They organised some water from the camp kitchen, undressed me, and rubbed me off. At that point, something happened inside me, it was like an electric current that made me turn into a normal inmate who wanted to survive no matter the cost. (Feliksa Piekarska in Ryn and Klodzinaki 1987: 122–23; author’s translation)

I understood this state better when I gradually became a Muselmann myself. Hunger, cold, excessive labour, fear of death, pain, and this terrible filth that to this day accompanies me and the sight of which I still cannot bear. Also the fever – from incipient epidemic typhus – all that had as a consequence that I lost my spirit and no longer believed in any point of continued survival ... After I had survived the typhus, I weighed 39 kg, but during my convalescence, my companions did everything so that I regained my strength. ... The change of work and the packages that I would later receive from home, gave me strength again. (Zygmunt Podhalanski in Ryn and Klodzinaki 1987: 108; author's translation)

I happened to meet Lorenzo. ... an Italian civilian worker brought me a piece of bread and the remainder of his ration every day for six months; he gave me a vest of his, full of patches; he wrote a postcard on my behalf to Italy and brought me a reply. For all this he neither asked nor accepted any reward, because he was good and simple and did not think that one did good for a reward. ... I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage, extraneous to hatred and terror; something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving. (Levi 2008: 139, 142)¹¹

All these stories exhibit examples of care: the care of sharing limited food and clothing, of washing a sick and soiled fellow prisoner, of pulling strings to get a weak prisoner less arduous work, of putting an effort into returning hope to one who had lost all hope, of sending a letter and food to family members in need. All these stories make it clear that it was this kind of care – as well as lucky coincidences – that saved the lives of those who had entered 'Muselmannhood'. And just as life as a homeless person gives rise to forms of care that would not necessarily be care outside that context, so also in the context of camp life the character of care mutates:

Once one of the inmates from the same hall in block 3a received a package with a whole kilogram of smoked bacon. When the news got around, we all cast envious glances at the lucky devil. At night I woke up. An inmate moaned quietly at the other end of the hall, but soon stopped making a sound. The next morning, we found out that the inmate was dead. It was the one who had received the bacon package. Not a bit of bacon was found next to him. Overnight ... he had eaten the whole kilo of bacon. This 'feeding orgy' had been too much for his starved organism. (Adam Jurkiewicz in Ryn and Klodzinaki 1987: 120; author's translation)

The above is one of several tragic examples of how what amounts to care-taking under normal circumstances – providing plenty of fatty food for a hungry and undernourished person – is not care-taking in the context of the extreme starvation conditions experienced by the camp inmates (see also Ryn and Klodzinaki 1987: 123). Even though the packages of food sent from home often saved the lives of prisoners, they were also occasionally what triggered their death.

In the concluding section, I will discuss the issue of ethical normativity in liminal spaces by bringing the concepts of ‘moral breakdowns’, ‘irony’ and ‘the end of ethics’ into dialogue with the cases of homelessness, camp life and Gregor Samsa’s post-transformation life.

The End, the Beginning, the Fleeting In-Between

Quickly, one after the other, tears of contentment coming to his eyes, he devoured the cheese, the vegetables and the gravy.

—Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*

Moral change can entail liminality, and the concepts of ‘a moral breakdown’, ‘ironic experience’ and ‘an end of ethics’ are all helpful in shedding light on the ethical normativity of liminal spaces, as the concepts capture increasing degrees of liminality, both in the sense of increasing personal or collective experiences of moral disorientation and in the sense of increasing changes in the context in which a person’s or a community’s ‘ordinary ethics’ can make sense.

If a moral breakdown halts one’s going about and moral reflection is necessary before one can go on, then we can recognize this form of ethical liminality, for example, in Matthew’s response to Barbara’s request to be left alone. At first, the request seems to make no sense to him, because the homeless shelter is a crowded place where no one can be physically alone, so why is she here if this is what she wants? He is surprised and this brings him to a reflective halt. On reflection, he decides to go on by respecting her wish and leaving the table (many know the feeling of being alone in a crowd and perhaps this is not always bad). Similarly, Gregor Samsa’s sister is surprised and brought to a halt by the fact that Gregor has not drunk his favourite beverage. She faces yet another moral aspect of the liminal space created by a family member’s transformation into a giant bug: if she wants to care for her brother by attending to his need for food, she must reflect and revise the ordinary ways of doing so.

