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The Limits of Ethnographic Turn

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Abstract

This article reflects on the ethnographic turn in recent comparative religious ethics (CRE). Comparative religious ethicists should be lauded because they privilege engagement with non-Western intellectual sources. Such engagement is important since it undermines the erroneous view that non-Western sources are either soft or are part of someone else's commitments and therefore irrelevant. Yet *some* recent comparative work stops at merely describing these non-Western sources, moving ethics away from its normative tasks. If CRE is to remain relevant to broader conversations in moral and political theory, comparative religious ethicists should perform two tasks: they should evaluate the object under consideration and illustrate how thinking about it may contribute to broader thinking about common moral and political problems.

Keywords: comparison, ethnography, evaluation, moral theory, prescription

Introduction

There is much to commend about recent comparative religious ethics.¹ Comparative religious ethicists privilege engagement with non-Western intellectual sources that many moral and political theorists dismiss or altogether ignore. Such dismissal or ignorance is often animated by the erroneous yet widespread view that non-Western sources are either soft or part of someone else's commitments and are therefore irrelevant.² More problematic, morally, is the chauvinism that underwrites such views:

modern Western ethicists routinely testify for or engage in an apologetics about their own position prior to thinking through or even hearing out a seemingly different,³ non-Western one. The cost of this enduring chauvinism is the lamentable disparagement of another philosophical or religious system and reflects an unwillingness to learn from others. Against this dominant trend, comparative religious ethics offers a welcome and necessary intervention.⁴

Some comparative religious ethicists continue to practice conventional moral and political theory, that is, moral and political theory whose character is explicitly normative, and includes both deontic (i.e., duty or obligation) and evaluative (i.e., right or wrong, good or bad) language. But other recent work, for example, those associated with the “third wave,”⁵ often stops at describing non-Western sources, either on their own or in relation to some “familiar” Western ones.⁶ Desiring to hear out non-Western practices, some recent comparative religious ethicists no longer employ explicitly normative methodologies. If moral and political theory, in their normative and practical domains,⁷ are concerned with evaluating and prescribing norms, then comparative religious ethics is less than helpful. Why? First, the ethnographic turn permeating comparative religious ethics moves ethics away from its normative tasks and consequently delimits the extent to which religious ethicists may converse with (non-religionist) moral and political theorists. Second, for some comparative religious ethicists, making strong normative claims betrays unexamined assumptions and chauvinistic impulses.⁸ Absent strong normative claims, however, the options seem to be either an uncomfortable toleration or an unbridgeable relativism.⁹

To be sure, comparative religious ethicists have made and continue to make important contributions to moral and political theory. Yet recent methodological shifts that prioritize descriptive methodologies may make it more difficult for comparative religious ethics to continue to make these contributions. If comparative religious ethics is to remain relevant to broader conversations in moral and political theory it must perform two tasks. Comparative religious ethicists should, first, *evaluate* whether some ethical norm is right or wrong, good or bad, not only on its own terms but also in relation to others. Without evaluation, comparative religious ethics may not only be mere ethnography but may also potentially commit one to tolerating all other views, however illogical or immoral they may be.¹⁰ Second, comparative religious ethicists should illustrate the ways in which some source under consideration may contribute to broader thinking about common moral and political problems, that is, how it may contribute to the *prescription* of norms. To move beyond mere description, then, comparative religious ethicists must demonstrate whether and how some source may contribute to the normative tasks of moral and political theory.¹¹

My argument proceeds as follows. I first summarize how Elizabeth Bucar and Aaron Stalnaker, contributors to and editors of *Religious Ethics in a Time of Globalism: Shaping a Third Wave of Comparative Analysis* (2012), characterize their methodological commitments. I also discuss other moral and political philosophers and religious ethicists whose work shares some of the same commitments. I then briefly outline Elizabeth Bucar's "Bodies at the Margins: The Comparative Case of Transsexuality" (2012), an account that exemplifies problematic features found in recent comparative religious ethics.¹² Finally, I register what I find

problematic about Bucar's account and some other recent work in comparative religious ethics: namely, that such work, while making comparison and diversity central, isn't explicitly normative.

In developing this argument, I aim neither to deny nor undermine the contributions made by third wave religious ethicists. My concerns are instead predominantly methodological: what should the aims and purposes of comparative religious ethics in particular and religious ethics in general be? But the potential consequences extend beyond methodological ones. Issues such as the moral status of transsexual humans, for instance, concern and affect individual and social well-being. If religious ethicists take these issues seriously, we must offer normative responses. While Bucar and some others associated with the third wave of comparative religious ethics offer valuable insight into diverse religious practices, they don't offer explicit normative judgments.

