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978-0-521-34448-7 - A Bibliographic Guide to the Comparative Study of Ethics

John Carman and Mark Juergensmeyer

Excerpt

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Introduction: a global map of ethical traditions

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When the early European explorers set foot on foreign shores, they often returned with drawings of what those shores looked like: maps to chart the destinations for future adventurers. These were often ludicrously done by today's standards. India would bulge curiously toward the northeast, and Sri Lanka would loom enormous, with Southeast Asia disappearing into a jumble of uncertain islands. America was equally as distorted: some of the earliest maps show no knowledge of anything further than a hundred miles or so beyond the Atlantic shores. Anything as distant as, say, present-day Ohio was *terra incognita*.

The European knowledge of the cultures of other lands has been just as uncertain, and the early reports have been just as distorted. This is especially true when it comes to matters of morality and ethics. When the British first came to India, for example, many of them were horrified at what they regarded as heathen practices. The custom of *sati*, in which widows voluntarily threw themselves onto their husbands funeral pyres, seemed especially outrageous, but even the backbone of conventional social morality in India – caste – was a target of scorn. Often European observers did not see evidence of Hindu social ethics in places where they expected to find it – in areas of public civility and universally accepted codes of behavior – and they concluded that Hindus had no social ethics at all.

Things have changed since the days of those early explorers, but in general the physical cartography has improved more than has the charting of moral differences. There are still those in the West who feel that non-Western morality is somehow inferior or incomplete when compared with the values of the West, and there are still large areas of non-Western ethical thought that are uncharted terrain. This bibliographical guide is intended to help those who want to explore these areas anew and gain a global perspective on ethical issues.

The guide is the result of a five-year project jointly sponsored by the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard and the Office for Programs in Comparative Religion at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley. The project, officially called the Berkeley-Harvard Program in Comparative Religion: Values

in Comparative Perspective, engaged more than 150 scholars in a series of conferences, courses, and research projects in the field of comparative ethics from 1980 to 1985. The project explored issues in Jewish, Buddhist, and Islamic social ethics, the comparative works of Max Weber and Louis Dumont, the ethical significance of cosmogonic myths and saintly exemplars, the nature of religious violence, the concept of work, and the role of women in various cultural traditions. Most of the conferences were held at Berkeley and Harvard; affiliated conferences, cosponsored by the University of Chicago and Columbia University, were held in Chicago and New York. Three volumes of essays have been published from conference proceedings, and two more are in preparation.

From the outset, it has been clear that scholars working in the field of comparative ethics would greatly benefit from a comprehensive guide to bibliographic resources in each of the religious traditions. Initially the thought was to include only primary resource materials from scriptural, legal, and narrative literature, but in time this field was expanded to include selected secondary writings as well. A set of categories was developed to index each of the entries according to the ethical topics covered in them, and introductory essays were commissioned for each of the traditions. Authors of the essays were asked to point out the major ethical concepts of their tradition, indicate in what texts they are discussed, and suggest what is distinctive about their tradition's form of ethical reasoning. A team of graduate students and faculty consultants was assembled to work on the project, and Cambridge University Press expressed interest in publishing the completed guide as a general reference work for scholars and libraries interested in the field. What began as a bibliographic resource for the Berkeley-Harvard project, then, became an attempt to provide a map of the global terrain of ethical ideas that would be useful to a wider range of scholars.

THE METAPHOR OF THE MAP

This bibliographical guide is like a map in several obvious senses: it attempts to be comprehensive, to provide an outline of the contours of ethical ideas, and to chart out what might be new territory for many investigators. It also bears several somewhat less obvious resemblances to the cartographic enterprise. One is that maps are often ethnocentric; the ones drawn by early European explorers, for instance, were clearly constructed from a Western point of view. To a degree, the same is also true of this ethical bibliographical guide, for even though its purpose is to enable scholars to see issues from multicultural perspectives, and even though its authors have endeavored to be as free from cultural prejudice as possible, the fact remains that the items have been selected and the topical categories chosen by scholars whose home bases are modern American academic communities. It is possible that scholars from different traditions, or from earlier or later generations,

INTRODUCTION: A GLOBAL MAP OF ETHICAL TRADITIONS 3

would make the selections differently. For that reason the map will undoubtedly have to be redrawn as contours change and new ways are found to investigate a familiar topography.

