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Introduction: Ethnography, Moral Theory, and Comparative Religious Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Representing a spectrum of intellectual concerns and methodological commitments in religious ethics, the contributors to this focus issue consider and assess the advantages and disadvantages of the shift in recent comparative religious ethics away from a rootedness in moral theory toward a model that privileges the ethnography of moral worlds. In their own way, all of the contributors think through and emphasize the meaning, importance, and place of normativity in recent comparative religious ethics.

KEY WORDS: *comparison, ethnography, methodology, moral theory, normativity*

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Now into its fourth decade, comparative religious ethics (CRE) is starting to revisit some of its earliest debates regarding the relationship between more self-consciously descriptive approaches (for example, those rooted in the anthropology and history of religions) and more self-consciously normative ones (for example, those rooted in moral theory linked to philosophy and theology). Such debates arise and confront scholars within the field with each new development in comparative scholarship.[1] This focus issue brings together both junior and senior scholars to think about the most recent intellectual and methodological debates that are occurring among comparative religious ethicists, namely those that have arisen and intensified in the wake of the "third wave."[2] How might these debates be characterized?

Recent work from Elizabeth Bucar, Aaron Stalnaker, and their collaborators, considering the rise of the ethnography of moral worlds, returns

[1] For example, consider Jeffrey Stout's (1981) criticism of David Little and Sumner Twiss's (1978) methodology. In a slightly different vein, Richard B. Miller commends religious ethicists to make a "cultural turn," enabling them to "craft an ethics of ordinary life" (2016, 40).

[2] Elizabeth Bucar and Aaron Stalnaker (2012) use the label the "third wave" of comparative religious ethics. On the conceptualization and periodization of the three waves in comparative religious ethics, see Bucar 2008. According to Bucar's characterization, the first wave of comparative religious ethics-Little and Twiss 1978 is a notable example-aimed to offer universalistic justifications for moral and political commitments. The second wave-for example, Yearley 1990--"adjudicat[es) between diverse religious claims, belief and ritual understood in context, moral relativism versus universalism, and the fusion of different moral horizons" (2008, 367).

For a programmatic statement about the third wave, see the introduction to Bucar and Stalnaker 2012, elaborated in Bucar and Stalnaker 2014. The members of the third wave, however, are methodologically pluralistic, with a diversity of approaches and orientations to comparative religious ethics. Even with Bucar and Stalnaker's programmatic statement, it is difficult to adjudicate what tethers the members of the third wave. Thomas Lewis, who is associated with the third wave, has recently problematized and offered his own proposals about comparative religious ethics (2015, 83-118). See also Lewis 2014, wherein he reflects on the relationship between ethnography and evaluation in comparative religious ethics, and argues for the continuing importance of normative judgment. One further ethicist associated with the third wave, Erin Cline, is contributing to this focus issue, wherein she also registers concerns about third-wave scholarship.

The other contributors to this focus issues are not explicitly associated with the third wave but do work in comparative ethics on issues in religious ethics relevant to comparative projects. For example, Shannon Dunn (2010) contributed to a set of essays in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* which also included contributions by Jennifer Rapp and David Decosimo who, while not involved in the Bucar and Stalnaker collaborations, are arguably part of the third wave. Kevin Jung has previously engaged those who work on or have provided theoretical tools from moral philosophy for comparative religious ethics. See, for example, his critique of Jeffrey Stout (Jung 2015, 27--43).

seasoned readers to the conferences and publications initiated by Robin Lovin and Frank Reynolds (1985) and their collaborators, who sought to widen the definition of and multiply approaches to comparative ethics characteristic of early models such as those developed and employed by David Little and Sumner Twiss (1978) and Ronald Green (1978, 1988). In the intervening years, elements of classical ethical discourse persisted in the work of Lee Yearley on virtue (1990), William Schweiker on agency and interpretation (1990), Grace Kao on religious pluralism and human rights (2011), and Erin Cline on comparative approaches to justice (2012). The most significant recent trend in comparative religious ethics, however, has been the shift away from a rootedness in moral theory toward a model that privileges the ethnography of moral worlds.[3] This methodological shift comes to a crescendo with some members of the third wave of comparative reli-gious ethics.[4]

[3] For example, John Kelsay (2010) highlights that thinkers like Saba Mahmood (2005)and Leela Prasad (2006), who carry out anthropological studies, are problematically read in comparative religious ethics *as* ethicists. On ethnography and religious ethics, see also Heim and Monius 2014.