Characterizing the Third Wave of Comparative Religious Ethics

How do some recent comparative religious ethicists describe themselves, including their turn toward descriptive methodologies? Consider one self-characterization. In the introduction to their volume, *Religious Ethics in a Time of Globalism*, Bucar and Stalnaker define "ethics" as the "intellectual reflection" upon "what is right and wrong, good and bad, which guide[s] our actions and judgment of others" (1). Comparative religious ethics, in turn, is ethics that makes "diversity (whether cultural, geographic, historical, etc.) central to the selection of an ethical topic, the method of analysis, or the purpose of study" (1). Commenting further on third wave scholars, they write:

Typically, these thinkers pursue themes that are not commonly addressed in philosophical and theological ethics, such

as bodily vulnerability and relations of dependence within families and teaching groups. Methodologically, this research builds from textual analysis, ethnography, or other extended case studies to provide thick descriptions of culturally embedded ethics; attends to power relations and social contexts; employs innovative combinations of descriptive and constructive inquiry; and provides explicit reflection upon conceptual categories and methodological tools employed in analysis. (2)¹³

According to what I will call the “Comparativist View,”¹⁴ comparative religious ethicists reflect, intellectually, on what is right and wrong, good and bad, reflections that are action-guiding and judgment-informing. In making diversity central, some comparative religious ethicists turn to ethnographic methodologies in order to provide thick descriptions of “everyday ethics”—that is, how ordinary people, in one or another social-historical context, arrange, experience, and live their lives according to some moral norms.¹⁵

Concomitantly, some comparative religious ethicists believe that ethnographic research examines and (in some cases) expands the long-ossified categories of ethics and moral development.

On their face, none of these commitments deserve opposition, and in many ways they ought to be supported. Philosophical inquiry ought to challenge conventional ways of thinking, including how ethicists conceptualize, evaluate, and prescribe moral norms. Nor are third wave comparative religious ethicists alone in highlighting the importance of ethnographic data. Margaret Farley notes that some feminist religious ethicists have been critical of universalistic moral theories. In the service of developing a “total view of human nature and society,” she argues, such universalistic moral theories have “been exclusive, oppressive, and

repressive of women” (1993, 171). In a slightly different register, Richard B. Miller (2005) advocates that religious ethicists pay attention to developments in cultural studies, psychology, and anthropology to develop an “ethics of ordinary life.” Consonant with the commitments commended in recent comparative religious ethics, Miller believes that “[c]onsiderable work in religious ethics neglects the routine culture of everyday experience—customs and codes, socialization processes, ritual practices, kinship systems, criteria of expertise, folk wisdom, divisions of labor, and contested ways in which these forces interact” (410). For Miller, paying attention to such data provides further opportunities for religious ethicists to engage in social and cultural criticism, including “broaden[ing] the agenda of religious ethics by identifying and commenting on cultural forces and institutional settings with which persons identify themselves and find meaning and moral direction” (411).¹⁶

Perhaps the most prominent recent example from outside religious ethics wherein theorists have used ethnographic data in order to criticize existing practices and explicate substantive normative positions is John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971). In prefacing his argument, Rawls writes, “[w]hat I have attempted to do is generalize and carry out to a higher order of abstraction the traditional theory of the social contract as represented by Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. In this way I hope that the theory can be developed so that it is no longer open to the more obvious objections often thought fatal to it” (1971, viii). Some recent feminist moral and political philosophers are among Rawls’s most trenchant critics and defenders. In their respective engagements with Rawls, these feminist thinkers draw from ethnographic data to criticize the problematic and develop the promising features of his theory of justice.

What motivates their respective engagements, which both draw from ethnographic data and offer normative theses? According to Susan Moller Okin, despite their concern with social justice, political philosophers have “displayed little interest in or knowledge of the findings of feminism” (1989, 8), and in particular the ways in which the sexual division of labor continues to permeate even deeply liberal democratic societies. While sympathetic to Rawls’s aims—“a consistent and wholehearted application of Rawls’s liberal principles of justice can lead us to challenge fundamentally the gender system of our society” (89)¹⁷ — Okin notes that he neglects the findings of feminism and thus does not develop his theory in such a way that it challenges the sexual division of labor.¹⁸ In particular, Okin takes Rawls to task for simply assuming that family life is just. For her, Rawls’s assumption betrays a commitment to false gender neutrality, according to which Rawls and other thinkers are guilty of “ignoring the irreducible biological differences between the sexes” and/or “ignoring their different assigned social roles and consequent power differentials, and the ideologies that have supported them” (11).

In mounting her criticism, Okin offers a thick description of the contemporary United States and evaluates the experienced and lived realities of contemporary American women. She highlights, empirically, the wrong-making features of this society, including the differences between men and women concerning wages, poverty rates, representation in political office, and shares of family responsibilities. She also stresses the view routinely underwriting these wrong-making features, namely that we “live in a society that over the years regarded the innate characteristic of sex as one of the clearest legitimizers of different rights and restrictions, both formal and informal” (5). And finally,

she offers normative proposals, arguing that a just future must be one in which men and women share equally in paid and unpaid work, productive and reproductive labor (171).

While working squarely within the Western philosophical tradition, Okin carries out many of the tasks that comparative religious ethicists commend: she attends to topics previously ignored in moral and political philosophy and illustrates the ways in which empirical data may highlight the problems with and/or challenge conventional ways of thinking. Moreover, at least in the realm of moral and political theory, Okin's efforts have been fruitful: in light of her criticisms, Rawls admits regarding his *Theory of Justice* that he omitted "major matters" including "the justice of and in the family" (1996, xxiv).¹⁹

Bucar's Ethnographic Turn

I do have reservations about the Comparativist View, however, as it is exemplified in the work of *some* contemporary comparative religious ethicists. To highlight the problematic fact that some recent work isn't explicitly normative, let me briefly summarize Bucar's "Bodies at the Margins: The Comparative Case of Transsexuality" (2012). To be sure, she meets some of the commitments endorsed by the Comparativist View. Her study is comparative in character and offers thick descriptions. But it is problematically not, as I discuss in the following section, explicitly normative.