In other ways this guide is not like a map. In the physical realm, an ocean is always an ocean, and one knows a mountain when one sees it, but the same thing cannot be said for the moral terrain. Even the words used to describe it are culturally specific: ethics and morality. The term “morals” is cognate with “mores,” the customs of a particular people, and the term “ethics” is related to “ethos,” the cultural context that is peculiar to certain times and places. Moreover, the term “ethics” as it has come to be used in the West denotes the principles that undergird laws and rules for moral behavior. In other traditions moral expectations are not so easily codified; ideal behavior may be conveyed through stories and images of great leaders rather than through laws and rules. In preparing this bibliographic guide, the compilers have attempted to be sensitive to what is ethically portrayed not just in moral codes but in the narrative and mythic literature of each tradition. Even so, there may be much in these stories and images that a scholar trained in a Western understanding of ethics would miss.

Because the terms “ethics” and “morality” are culturally specific, they cannot easily be translated into other languages. In that way they are like the term “religion,” and perhaps Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s admonition that we avoid using that term for purposes of cross-cultural comparisons should apply to “ethics” and “morality” as well. The problem is that there are no simple transcultural terms to replace them. There are, however, terms in other languages that approximate them. In the Hindu tradition, for instance, the rough equivalent to ethics is *dharma*, and in classical Chinese thought the approximate term is *li*. Yet *dharma* and *li* can be understood fully only within their cultural contexts, just as ethics can be understood fully only within the context of Western religion and philosophy. Therefore, it is appropriate to ask, as it was asked at one of the first conferences sponsored by the Berkeley-Harvard program, whether there is such a thing as ethics in the Hindu tradition. And, for that matter, is there *dharma* in the West?

If not, then it may well be that any effort at understanding ethics cross-culturally is doomed from the outset. Yet even though language fails to provide a single, transcultural term for what in the West is known as ethics, a comparative look at language does suggest that expressions for the impulse toward moral behavior are well-nigh universal. Virtually every language has a grammatical equivalent to “ought” and “should,” some way of indicating correct, proper, or standardized action that is undertaken not simply for prudential or aesthetic reasons. This linguistic fact, as much as anything else, assures us that even though there is no global term for what in the West is called ethics, something of the sort exists elsewhere in the world. But whatever that something may be, it exists only in particular cultural settings, and for that reason it is necessary to look closely at the literature of any given culture to understand what moral action means.

THE PROBLEM OF MAKING SELECTIONS AND CREATING CATEGORIES

The attempt to view other cultures and other people's ways of thinking always involves the dangers of myopia: the inadvertent distortions and omissions that come from scanning unfamiliar terrain. The scholars engaged in creating this bibliographic guide have tried to minimize these dangers by paying careful attention to the criteria used to select items to be included in the bibliography, the interpretations given these items in annotations, and the assumptions at work in establishing the categories that are used to code and index the subject matter to which the items refer. Most of the work of selection, annotation, and coding was done by research teams of graduate students in consultation with senior scholars in the field, and at each step there was considerable discussion about the implications of the choices that were made.

In regard to selection, for example, one of the issues concerned the "great works" of each tradition. The teams wanted to include books that are considered normative or scriptural in various cultures, but they were aware that in many religious traditions there is substantial disagreement about what should be regarded as canonical. Not all Buddhists, for instance, accept the *Lotus Sutra* as a central text, and many Hindus take greater moral sustenance from recent works and teachings than from celebrated ancient tomes. Furthermore, every ethical tradition carries multiple strands of ethical reasoning. In choosing some items for inclusion and excluding others, the research teams did not want to imply that their understanding of what was normative for each tradition would be accepted by all within the tradition. The section on Hindu teachings is a case in point. Ancient writings were chosen over literature from the medieval and modern periods, making it possible to speak of a single great heritage rather than a multiplicity of smaller traditions, but the cost was that much of the later moral literature in the Hindu tradition is not represented in the *Guide*.