For the homeless, the prisoners arriving at the camp and the beetle-human Gregor, the feeling arises that ‘none of this’ (e.g. the values, principles, ideals, practices and future hopes of their former lives) is of any help in figuring out how to live a life worth living in these radically changed circumstances. Primo Levi thus challenges us to contemplate ‘the possible meaning in the Lager of the words “good” and “evil”, “just” and “unjust”; let everybody judge, on the basis of the picture we have outlined and of the examples given above, how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire’ (2008: 98). The feeling and reality of being despairingly lost, not only with regard to a particular practice in one’s life, such as ‘teaching’ or ‘homemaking’, but with regard to one’s whole existence, captures a fundamental struggle in all of these lives, which can be characterized as a pervasive form of ironic experience brought about by changed life circumstances.

Coming to 'the end of ethics' in the above sense is thus something humans do. We despair. We feel that ethics as we know it no longer applies, we can be right about that and we can have no idea of how new values, concepts and a sense of life purpose could be developed. Humans can also be in states in which they do not have any 'moral agency', such as when newly born, in a coma or in severe states of starvation, dementia or insanity. Here, the conditions are lacking for these individuals to be, for instance, morally creative, obligated, responsible or blameworthy. Philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, Agamben and O'Byrne understand the concentration camps as institutions that are highly successful at eliminating the moral personhood of their prisoners, in part because they make it impossible for prisoners to act in morally good ways most of the time. This points to the structural and relational conditions for morality and for a life worth living to be able to unfold, as well as to the need for politics. However, even though we can say that we come to 'an end of ethics' in ways such as those described above, none of these situations, I would argue, amount to ethical vacuums.

All three narratives show that there is something, which amounts to care for the homeless, care for the *Muselmann* and even care for the beetle-human Gregor Samsa. In homeless life, care could be having one's personal space respected, having something to hold on to, being given good advice or the recognition that one is a fellow human being. Considering the extraordinary circumstances of life in the concentration camp, many of the examples of care found there are strikingly ordinary. Every day, all over the world, care workers and family members also wash sick adults; over the course of a lifetime, many people give or receive encouragement when life gives rise to despair; and when a co-worker falls ill, colleagues often try to share the workload. It seems, to address Levi's question, that the ordinary moral world, to a large extent, did survive on the other side of the barbed wire, even though 'Thou shall not steal' was replaced by 'Thou shall generally, though not in any case, steal' as a moral commandment (see, e.g., Levi 2008: 101, 190), and even though almost everyone who entered the camp lost their moral bearings for a while or permanently. It was thus not impossible to do right by the *Muselmann*, and he was not beyond help: he could be shown respect and helped, and he could be mistreated and let down. Finally, the care that Gregor's sister shows for her brother, manifested in how she manages to provide him with nourishment, is an exemplary display of clear-eyed acceptance of a radically changed reality, combined with a creative, experimental empathy. What these narratives highlight is, I believe, that in any type of liminal space in human life, there are forms of ethical normativity at stake. We are, in this sense, never at the end of ethics.

If life contains no ethical voids, a consequence of this is that no matter how radical the change in our life, society or environment is, there is the possibility of finding ethical guidance in how to navigate the change well. Gregor's sister illustrates one way of doing so, namely, through empathetic experimentation. She enters a moral lab, tests Gregor's likes and learns that nourishing food for him is now very different to what it was before. But the stories also show that

different things are ethically required of us during change. Gregor's change calls for the investigation and development of a new way of living and a new way of being a family (a calling his family neglects, with the result that the story ends badly). But the development of a new way of life and new moral values did not seem to be the ethical calling in camp life. Rather, that seemed to be a calling for a holding on to and a return to ordinary care, decency and respect – as well as a calling for new political and legal institutions.

