JUDGING OTHERS

History, Ethics, and the Purposes of Comparison

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ABSTRACT

The most interesting and perilous issue at present in comparative religious ethics is comparative ethical judgment—when and how to judge others, if at all. There are understandable historical and conceptual reasons for the current tendency to prefer descriptive over normative work in comparative religious ethics. However, judging those we study is inescapable—it can be suppressed or marginalized but not eliminated. Therefore, the real question is how to judge others (and ourselves) well, not whether to judge. Instead of bringing supposedly universal moral scoring systems to bear on reified “traditions” and “cultures,” it would be better to focus on the precise details of particular practices, motifs, and theories in various settings, and compare them with an eye to substantive issues of current ethical concern.

KEY WORDS: comparative ethics, religious ethics, description, interpretation, evaluation, judgment, objectivity

THERE IS AN AMBIGUITY OF PURPOSE embedded in the activity of comparison, which carries over into comparative studies of ethics. In most cases, one compares things of the same sort in order to judge which of them is superior, which inferior. This seems relatively obvious when it comes to restaurant or movie reviews, to scoring systems for fine wines or colleges. It might seem less so as the objects compared become more complex, like books instead of possible airline tickets. Usually complexity makes the judgments harder, more contestable, and more interesting, without changing the purposes of the comparison—discerning excellence, mediocrity, and failure, and pointing out the differences. However, this is not ordinarily how comparative religious ethics is practiced in the contemporary English-speaking academy. At present, serious comparative studies tend to aim not at discerning the finest ethic among several possibilities, but instead at various other goals—such as insightful description of unfamiliar ways of life, or the construction of suggestive typologies of religious practice and self-regulation.
This was brought home to me recently when I was selling a used truck to a local dealership. While making small talk with the manager, I mentioned that I taught comparative ethics at the local university. His eyebrows lifted, his expression surprised and a bit rueful, and I realized that he thought I was engaged in a sort of sociology of morals, examining the general probity of different groups—and perhaps I had empirical evidence that used car salesmen are all shysters. Eager not to offend, I quickly explained that comparative ethics usually centers on descriptive studies of different ethical viewpoints, and that I personally studied the ideas advocated in influential ancient texts from both East and West. He was relieved to be off the hook, but I felt myself sliding onto the hook: Is comparative ethics so resolutely descriptive that it cannot even worry used car salesmen? How does our apparent preference for description over normative arguments affect the practice of comparative religious ethics? Might we be missing something of great import?

There are understandable historical and conceptual reasons for the current state of practice in comparative religious ethics, but before tracing their contours, I first simply state the overarching argument of this essay as a way of forecasting its goals and main lines of development. In brief, I contend the most interesting and perilous issue at present in comparative religious ethics is comparative judgment—when and how to do it, if at all. However, judging those we study is inescapable—it can be suppressed or marginalized but not eliminated. Therefore, the real question is how to judge others (and ourselves) well, not whether to judge. Practitioners of comparative religious ethics cultivate an unusual combination of skills that equip us relatively well to make comparative judgments, so at least some should tackle these issues head on, and any lingering taboo against the very idea of normative judgment in comparative ethics should be tossed aside.

1. How Did We Get Here?

One persuasive explanation for current mores is a set of overlapping histories in the study of religions in the West. The history of the study of religion has played a significant role in shaping current predispositions, as has the shorter history of religious ethics as a field. There is no need in the current venue to recapitulate full histories of each of these areas of study, but a sketch will help justify the focus and trajectory of the current essay.¹