Bucar compares Twelver Shi'i and Roman Catholic perspectives on gender, sex, and transsexuality. In order to begin her comparative study, she privileges gender and sex as bridge concepts between Shi'i Islam and Roman Catholicism, which provides "an

opportunity to study cross-cultural patriarchy or sexual conservatism as universal phenomena” (2012, 49).²⁰ She highlights similarities between these traditions, including (among other things) the prohibition of female leadership from certain religious offices, endorsements of gender complementarity, and the condemnation of homosexuality as sinful. But despite these similarities, she notes, these two traditions diverge over transsexuality. According to Bucar’s definition, transsexuality picks out “individuals who feel trapped in the ‘wrong’ sexed physical body or whose gender identification does not ‘match’ with biological sex” (51).²¹

She first charts how Islamic law treats intersexuality and transsexuality, focusing on the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in contemporary Iran. Following Ayatollah Khomeini’s 1983 fatwa—the first to support “sex change operations to correct sexual disorder in modern Iran” (52)—sex change operations became legal for transsexuals. The view underwriting this decision, Bucar notes, is that “transsexuality is seen as a physical illness and therefore as having some physical cure,” that is, a sex change operation that does not entail the “construction of a new sex, but rather the uncovering of the true sex that was hidden” (53). Consequently, the Iranian government not only allows sex change operations but also offers financial support for up to half the cost of such surgeries (54). And thus, Iran, an overwhelmingly Islamic country, is becoming one of the leading sex change centers in the contemporary world.²²

Bucar then turns to Roman Catholicism. Unlike the Iranian case, however, there isn’t an “official position” within the Roman Catholic Church regarding sexual reassignment. Nonetheless, insights may be drawn from various documents sent—*sub secretum* (54)—to papal

representatives in 2000 and 2002. According to these documents, sex change operations are merely superficial and external. Moreover, these documents “explicitly instruct bishops to never allow the altering of the sex listed in parish baptismal records” (54). In addition, Catholics who have received sex change operations are neither allowed to marry nor be ordained or enter religious life because of “mental instability” (54). What underwrites these views? For the Catholic Church, “transsexuality is categorized as a psychic disorder because of a conception of the ‘natural’ status of sexed bodies” (55). Sex “is not only a biological or physical attribute” but also “a consciousness known by the individual” that is “onto- logically significant all the way down.” Therefore, “transsexuality becomes the nonacceptance of the psychosomatic unity of body and soul—a unity that is the necessary condition of the human life” (55).

While both religious traditions view transsexuality as a disorder, Bucar writes, each sees its roots differently. Twelve Shi’i clerics view it as a physical disorder whereas the Roman Catholic Magisterium sees it as a psychological one. Each tradition’s prescribed course of treatment—“cosmetic surgery and hormone treatment versus psychological counseling” (56)—follows in turn from this distinction. For Bucar, the distinction in roots opens the opportunity to study the “different logics of the body,” especially “what and how sex and gender signify” (56). She draws from queer theorist Bernice Hausman to think through what motivates a transsexual’s demand for a sex change operation (e.g., gender identification), how Twelver Shi’i and Roman Catholic authorities respectively view such a demand (56), and whether sex change operations track gendered/sexed moral duties (57).²³

“Transsexuality has unique potential as a focus for comparative ethics,” she writes near the close of her study, “because it challenges religious individuals, communities, and traditions to clarify what counts as someone’s ‘natural’ sex, whether it can be changed, and its logical relationship to a gender identity” (58). To identify the challenges transsexuality poses, Bucar concludes with several proposals for future research. She suggests undertaking different historically oriented studies into the ways in which these traditions developed their respective theologies of the body, including whether they have always endorsed strict gender/sex dualisms, the role of procreation versus pleasure, and whether these two traditions developed their respective anthropologies through a mutual dialectic (59).

Comparative and Conventional Ethics

Despite these insights, I find aspects of Bucar’s views and the ethnographic turn in recent comparative religious ethics problematic. Consider *The Point of View of the Universe: Sidgwick and Contemporary Ethics* (2014). In their book, Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer gloss the preface and opening chapter of Henry Sidgwick’s *The Methods of Ethics* (1981). Ethics, for them (as it is for Sidgwick), is “the study of what we ought to do, not of what is the case. Hence it is to be distinguished from those areas of sociology or psychology that study morality as a social science, or examine the psychological factors that lead us to make the ethical judgments we make or the extent to which they influence our behavior” (2014, 14). Based on their definition,²⁴ in its normative and practical dimensions,²⁴ the task of ethics is narrow: ethicists explicate what it is that one, as a rational moral agent,

ought to do, and defend why this is the case against possible defeaters. We can consider this the “Conventional View.”

I wrote earlier that philosophical inquiry ought to challenge conventional ways of thinking, so I do not highlight the Conventional View as an appeal to authority; rather, I foreground it to help refine the consonance and dissonance between it and the Comparativist View.²⁵ Moreover, what I find problematic lies between the Conventional View and how *some* ethicists exercise the Comparativist View. Compare these two views:

The Conventional View: in normative and practical domains, ethicists explicate what it is that one, as a rational moral agent, ought to do, and defend why this is the case against possible defeaters.