In other cases, a different approach was chosen: separate chapters were prepared to describe various branches within a single tradition. Thus Indian and Tibetan aspects of the Buddhist tradition appear in one chapter, Chinese aspects are in another, and the Japanese aspects appear in yet a third – the chapter concerning Japanese religious ethics as a whole.

Christian ethics created a different sort of problem, since writings on Christian ethics tend to be organized more by historical period than cultural location. For that reason the chapter on Christian ethics is divided into four chronological sections: early, medieval, reformation, and modern. On the whole, the literatures of ancient civilizations were brought into the bibliography under the rubric of the living traditions to which they have given rise. An exception was made in the case

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INTRODUCTION: A GLOBAL MAP OF ETHICAL TRADITIONS 5

of the ethical literature of ancient Greece, because of its general significance for Western culture. Similarly the tradition of Western philosophical ethics is treated as if it were a cultural reality separate from, although obviously related to, the religious traditions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, with which it has interacted. Because the emphasis of the bibliography was to be on written sources relating to the major world traditions, the smaller traditions and those with few written materials were not included. Teams of scholars looked into the materials available for Zoroastrian, Sikh, African, and Native American traditions, but the only section completed in time for this publication is a tentative bibliography of Native American ethics; it is included as an appendix.

Another subject of lively discussion among members of the research teams was the matter of what categories should be chosen to code and index these ethical documents by genre and topic. One of the purposes of creating the bibliography was to encourage cross-cultural investigation, and the teams felt that such studies would be greatly facilitated by a general topical index and a series of codes that could be used to sort through individual citations. The problem came in determining what categories would be used in building this system of codification. On the one hand, the teams wanted to choose categories that would reflect the current interests of scholars doing research in the field; on the other hand, they wanted to choose categories that would accurately reflect the concerns of the texts themselves. They were also aware that an element of presumption would be required in both areas: they could not speak for all researchers in the field of ethics, nor could they pretend to establish once and for all what the texts in question were truly “about.” A decision was made to steer a middle path and hope that the causes of both topical interest and textual accuracy could be served, at least to a degree. In any case, the teams attempted to avoid using categories that were of interest only in the modern period or that applied only to a single culture.

In the end it was the research team at Harvard, coordinated by Russell Sizemore, that drew up the list of categories: twenty-four to encode the range of topics that might arise in each text, and an additional eleven to describe the genres according to which the material contained in each text was presented. The genre categories are fairly straightforward, but the topic categories are more diverse. They include concepts such as good and evil, matters of ethical concern such as work and wealth, and aspects of religion that have moral implications, such as exemplary figures and religious practices. The subject topics also include the area of theological and philosophical reflection on moral issues and the inevitable catchall receptacle for matters “too diverse to catalog.” Because of the problematic nature of these categories, the writers of the introductory essays for each tradition were asked to include comments on the appropriateness of these categories for their tradition. In most cases the categories stood up fairly well, though it was clear to everyone that many other categories might have been added to the list. Other researchers may well want to expand the range.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COMPARATIVE ETHICS IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD

The compilers of this bibliography hope that it will encourage comparative study in the field of ethics, not only so that the field itself may thrive, but also because the world has an obvious need for intercultural ethical understanding. Such matters as the question of the moral status of violence, the need to protect the environment, and the rights of minorities are issues that concern sensitive persons everywhere and have international repercussions. When these issues are given different evaluations by moral authorities in different cultures, several questions must be confronted. Do the spokespersons for cultural traditions adequately express the views of their own populace? Should the moral systems they represent be regarded as legitimate? Is there any basis for arriving at a consensus between the moral views of others and one's own? Faced with such questions, one's moral and intellectual task is a double one – descriptive and normative. One must find out what the neighboring tradition says and why its views may be different from one's own, and one must decide what, if anything, can be done to bring about a reconciliation when the two cultures' standards conflict.