In our attempts to deal with moral change, whether it is the struggle to reassemble a life out of the scraps left by a war or a new generation's rebellious experimentation with sexuality and gender concepts, we find ourselves in a field where we are neither the masters nor the slaves of moral creation. The success of our endeavours is determined by a mutually interdependent interplay between us and the world, and in this work, we are always and never at the end of ethics.¹²

Cecilie Eriksen is a moral philosopher who works for the Danish National Center of Ethics. She is the author of *Moral Change – Dynamics, Structure and Normativity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). She has also published on basic trust, moral progress and Ludwig Wittgenstein and co-edited and contributed to volumes on topics such as law and legitimacy, modern work life and contextual ethics. The latest of these is *Philosophical Perspectives on Moral Certainty* (Routledge, forthcoming).

Notes

1. In this chapter, the terms 'ethical' and 'moral' are used interchangeably. The term 'we' generally refers to something along the lines of either 'me, the writer, and you, the reader' or 'people in current Western societies with a background similar to this author and perhaps the reader', and occasionally it means 'human beings in general'. Hopefully, the context of use in each case makes it fairly clear what is meant. I am perfectly happy to accept all instances of 'we' as 'grammatical fictions' (Sandis 2020).
2. Zigon has, however, criticized the so-called 'ordinary ethics' approach in moral anthropology (see Lambek 2010; 2015; Das 2007, 2015, 2020; Mattingly 2014, 2018). His critiques are, for example, that the approach puts too much stress on what is ordinary, so that the approach turns into endorsing moralism and conservatism, and thus overlooks the unordinary folded into the ordinary, as well as the needs for radical ethical critique and a change of ordinary ethics (Zigon 2014, 2018a: 18–19, 2018b: 15–16).
3. Lear works with three degrees of irony: 'the experience of irony', 'the capacity for irony' and 'ironic existence' (Lear 2011: 4, 119). I only focus on ironic experience and reflection.
4. Lear underlines that we can have this longing without anything coming of it, that is, it does not *necessarily* lead to any moral changes in our practices or life, but ironic experiences can be the initiating spark of such changes.
5. '*Muselmann*' was a term used in several concentration camps and a phenomenon observed in all camps. Its literal meaning is Muslim and it has been suggested that it was used because the *Muselmänner* were often curled up on the ground in exhaustion, resembling a Muslim in prayer (Ryn and Klodzinaki 1987; Agamben 1999: 41).

6. See also Shoah Resource Center and Levi (2008: 101–3). Oster (2014) has an illuminating discussion of why these are both false and morally highly problematic conceptions.
7. I would like to leave open the question of whether O’Byrne’s idea of ‘an end of ethics’ does imply what I term an ethical vacuum, even though several of her formulations suggest this and even though she did not protest at this interpretation upon reading it. I still suspect, however, that due to different ways of conceptualizing ‘the ethical’ (see Eriksen 2020a: 145–61, 2020b; O’Byrne 2019: 2–3), there might be more overlap in what we aim to say than what is displayed here.
8. Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* was first published in 1915. It has been interpreted as a critical commentary on how some types of ‘modern’ work life lead to a dehumanizing of the worker, as well as an unflattering portrait of a certain culture’s inability to deal well with encountering what is non-ordinary and alien. Other descriptions of life in liminal spaces can be found in, for example, Turnbull (1976), O’Reilly (2018) and Zigon (2014, 2018). In all of their fieldwork, familiar and more unfamiliar examples of care, given and received, can be found (see, e.g., O’Reilly 2018: 837–8; Zigon 2018: 84–89, 97–99). The cases used here are thus not unique in this respect.
9. For an illuminating overview of the concept of ‘care’ and ‘care ethics’, see Mattingly and McKearney (forthcoming). My view on the nature of ethics can be found in Eriksen (2020a, 2020b).
10. It is, for example, doubtful that caring for a drug, in the way that Johannes Lenhard documents some of his homeless informants as doing, is a good thing (Lenhard 2017) and we do not mean it as moral praise if we say of someone that she cares more about money than her children.
11. Levi did not (as far as I recall) identify himself as a Muselmann. He did, however, come across as one to others (see, e.g., Levi 2008: 121). Consult Oster (2014) for why we should not consider *Muselmänner* a distinct group of prisoners.
12. I would like to thank Anne O’Byrne, Robert Orsi, Jarrett Zigon and the members of the research groups EAI and PROGRESS for valuable critique and comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. I would like to thank Hanno Sauer for help with translation of the German quotations. The research was supported by Independent Research Fund Denmark – Humanities (grant no. 7013-00068B) and the European Research Council (grant no. #851043).

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