The Comparativist View: while making diversity (whether cultural, geographic, historical, etc.) central, ethicists reflect, intellectually, on what is right and wrong, good and bad, reflections that are action-guiding and judgment-informing.

These two views are largely consonant, with both endorsing evaluation and prescription. The only *explicit* dissonance between them is the centrality of diversity to the Comparativist View. But there is nothing about the Conventional View that precludes reference to (or use of) the various data centralized in the methodological statement of the Comparativist View. I have referred to several thinkers, whether in religious ethics or moral and political philosophy, who commend or already make use of ethnographic data. There are also myriad thinkers, in both religious ethics and moral and political philosophy, who routinely attend to history while also making normative claims.²⁶ Thus, there is greater consonance than

dissonance between these two views. What is the distinction, then, that renders some exercises of the Comparativist View problematic?

Bucar amply fulfills one commitment of the Comparativist View, namely, centralizing diversity in her analysis. She undertakes the comparative study of two traditions that, while sharing many commitments, differ over their respective views about transsexuality. To explicate their respective views, she historically reconstructs Shi'i Islamic juridical thought, culminating in Ayatollah Khomeini's 1983 fatwa, and, drawing from papal documents and other sources, offers the Roman Catholic view. On the Islamic sources she covers, for example, she writes: "I *describe* the practical justification for sex change operations in Iranian fatwas as well as the gendered duties and rights of postoperative transsexuals in national law" (2012, 50–51; emphasis mine). What she provides, then, is a descriptive account concerning the genesis and history of these two views.

But while Bucar describes the practical justifications offered in both traditions, that is, she provides the genesis and history of these views,²⁷ she does not *evaluate* either view and therefore does not pronounce on whether either is right or wrong about transsexuality. Thus, her turn to ethnographic methodologies runs afoul of one formal commitment that both the Conventional and Comparativist Views endorse, namely, evaluating whether certain accounts are right or wrong. This evaluation is necessary inasmuch as practical justifications about what is right or wrong guide one's actions. To fulfill this commitment, Bucar could have examined, for example, whether there are resources within Catholic, Islamic, or even extra-traditional thought that would commend or criticize these views; and if so, explore in what ways they do so.

She doesn't meet another formal commitment that both the Conventional and Comparativist Views endorse: being explicitly action-guiding, that is, *prescriptive*. For example, how does her comparative study instruct someone, *who is either Catholic or Muslim*, about how he or she *ought* to view gender, sex, and transsexuality? Since she doesn't evaluate whether either tradition's view is right or wrong, good or bad, she cannot rightly prescribe that adherents to one or the other tradition act in a certain way.

There is a related concern: how does her comparative study inform someone, *who is neither Catholic nor Muslim*, about how he or she *ought* to view gender, sex, and transsexuality? For such an individual, the teachings of these respective traditions are not authoritative in a way that is judgment-informing and action-guiding. While someone may glean insights into how different traditions view transsexuality, Bucar isn't explicit about the ways in which the study of these two traditions ought to inform another view about transsexuality, for example, a metaphysically naturalist one, which does not ascribe any value to notions such as the Islamic view about a "true self" or the Roman Catholic view about the "psychosomatic union of body and soul."

Given her commitments to judgment-informing and action-guiding intellectual reflection, Bucar is certainly alive to the normative tasks central to religious ethics. So, why doesn't she make in her study a normative turn when considering Roman Catholic and Shi'i views about transsexual persons? Writing elsewhere about the relationship among feminism, Catholicism, and Shi'i Islam, she notes that one "problem in cross-cultural work on women is a tendency to slide from description (is) to prescription (ought), without attention to explanation (why)" (2011, xvii). But again, she does not provide explicit opposition (nor do others associated

with the third wave) to evaluation or prescription; rather, given their commitments to centralizing diversity, Bucar and others hold that evaluation and prescription must only take place after careful descriptive work is completed. In the same study just cited, however, Bucar also writes: “[i]f this book has a political agenda, it is that this diversity [among feminisms] is productive for feminist thinking and action” (2011, xviii).²⁸

Thus Bucar rightly foregrounds that there is a multiplicity of views about an issue, whether feminism or transsexuality, and thus highlights what one tradition holds and why they hold it.

Despite this explanation, though, the concern remains why Bucar doesn't move, as she herself endorses doing, from *is* to *ought*, especially given that she and other third wave comparative religious ethicists labor to explain *why*. Operating in Bucar's work, I think, is what Paul Griffiths calls an “anxious normativity” (2006, 8): her characterization of Roman Catholicism and Shi'i Islam as “conservative” and “patriarchal,” for example, suggests that she views their attitudes toward certain persons as problematic. But what exactly is problematic about them? And by what criterion (or which criteria) does she judge them to be so? If she views them as problematic and deleteriously affecting the well-being of transsexual persons, why is she not anxious to say so? I consider two possible reasons.