In the past, international observers moved rather quickly to the normative level. They failed to spend much time trying to understand how cultural systems other than their own could justify the sorts of behavior they did. This was especially the case in the years prior to the mid-twentieth century when Western culture, confident of its own superiority and buttressed with political power, typically recommended itself with missionary zeal to the rest of the world. Although this era of moral presumptuousness is not entirely dead, there exists today an awareness of the validity of a variety of ethical traditions that makes it unlikely that ethical judgments will ever again be made with the haste and self-assuredness to which they were prone in the past. Yet they will have to be made. Our hope is that the descriptions provided by students of comparative ethics may help to inform those judgments.

It would be an unsatisfying conclusion if one looked at the multiplicity of ethical perspectives on any given topic and came away simply overwhelmed. It would be unfortunate if one were to conclude that ethical points of view are so subjective, so culturally relative, that there is no hope of arriving at cross-cultural constants in the ethical realm. Scholars of comparative ethics have not yet acquiesced in this view, but the field is divided between those who think one should start by assessing the differences among cultural traditions and those who hold that one should begin by appreciating the universals of ethical truth and ethical reasoning that underlie these differences. Whether the one camp can reach total agreement with the other is yet to be determined, but in the meantime it is fair to say that few deny

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[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: A GLOBAL MAP OF ETHICAL TRADITIONS 7

the existence of at least some constants of ethical sensitivity to be found throughout the world. The comparative study of ethics promotes an understanding not only of the differences among traditions, but of their similarities. Hence a map of the global contours of ethics need not end up as a diagram of cultural islands separated by impassable seas. Rather, the map reveals continental cohesions that draw the traditions together, and layers of continuity that link seemingly disparate cultures, although sometimes beneath the surface. Like it or not, as participants in a global culture we are all heirs to each other's cultural traditions – even, and sometimes especially, when we protest against the idea that this should be so.

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GUIDE TO CROSS-CULTURAL TOPICS AND GENRES

CROSS-CULTURAL TOPICS

Definitions

EF: *Exemplary Figures.* Discussions of exemplary figures as providing moral standards, including identification of types of exemplars (e.g., prophet, scholar, mystic, priest, founder), and treatment of patterns of religious imitation (e.g., literal imitation, imitation in spirit, imitation as trust in the figure's teaching); discussion of sacred vocations or roles within society or the sacred community that are of special significance.

EL: *Evil.* Descriptions of the nature of evil, especially human evil; paradigmatic examples of evil; striking examples of moral failure; cosmogonic accounts of the origins of evil. Applicable even if evil in the world is given only a provisional status.

FP: *Friendship.*

FR: *Familial Relations and Responsibilities.*

GD: *Good.* Images of the highest good, description of that which is of infinite value, exemplars of good in mythic battles between good and evil, descriptions of the agent or force behind or empowering moral transformation or accomplishment. Includes discussion of the good for mankind, and the good generally, as, for example, when loving-kindness or harmony is offered as the most fitting characterization of the highest good, and discussion of an all-embracing order transcending good and evil if such an order is given positive regard.

HE: *Human Equality.* Includes treatment of questions of racism and sexism.

HN: *Human Nature and Moral Psychology.* Descriptions of human nature, including the relation of the human mind/self to the cosmic or divine mind/self; treatments of human freedom or freedom of the will; descriptions of the human condition, of the relationship between moral knowledge and moral action (e.g., do people who know what is good, do what is good?); the nature of the self, including conceptions of conscience, memory, "layers of the self," and images of the moral personality; treatment of questions of immortality and afterlife.

IA: *Intellectual Activity.* The relationship between learning, education, or knowledge, and moral stature.

ME: *Metaethics and Ethical Theory.* Includes discussions of sources of moral authority and moral knowledge (e.g., revelation, mystical experience, art, history, etc.); discussions of the meaning of ethical terms (e.g., "right" means "willed by God" or "in harmony with the universe") and of reasons for being moral.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: A GLOBAL MAP OF ETHICAL TRADITIONS 9

ML: *Moral Dilemmas*.