[4] Although Bucar coined the language of "third wave," we view this as more of a natural maturation and expansion of the field rather than as a group of scholars self-consciously reacting against the methods and priorities of the previous intellectual generations. While the essays we introduce in this issue of the *JRE* focus on the increasing importance of ethnography in comparative religious ethics, this is by no means the only (or even the most important) new direction in comparative religious ethics. As in other fields, conferences and workshops that lift up certain intellectual developments cohering around a certain theme arguably tend to garner more notice than those arising solely from print exchange in books and journals. Ethnography in comparative ethics is a case in point. In May 2009, the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School sponsored a conference titled "Moral Worlds and Religious Subjectivities" in which invited participants-from the first, second, and third waves-discussed new developments in the field, many of them rooted in or influenced by ethnography as a privileged way of accessing unfamiliar "moral worlds" and the attendant "religious subjectivities" that constitute them. Many of those papers and their responses, revised and expanded, were published in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38.3 in a focus issue edited by Donald Swearer (see Swearer 2010). A workshop at Indiana University was held in October 2010, following up on the Harvard conference, attended mostly by the "third-wave" scholars, under the title "Religious Ethics in a Global Age: Shaping a Third Wave" which generated two more collections of essays. The first was another focus in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38.4 (see Bucar, Kao, and Oh 2010); the second was the edited volume by Bucar and Stalnaker (2012) referenced above.

Representing a spectrum of intellectual concerns and methodological commitments in religious ethics, the contributors to this focus issue, with their individual contributions ranging from critical to constructive, consider and assess the advantages and disadvantages of this shift. Drawing from sources in Confucianism, Islam, and contemporary analytic philosophy, the contributors concern themselves with issues including: whether the scholarly self-reflexivity commended in recent comparative ethics leads to an undesirable suspension of moral evaluation; whether scholars associated with the third wave of comparative religious ethics need to become clearer about the meaning and place of the terms that guide their inquiry (especially the term "normativity"); and whether (and, if so, how) descriptive and normative methodologies in comparative religious ethics might be utilized so that they are mutually enriching.

In "Ethnography and Subjectivity in Comparative Religious Ethics," Shannon Dunn first examines Clifford Geertz, Talal Asad, and Catherine Bell to think through the fraught relationship between ethnography and normativity in the broader study of religion. On the one hand, she notes, Asad's and Bell's hesitance regarding normative judgments is understandable: much inquiry in the study of religion falls against the back- drop of globalization and Western political and economic hegemony. On the other hand, their primarily deconstructive methodologies have consequences for ethics: namely, such methodologies occlude ethicists from making normative arguments about social practices. Building on this broader disciplinary backdrop, Dunn then moves to consider ethnographic studies regarding Muslim women, focusing in particular on Carolyn Moxley Rouse's *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (2004) and Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), and how they relate to the task of ethics. "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).

Whereas Dunn is concerned with the suspension of normative inquiry in

third-wave comparative religious ethics, Kevin Jung's "Normativity in Comparative Religious Ethics" has a narrower, yet related, aim: namely, to clarify the meaning of "normativity" in ethics and offer reasons why comparative religious ethicists must explain how they define normativity and make clear how the term is used in the theory of knowledge that comparative religious ethicists implicitly or explicitly employ. Noting that while members of the third wave aim to avoid the pitfalls associated with overly universalistic and relativistic conceptions of practical reason and human experience, Jung argues that if "we accept their views on normativity, we could run the risk of watering down the nature of nor-mativity to the point of it being insufficient for determining the rationality of moral beliefs and actions, as well as insufficient for justifying moral belief' (2017, 643). In his view, third wave ethicists tend to view the justification of moral belief as a discursive social practice, a view that neglects the crucial differences between the process and the grounds of justification. Moreover, with regard to moral belief and action, third- wave ethicists also tend to confuse an agent's motivational and explanatory reasons with normative reasons. Consequently, he argues, their conception of normativity may be too weak to have force in ethics.[5]

Finally, Erin Cline, in "Putting Confucian Ethics to the Test: The Role of Empirical Inquiry in Comparative Ethics," presents a case for how descriptive and normative methodologies may be mutually enriching. "If one is interested in the truth and contemporary relevance of traditional normative ethical views," she claims, "then there are good reasons to take into account the degree to which they cohere with our best science" (2017, 683). In order to explicate and defend this claim, she examines and compares Confucian views about child-rearing and developmental psychology's views about attachment theory, where the latter holds that "an infant's emerging social, psychological, and biological capacities can- not be understood apart from its relationship with its mother" (2017, 675). Thinking through these two views, she argues for a pair of