For Saba Mahmood and Talal Asad, two critical genealogists of religion who are influential in religious ethics and religious studies, making strong normative claims reveal more about the commitments of the scholars making those claims than they do about their objects of inquiry. Thinkers like Mahmood and Asad, Shannon Dunn notes, “are suspicious that political power and state hegemony has warped the

cultural framework of Western modern secularism, including its constructs of self and agency.” Mahmood in particular, Dunn adds, believes cross-cultural normative ethics trades on “notions of superiority and inferiority ascribed to persons and cultures” (2017, 624). For these thinkers, there isn’t a trans-cultural standard by which to judge others; attempts to offer such standards, moreover, redound to “Western political and economic hegemony” (ibid.). For them, the task is to expose and interrogate the taken-for-granted assumptions in much conventional moral and political theory, especially when it concerns cross-cultural moral and political evaluation.

In interrogating the normative standards underwriting Western moral and political thought, however, thinkers like Mahmood and Asad don’t concomitantly acknowledge that their own standards are normatively laden as well. Thomas A. Lewis (2015) and Anil Mundra (2017) both argue that normativity is ineliminable in humanistic scholarship, whether in the historical and social scientific study of religion or in religious ethics and theology. Both the people being studied and the scholars studying them, Lewis and Mundra stress, hold normative commitments. “[T]hose who want to purge normativity from the study of religion,” Mundra observes, “need to view religious behavior as more autonomic than autonomous” (2017, 11). Moreover, both the scholar and people being studied are “at once naturally or historically conditioned—such that they admit of objective description—and also free agents, such that they are susceptible to normative intervention” (ibid., 1). For thinkers like Mahmood and Asad, the argument against Western, chauvinistic normative evaluation potentially lends itself to another problematic normative position: suspending normative judgment in the face of problematic cultural and religious practices.

A second possible reason stems from the ideas of Richard B. Miller. Commenting on moral critique amidst anxieties about ethnocentrism, Miller highlights an existential account that he terms “bourgeois relativism,” which:

expresses the idea that there is something wrong in applying one’s standards when judging others’ practices.... Bourgeois relativists would have us believe that, given the variety of human ways of living now and over the vast expanse of human history, one cannot be *right* when judging others. Such judgments would seem to be, at minimum, presumptuous given our limited range of experience, and they often lead to acts that are not only intolerant but brutally inhumane. (2016, 87–88)

Fueling this form of moral relativism, Miller thinks, are worries about ethnocentrism, which he defines as the “reactive attitude of parochial bias when encountering or judging others.” Since it is a reactive attitude, ethnocentrism is more than a stereotype or simple provincialism; rather, it is “[a]n ethno-centric response to otherness [that] combines narrow-mindedness with moral hubris” (2016, 77).

In her reflections on the variety of ethical systems, Bucar is well aware of the problems of narrow-mindedness and moral hubris. And for those very reasons, she commends turning to *ought* only after attending to the *is* and *why*. This might be considered a desire to avoid a crass moral universalism that is in fact masking ethnocentric impulses. But at the same time, while she and other third wave ethicists are attentive to the diversity of human cultural and religious practices, a central feature of the Comparativist View, they also want to avoid moral relativism.²⁹ If the ethicist doesn’t wish for moral inquiry to

collapse into relativism, he or she cannot claim that some- one's practice is morally permissible because it is important to them, to the cultural or religious group. The ethicist must render moral judgments about practices.

Both of these possible reasons for her anxious normativity— genealogical concerns about Western hegemony and anxieties about ethnocentric chauvinism—may explain Bucar's reticence about moving from reconstructing the norms internal respectively to Shi'i Islam and Roman Catholicism to evaluating those norms. Despite my own sympathies about such anxieties, appeals to them don't justify her decision to refrain from normative evaluation.

What now? While I have argued that Bucar fails to move from description and explanation to evaluation and prescription, I am not claiming that ethno- graphic work has no place in comparative religious ethics. To be sure, identifying, through ethnographic and other methodologies, the diversity among contemporary moral, political, and religious practices and views is important and necessary. Whereas some moral and political theorists and religious ethicists have downplayed or altogether ignored the actual ways in which people arrange and live their lives according to varied norms, theorists who use ethno- graphic methodologies move moral and political theory and religious ethics away from the wholly abstract and idealized, thus making vivid people's lives and the actual injustices they may face.

What I find problematic, though, is that Bucar fails to distinguish between ethnographic methodologies and normative ones. In comparative religious ethics especially, there are good reasons to attend first to description and explanation. For example, according to William Schweiker:

"[m]orality," the religious ethicist can insist, is a term for the space or

network of questions which human life transpires and the answers a community gives to those questions in order to shape character and guide conduct. From the perspective of actual traditions, religious ethics must be conceived as examining various features of how the moral space of life is conceived and enacted in life. (2008, 8)

The comparative religious ethicist's use of ethnographic methodologies carries out what Schweiker commends, specifically describing and explaining how discrete communities conceive, consequently arrange, and live their lives according to their own moral norms.