NS: *The Nature of Society*. The nature of, structure of, and authority within society. Accounts of the origins of society, of the nations, of the races; descriptions of what makes a group of people a society, including expressions of ideal community (e.g., “all men are brothers,” “we are all one body,” etc.); descriptive and normative accounts of the present social order and moral evaluations of that order; discussions of political legitimacy (what justifies a ruler’s power over others) and political obligation (what moral obligation is attached to secular law and allegiance to the ruler). Includes discussion of the responsibilities of the ruler or the ruling class, the rules governing their behavior, and the values and goals that are unique to those positions of power.

PR: *Performance of Religious Practices*. Includes matters of religious purity and pollution.

RC: *Religious Communities*. The nature of, and authority and structure within, the religious community or communities. Includes discussion of special religious or monastic orders and duties unique to those of special religious standing.

RM: *The Relativization of Morality*. Discussion of and examples of religiously inspired qualifications of the importance or ultimate status of moral judgments or categories.

RN: *Relationship to, Treatment of, and Conception of Nature*.

SI: *Society and Individuals in Moral Development/Transformation*. The relationship between individuals and society in the preservation of moral values and in empowering moral transformation. Treatments of such issues as how society is morally upheld or transformed (by moral individuals, by moral social structures, by having a moral leader?), and the nature of society’s role in aiding the individual’s moral development and accomplishment. Includes discussion of the processes by which a culture passes on its morality to its members, its ways of upholding standards of style and ideals of character, and discussion of how individuals are to respond to moral failure within society.

SM: *The Path of Spirituality and Moral Accomplishment*. Soteriology as it relates to ethics: the relationship between spiritual stature and moral achievement, between religion and morality. Includes treatment of such issues as how spiritual attainment affects moral experience and whether the promptings of spiritual insight can ever conflict with or oppose moral guidance. Cf. IA, which relates moral stature to more strictly defined intellectual activity.

SX: *Sexuality, Bodily Life*.

TD: *Too Diverse to Catalog*. See annotation.

TW: *Truthfulness in Word and Deed*.

UF: *Use of Force*. Legitimate uses of coercion or violence (including questions of war and violent revolution).

VV: *Virtues and Vices*. Listings and discussions.

WK: *Work*. One's occupation, the division of labor in society, fair wages.

WM: *Wealth and Material Possessions*. Distribution in society, relationship to moral and spiritual development.

Note: Categories GD and EL do not intend to dictate a dualistic view of reality. Evil (or Good) may have only a provisional status in the perspective of the given religious tradition and still be a significant topic for ethics.

Discussions of human motivation could fall under a variety of classifications. In general, motivations for judging acts and persons are classified with ME, "Metaethics and Ethical Theory." Discussion of the intricacy of human motives and their relationship to other structures of human personality is classified with HN, "Human Nature and Moral Psychology." Motivation as it relates to other character traits is classified with VV, "Virtues and Vices."

CROSS-CULTURAL GENRES

Definitions

AR: *Art*. A work of art or sustained discussion of a work of art that has served as a vehicle for moral teaching. Includes works of literary art.

CM: *Cosmogonic Myths*. Accounts of, or sustained discussions of accounts of, the origins of the cosmos, including the origins of God, the gods, of humanity, the sexes, the races, the nations, of evil, of the beginning of and the end or goal of history.

DA: *Devotional Activity*. Works used in, or accounts of, devotional activity, as these have contributed to ethical reflection. Includes works which describe (authoritatively or not) ritual performance, discussion of rituals in their implications for ethics, prayers, hymns, and discussion of devotional life and mystical activity as these have provided guidance for human conduct.

FD: *Formal Discourse*. Sustained discourse on ethical topics. Includes formal treatises on ethical subjects and commentarial literature dealing with classic texts.

HB: *Historical Background*. Intended to cover primarily modern scholarly overview or historical surveys on particular periods, movements, or topics.

LC: *Legal Codes*. Collections and discussions of such collections of legal rules, principles, practices, and philosophy.

MD: *Books or Manuals of Discipline*. Collections of rules or guidelines for lay or monastic life and/or spiritual advancement. Includes collections of proverbs, etiquette, and epigrammatic moral advice.

PE: *Paradigmatic Examples/Exemplars*. Accounts of, or sustained discussions of,