¹ A helpful historical overview of the study of religion in the West is Sharpe 1975. An artful and much shorter sketch is Smith 1998. On religious ethics, see Schweiker 2005, noting especially the essays by Schweiker and Twiss.
In the nineteenth century, influential European thinkers from Hegel to Spencer developed evolutionary approaches to culture and society that seemed to many in the latter half of that century to provide the necessary conceptual architecture for all of the emerging human sciences, from economics to sociology. Drawing eagerly and confidently from this dramatic new paradigm, theorists such as E. B. Tylor and Friedrich Max Müller gave birth to a new "science of religion" centered on an evolutionary method of analysis. As defined in 1905 by Louis Henry Jordan, this science "compares the origin, structure, and characteristics of the various Religions of the world, with the view of determining their genuine agreements and differences, the measure of relation in which they stand one to another, and their relative superiority and inferiority when regarded as types" (Sharpe 1975, xii, citing Jordan 1905, 63). To generalize freely, the evolutionary method viewed religions as analogous to organisms, which might be comprehended in a universal taxonomy and thereby ordered rationally, as well as evaluated according to their superiority and inferiority as whole systems or agglomerations. In hindsight, there are catastrophic problems embedded in this research program. While the organism analogy does suggest complexity, it overstates the order, systematicity, homogeneity, and boundedness of religions considered across time and space. More pressing, for my concerns, is the ease with which such analysts might "evaluate" whole religions as superior or inferior, despite their vast complexity, according to thinly veiled Protestant or rationalist presuppositions.

Eventually, scholars turned away from a global science of religions. Writers of later phenomenological and anthropological studies, for example, aimed to attend more carefully to local details, and many found it useful to "bracket" questions about the truth or value of the practices and beliefs they described and analyzed. The urge for an integral, globally encompassing, evaluation-laden account of human religiosity subsided.

In place of a science of religion, scholars of the history of religions, such as Mircea Eliade, practiced a different kind of comparison. Instead of arranging specimens in a pseudo-biological hierarchy, such scholars roamed very widely across human history and culture to construct and analyze fascinating trans-cultural phenomena such as the sacred and the profane, the axis mundi, and many others. However,

2 Like the rest of this narrative sketch, this contrast is oversimplified. Great global theorists such as Durkheim and Weber relied on many more-specialized studies to construct categories like "totemism" and "rationalization"; more-local studies of religious data have been proliferating for quite some time, although they are obviously shaped by broad theoretical trends and goals.
even this resolutely egalitarian approach that found not only data but wisdom all over the globe has called forth critics of various stripes, with perhaps the most persuasive critics arguing for the necessity of real linguistic and cultural expertise to properly interpret religious materials in their historical and cultural contexts. Seemingly, the safest approach would be to pursue ever more local studies and eschew broad generalizations of any sort—whether evaluative or merely typological. Recently, a “backlash against the backlash” has developed, with scholars reasserting the possibility of a chastened and responsible comparative history of religions.3

This fairly standard narrative of the genesis and development of religious studies leaves little room for ethical evaluation, except in the dustbin of rightly discarded intellectual maneuvers. How might religious ethics and comparative religious ethics figure in such a history? The neglected “other” in such accounts is of course Christian theology (not to mention modern Jewish thought). Christian ethical reflection has continued all along in parallel to the development of religious studies, and “religious ethics” appears to be the uneasy child of these disparate parents.4 Explicitly comparative religious ethics has its own history, narrated recently and most ably in a short essay by Sumner B. Twiss (2005). As Twiss argues, an adequate history of modern efforts at comparative religious ethics would need to include foundational sociologists of morals like Durkheim, Weber, and Troeltsch, as well as mid-century philosophical ethnographers like John Ladd and interpretive anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski. However, the most familiar account of the present options in comparative ethics focuses initially on two ground-breaking works from 1978: David Little and Sumner B. Twiss’s Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method and Ron Green’s Religious Reason: The Rational and Moral Basis of Religious Belief. The second half of this familiar account comprises reactions to these two works by historians of religion, for example in Robin Lovin and Frank Reynolds’s celebrated collection, Cosmogony and Ethical Order. The contrast between the two “stages” is put by Lovin and Reynolds, and others,5 as one between earlier “formalist” approaches to ethics that stress explicit philosophical theories of morality, with much attention to rational justification of moral norms, which are seen as characteristic of Western-trained philosophers, and later “holistic” interpretations that are sensitive to the nuances of

3 On this, see Patton and Ray 2000.
4 For much fuller reflection on religious ethics and its history, with the uneasiness I remark on reflected in the contradictory viewpoints espoused, see Journal of Religious Ethics 25.3, the 25th Anniversary Supplement.
5 For a recent example, see Swearer 2005.
local cultural contexts, which are seen as characteristic of anthropologists and historians of religion. This narrative of succession from more-flawed to less-flawed research programs seems to reflect a widespread sense in the field that whatever one does as a comparative ethicist, interpretations of unfamiliar ethics must take sufficient account of historical and cultural context to be compelling as interpretations by the usual standards of the history of religions more broadly. This is undoubtedly a welcome development, since such concern with context does lead to richer, more-illuminating interpretations of religious sources and of the ethics they propound.