But description and explanation are exercised in other scholarly fields, including anthropology, geography, history, or sociology, and scholars in these fields claim to do nothing more.³⁰ Moreover, they may also use the language associated with ethics—good and bad, right and wrong—in their descriptive and explanatory exercises. But the ethicist's task, especially in the practical domain, is not simply to describe and explain but rather to also evaluate and prescribe—that is, to do explicitly normative work. In order to not be delimited to merely doing ethnography, the comparative religious ethicist's task must move beyond description and evaluation, and explicitly so. Bucar and others who use ethnographic methodologies are right to emphasize that ethicists must attend to description and explanation prior to evaluation and description; however, as ethicists, they falter when they do not move from ethnographic to explicitly normative work. There is nothing *prima facie* problematic with using such methodologies. But ethicists must also evaluate what is right or wrong about their object of inquiry, and then prescribe what ought to be done. Bucar and others who are part of the ethnographic turn do not move from description and explanation to evaluation and prescription. Therefore,

such work isn't ethics; rather, it is only the ethnography of moral worlds.

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Notes

1. I presented an earlier version of this article in the Comparative Religious Ethics Section at the American Academy of Religion (2015). I am grateful to audience members for their comments and questions. Thanks to Martijn Buijs, Natalie Carnes, Travis Cooper, Molly Farneth, Jason Heron, Sam Houston, Kevin Jung, John Kelsay, Sean Larsen, Will Love, Perry McAninch, Ross Moret, Anil Mundra, Grant Osborn, Jamie Pitts, Jock Reeder, Jamie Schillinger, Gary Slater, Sara-Jo Swiatek, Matthew Whelan, Alex Winder, Jordan Wolf, and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and conversation.
2. In offering this claim about philosophical softness and irrelevance, I am informed by Patil 2009, Ch. 1. Consider, for example, Antony Flew's view: "Philosophy . . . is concerned first, last and all the time with argument. [B]ecause most what is labeled Eastern Philosophy is not so concerned this book draws no material from any sources east of Suez" (1971, 36; quoted in Kapstein 2001, 5). Unfortunately, Flew's view isn't a dated caricature. Consider Jay Garfield and Bryan Van Norden's article, "If Philosophy Won't Diversify, Let's Call It What It Really Is" (2016). They write: "[t]he vast majority of philosophy departments in the United States offer courses only on philosophy derived from Europe and the English-speaking world. Given the importance of non-European traditions in both the history of world

philosophy and in the contemporary world, and given the increasing numbers of students in our colleges and universities from non-European backgrounds, this is astonishing. No other humanities discipline demonstrates this systematic neglect of most of the civilizations in its domain. The present situation is hard to justify morally, politically, epistemically or as good educational and research training practice.” Given the Eurocentric orientation of philosophy departments, Garfield and Van Norden “suggest that any department that regularly offers courses only on Western philosophy should rename itself ‘Department of European and American Philosophy’” (Garfield and Van Norden 2016). Van Norden (2017) has recently expanded on these views.

3. In different ways, both historians of religion, e.g., J. Z. Smith (1982), and philosophers of religion, e.g., those working on Indian and Tibetan sources, have worked toward undermining the idea that cultures or philosophical systems are as exceptional or disparate as some narratives would suggest. Some non-religious philosophers, e.g., Derek Parfit (1987, Part II and Appendix J) and Owen Flanagan (2011), are noticing the same.
4. In attending to non-Western moral and religious traditions, comparative religious ethicists are fulfilling the very wishes the editors of the *Journal of Religious Ethics* expressed in the “Editorial” introducing the journal in 1973: “[g]iven the present state of our discipline, we have no illusion that essays on Buddhist, African, Hindu or Islamic ethics will come our way as readily as will essays on Christian or Jewish ethics. We realize that we will not easily escape in our initial issues the parochial-ism and Western bias that tends to characterize the present state of our discipline. We are however conversant with resource persons who are committed to assist us on this matter. Success here will mean that we have indeed advanced

the academic study of religious ethics” (1973, 3). Despite the important advances made in religious ethics, however, there is much work yet to be done. For example, David Clairmont and I note that “the geographical and cross-traditional breadth of comparative ethics has been both impressive in some ways and yet quite limited in others. With a few noteworthy exceptions . . . comparative religious ethics has focused much more on the study of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in conversations with East Asian and South Asian religions than it has in engaging with the religions of Africa or the Americas” (2017, 618).

5. On the conceptualization and periodization of the three waves in comparative religious ethics, see Bucar 2008 and the introduction to Bucar and Stalnaker 2012.
6. To be sure, scholars associated with the third wave are heterogeneous. Therefore, this characterization does not apply to all those associated with the third wave nor does it apply to the same degree to those advocating the turn to ethnographic methodologies. For example, one religious ethicist associated with the third wave, Thomas A. Lewis, expresses concern about the ethnographic turn in comparative religious ethics. In “Women, Ethical Formation, and Narratives of Modern Morality,” he writes: “Influential recent ethnographic work focused on ethical matters, for instance, begs important questions about the relationship between ethnographic accounts of ethical practices and normative judgments of those practices. It is important to preserve a role for such normative reflection, and there are good reasons for engaging in such reflection in dialogue with canonical figures such as Kant and Hegel. To recognize that the history of ethics includes more than such thinkers does not entail rejecting the validity of focused work on them. For this reason, it is important to distinguish the kind of expanding

the view for which I am calling in this paper from the transformation of ethics into a principally descriptive project in which all views are deemed equally meritorious” (2014, 41). In explicating this view, he positions himself against Saba Mahmood (2005) and Leela Prasad (2006), two scholars whose anthropological work is popular among comparative religious ethicists. See also Lewis 2010, wherein he offers further reflection on Prasad. For further criticism of the ethnographic turn from comparative religious ethicists, see Erin Cline 2017, Shannon Dunn 2010 and 2017, and David Decosimo 2018.