[5] For a survey of and further reflection on normativity, see Finlay 2010.

related points. First, empirical data-for example, those found in developmental psychology-may help further develop aspects of Confucian views about child rearing. Second, she argues that certain dimensions of traditional views, for example, Confucian views about child rearing and moral development, ought to be amended in light of what empirical evidence illustrates. The upshot of her inquiry is twofold: first, she illustrates how humanistic inquiry may engage and draw insights from the sciences; second, she demonstrates how "studying and comparing ethical views from different philosophical and religious traditions is worthwhile, not only because it helps us to understand and appreciate a variety of different ethical visions for human life, but because the views we encounter might help us to understand ourselves and others more accurately, pointing us toward views and practices that have a tradition-independent claim to being true and valuable" (2017, 668).

These essays tell part of the story of recent developments in comparative religious ethics by examining the connection among anthropology, developmental psychology, moral philosophy, and religious ethics. Thus, they raise important questions that need to be accounted for when con-sidering the "ethnographic turn" in religious ethics. But as those familiar with the field will no doubt be aware, there are other important questions, religions, and cultural traditions that remain to be explored further as the field continues to develop.

First, as the *JRE* approaches its fiftieth anniversary, it will certainly be an occasion to reflect on the origins, development, and current sub- disciplines in the field, which should include include a consideration of comparative religious ethics. It will also be an occasion to confront the sometimes uncomfortable relationship between the philosophy of religion and theological ethics, the universal and the particular, and the putatively descriptive and the prescriptive. Although the essays in this focus address these questions in part, a full examination of the relationship between ethnography and moral theory will require additional debate about how ethnography and moral theory relate to the disciplinary issues that led to the founding of the *JRE* in the 1970s, including the relationship of history to philosophy and moral philosophy to

theological ethics.

Second, a related question is how scholars understand their relation to what they study. This question links ethnography to moral theory but also returns to another important issue in the recent comparative ethics literature: the purposes of comparison. For example, anthropologists have long noted that the presence of an ethnographer in a community changes the very thing that the ethnographer observes, which is why we speak not only of scholarly observers of culture but also of "participant observers" who are embedded in networks of relationships within the communities they study. Moreover, as Todd Whitmore (2007) notes, not only do ethnographers of moral worlds at least minimally alter the communities they study, many also experience the claims those communities make on them since the scholar is taking something (for example, observations of the values and patterns of life of a community) and may (rightly?) be expected to give something in return (ranging from a particular view of that community to be reported back to their scholarly audience -which may therefore compromise what the scholar thinks ought to be reported-to some material benefit or even some kind of political involvement to better the life of the community). On the scholar's moral and methodological commitments, Robin Lovin writes:

What we have learned ... is that questions of comparison are not just methodlogical. They are also moral. We are not only reflecting on other people's ethics when we do comparative religious ethics but also making moral claims of our own. The doing of comparative religious ethics is first-order moral dis- course, often disguised as second-order theoretical reflection. Often, it is so effectively disguised that even the theorists fail to recognize what they are doing. Comparison is a moral activity, although it often serves to subvert the moral structures it is comparing. (Lovin 2010, 260-61)[6]

[6] On the scholar's moral involvement with his or her object of inquiry, see also Cotting- ham 2014, who calls for a "more humane approach" to the philosophy of religion, an approach that commends taking into account human culture and praxis and not merely analyzing and dissecting religious truth claims.

Comparative choices are moral choices and, depending on how the scholar understands the meaning of religious ethics and the motivation to undertake that work, those choices will have a complex relation to the scholar's own academic and religious commitments.

Third, 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 in its history-including, among the first wave, Little and Twiss as well as Green-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. [7] We are hopeful that the work done **in** ethnography and religious ethics might be expanded to engage with and draw resources from a wider range of religious traditions, thereby advancing the conversa-tions in these essays on ethnography and moral theory.

The contributors to this focus issue do not aim to reject the contributions made by members of the third wave. To be sure, each registers his or her appreciation of the insights provided by third-wave scholarship about diverse moral worlds. Through considering the methodological shift associated with the third wave, the contributors think anew about the relationship among ethnography, moral theory, and comparative religious ethics.

[7] Some exceptions pertaining to African ethics are Ilesanmi 1995, 2004, 2010; Lucht 2010; Hallen 2005; Gbadegesin 2005; Bujo 2005; and Grillo 2005. For material on the ethics of the native and indigenous traditions of the Americas, include Grim 1992; Swanson 1992; Gooding 1992; Deloria 2005; Vecsey 2015; and Warren 1985.

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