7. The comparative religious ethicists with whom I am concerned are not explicitly engaged in metaethics, which focuses on the epistemological, linguistic, and metaphysical status of moral speech and whose aims are primarily descriptive and explanatory. For example, does the statement “torture is wrong” admit of truth or falsity (cognitivism)? Or does such a statement express one’s feelings (expressivism) or the mores of the culture or society in which one was raised (relativism)? I say that metaethical inquiry is *primarily* descriptive and explanatory because if a statement like “torture is wrong” admits of truth and certain acts are considered to fall under the rubric of torture, then one is normatively constrained—that is, morally obligated—to not engage in acts of torture. Kevin Jung (2017) explores, among other things, the relationship between metaethics and normativity in comparative religious ethics.
8. Jonathan Schofer (2012, 5–6) highlights different normative stances that “modern Western scholars” and “Western secular liberal scholars” must overcome in order to understand ethical formation and subjection. He highlights these normative stances despite earlier claiming that “[e]thical formation in and through subjection is an extremely widespread pattern that is not limited to particular traditions, time periods, or regions; it

is not . . . distinctly ‘Western’ or ‘Eastern’” (4). In making these claims, Schofer echoes sentiments found in Talal Asad (2003) and Saba Mahmood (2005).

9. In “Ethnography and Subjectivity in Comparative Religious Ethics” (2017), Shannon Dunn makes a similar claim. “Although normative inquiry is not without risks,” she writes, “in some circumstances a greater risk is engagement in forms of political and social quietism that endorse the status quo” (2017, 625). Comparative religious ethicists, however, aren’t the only ethicists whose commitments lend to relativism. In *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (1983), Stanley Hauerwas writes: “[a]ll ethical reflection occurs relative to a particular time and place,” with “the very nature and structure of ethics is determined by the particularities of a community’s history and convictions.” Thus, he holds that “ethics always requires an adjective or qualifier—such as Jewish, Christian, Hindu, existentialist, pragmatic, utilitarian, humanist, medieval, modern—in order to denote the social and historical character of ethics as a discipline” (1) for “no ethic can be freed from its narrative, and thus communal, context” (28).
10. While cautioning against universalistic conceptions of morality, various comparative religious ethicists simultaneously claim that they don’t wish to commend moral relativism. See, e.g., Stalnaker 2006, Ch. 9; Stalnaker 2008, 429–35; Bucar 2008, 357; and Bucar and Stalnaker 2012. Lewis 2015, Ch. 4 recommends caution as scholars navigate between the localization and universalization of moral norms in comparative religious ethics.
11. There is an ongoing debate, occurring most recently among John Kelsay (2010, 2012), Jung Lee (2013), and Elizabeth Bucar and Aaron Stalnaker (2014), about the proper objects of inquiry for comparative

religious ethics. According to Bucar and Stalnaker, both Kelsay and Lee “single out for criticism a line of comparative scholarship centered on virtue ethics and personal formation” (360). In explicating my own views about comparative religious ethics, I won’t comment on whether these are appropriate objects of comparative inquiry.

12. First, I provide this outline not only to familiarize readers with Bucar’s chapter but also (and more importantly) from a desire to charitably reconstruct her argument. Second, in order to focus my concerns about the displacement of normative methodologies for descriptive ones, I will limit my discussion of the third wave of comparative religious ethics to Bucar.
13. Compare Bucar and Stalnaker with Maria Heim and Anne Monius’s view about the ways in which moral anthropology contributes to ethics. “The distinctive contributions that cultural and linguistic anthropologists are making in this area,” Heim and Monius write, “[have] centered on the quotidian, on the ‘everyday’ ways in which morality and ethics are experienced, constructed, discussed, and lived, often tacitly, in particular ethnographic contexts. Moral anthropology in this vein becomes the attentive study of the way ethical experience and concerns are inscribed in everyday contexts in potentially all spheres of life” (2014, 386).
14. Below, I contrast this with what I will call the “Conventional View.”
15. On thick description, see Geertz 1973a. For an example of Geertz exercising thick description, see Geertz 1973b. For an argument regarding the impossibility of thick description, see Jackson 2013.
16. In *Friends and Other Strangers: Studies in Religion, Ethics, and Culture* (2016), Miller continues to emphasize the need for religious ethicists to attend to culture. He notes that we move between “alterity and “intimacy,” that is, “the idea that our lives oscillate between knowing

and acknowledging others, on the one hand, and remembering, reimagining, and reconfiguring our foundational outlooks toward self and world, on the other.” In this movement between alterity and intimacy, Miller believes it is important to attend to cultures because they “generate manifestations of and proclamations from the other that reveal something about our indigenous habits and attitudes given how we respond to them” (2016, 309).

17. For Rawls’s two principles of justice, see Rawls 1971, Ch. 2, esp. Section 11.
18. Okin is less charitable toward Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) and Michael Walzer (1983), whose communitarian views, she argues, either implicitly lend support to or explicitly justify institutionalized gender roles. On communitarian views, she writes, “[t]he appeal to ‘our traditions’ and the ‘shared understandings’ approach are both incapable of dealing with the problem of the effects of *social domination* on beliefs and understandings. They therefore prove to be useless or distorted ways of thinking when we include women as fully human subjects in our theorizing about justice or try to assess gender by the standards of justice” (42–43).
19. Other feminist thinkers have continued criticisms of Rawlsian philosophy, including Eva Feder Kittay (1999), who thinks through the relationship among dependency, equality, and gender; Martha Nussbaum (2000), who develops her capabilities approach in conversation with Rawls’s rights-based approach and applies it to Indian society; and Debra Satz (2010), who examines the ways in which markets uphold inequalities between the sexes.
20. On bridge concepts in comparative religious ethics, see Stalnaker 2006, 17–19. On his definition, “[b]ridge concepts are general ideas, such

as ‘virtue’ or ‘human nature,’ which can be given enough content to be meaningful and guide con- temporary inquiry yet are still open to greater specification in particular cases.” “Bridge concepts are not,” he adds, “hypotheses about transcultural universals that purport to bring a ‘deep structure’ of human religion or ethics to the surface; I am skeptical about all such deep structures or ‘epistemes’ that are supposed somehow to determine or explain thought and practice, whether for humanity as a whole or merely within a single tradition or era” (17). Given the extent to which Stalnaker delimits the explanatory force provided by bridge concepts, I am unsure what motivates Bucar to draw upon them in order to study cross-cultural patriarchy and sexual conservatism as *universal* phenomena. Thanks to Anil Mundra for helpful conversation on this point. See also n.9 above.

21. Transsexuals are to be distinguished, Bucar writes, from “transvestites,” who wear clothing associated with their opposite gender but do not necessarily want to change their sex,” and “transgendered persons,” who move “between male and female gender identities or attempt[t] to occupy a third gender. In doing so, transgendered individuals challenge the strict gender dualism operative in much moral anthropology” (51).
22. “Postoperative transsexuals are given special civil rights in Iran,” Bucar writes on this point. “[T]hey can apply for new birth certificates, drivers licenses, and national identity cards to reflect their newly realized ‘true sex’” (54).
23. For example, Bucar distinguishes among “action” (i.e., “cosmetically taking away or adding what should be there as opposed to manipulation or even mutilation of what is naturally there”), “effect” (“successfully uncovering the truth about an individual’s sex by making it agree with his or her gender

as opposed to unsuccessfully attempting to alter the sex God has given to a person, who remains male or female but now appears externally as something else”), and “implication” (that is, an individual’s gendered/sexed moral duties, which change in Iran but not in Roman Catholicism, “because neither sex nor gender was actually changed”) as they obtain between these two traditions (57).

24. In offering this definition, they eschew reference to metaethics. For Sidgwick’s own views about (what is now considered) metaethics, see, e.g., Sidgwick 1981, Book 1, Chs. 1, 3, and 8.
25. On this point, consider Kevin Jung’s view about the definitions of “normativity” in comparative religious and philosophical ethics. He writes: “[a] critic might object that there is no compelling reason for anyone to adopt my definitions of normativity. It is certainly true that no one is obliged to accept my definitions, although such definitions are widely accepted in contemporary philosophy. But the real question is not whether one has to accept these definitions of normativity but whether it is possible to discuss normativity without them. Analogously speaking, just because one can replace the meaning of efficiency with that of equity in economics, it does not follow that the original meaning of efficiency now has no use or importance in economics” (Jung 2017, 648n.5)
26. For example, in his *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* (2007), Rawls commends such study. On the “democratic view,” which he distinguishes from the “Platonic view,” political philosophy sees itself “as part of the general back-ground culture of a democratic society, although in a few cases certain classic texts become part of the public political culture. Often cited and referred to, they are part of public lore and a fund of society’s basic political ideas. As such, political philosophy may contribute to the culture of civic society in which its

basic ideas and their history are discussed and studied, and in certain cases may enter into the public political discussion as well” (3–4). Within religious ethics, Thomas Lewis’s *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel* (2011), for example, attends to both (1) historically, the social and political context in which Hegel developed his thought and (2) normatively, the ways in which Hegel’s mature writings about the relationship between religion and politics may contribute to our current thinking.

27. On the relationship between genesis and validity, history and philosophy, see Joas 2013. On the relationship between genesis and validity, see also Cohen 2000, wherein he discusses how whether he attended Oxford or Harvard for graduate study would have informed his view about the analytic/synthetic distinction. Cohen attended Oxford, accepts the distinction, and finds this fact “disturbing” because having studied at Oxford is “no reason to think that the distinction is sound” (2000, 18).
28. Despite making this claim, however, Bucar isn’t explicit about *how* diversity among feminisms is supposed to be productive. I earlier pressed this challenge in a slightly different way. See Ranganathan 2016, 258ff. On making explicit one’s implicit aims and commitments when examining religious data, see Slater 2017 and Slater 2020.
29. See n.9 above.

30. Travis Cooper (2017) and Anil Mundra (2017) each offer strong challenges to the idea that humanistic description is “neutral” or “scientific,” with each arguing in his own way that normativity and value-laden inquiry permeate the study of religion.

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