For present purposes, it is worth noting that these seemingly opposed orientations to universality and particularity reflect divergent responses to the specter of relativism, and indeed different degrees of concern with normative reflection per se. On the one hand, the supposedly formalist philosophers (especially Green) seem not only interested in ethical and conceptual diversity, but also concerned by the possibility that a common morality might be undercut or obscured by local variety. On the other hand, the holistic interpretive historians seem unconcerned about the implications of diversity for the relativity or authority of any moral norms; their more urgent concern is to understand specific groups or cultures in all their particularity and complexity. Indeed, by focusing almost exclusively on specialist efforts at “thick description” of particular forms of religious ethics, contributors to such group efforts often fail to explicitly compare at all. This sort of implicit relativism can tempt us to quarantine “others,” clearly separating “them” (the local informants, the writers of ancient texts) from “us” (moderns, those who interpret).

I have recently argued that this apparent contrast can be largely overcome with the right sorts of theoretical tools and approaches, which allows a synthesis of the strengths of both—at least in some cases involving particular objects and purposes. More specifically, particular texture and complexity may be articulated for analysis with the neo-pragmatist idea of a vocabulary for social life, which is meant to show how practices, norms, and ideas interrelate (and are developed and contested); different ethics thus articulated may then be compared by means of relatively thin “bridge concepts” that specify the topic of comparison and provide a way to generate “perspicuous contrasts” between different vocabularies. My approach aims to preserve the real goods available to interpreters only through specialized training and expertise in the religious materials studied and compared, while also

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6 For a fuller attempt along these lines to analyze methodological debate in comparative religious ethics, see Sizemore 1990.
7 For much fuller discussion, see Stalnaker 2006, 1–26.
taking seriously the remaining normative force, if any, of the ethics propounded by one's objects of study.

Regardless of the virtues and vices of the vocabulary/bridge concepts approach to comparative ethics, two questions remain unanswered by this historical overview. First, even if one agrees, as I do, that it is quixotic and misguided to attempt global judgments of superiority and inferiority for all religions considered as units or types—whether in an evolutionary schema or according to some other yardstick—does this recognition destroy the possibility of more-local, interpretively well-grounded, and precise ethical evaluations? Second, is there any intrinsic problem with a comparative historian of religion studying ethical materials but steadfastly refraining from judging the normative conclusions embedded in those materials (whether texts, field notes, or any other artifact capable of suggesting courses of action)? My answers are no and yes, respectively. Precise, contextually grounded ethical evaluations are not just possible; they cannot be avoided by responsible interpreters.

2. Interpretive Understanding and Comparative Judgment

To explore these issues more fully, we need to move beyond historical explanations for current scholarly mores to exploring conceptual problems that appear to be intrinsic to the practice of comparative ethics, which also contributes to preferences for descriptive over normative scholarly work. Jeffrey Stout has argued that studying ethics may be empirical and/or comparative, but is always normative, whether explicitly or implicitly. He argues that as a species of critical reflection, studying ethics requires us at the very least to pick relevant data to examine, and that judgments of relevance and importance rely on either covert or overt normative presuppositions about which ethical questions are worth attending to, debating, analyzing, and so forth. The abstractions of theory used to guide the picking and sorting of examples "reflect normative commitments, because they, too, are inferentially related to the rest of what one believes and desires" and are "implicated in a self-involving process of normative appraisal" of the sort that Robert Brandom has analyzed in his work on inferentialism in the philosophy of language (Stout 1997, 25).8

I am quite sympathetic to this line of argument, but it is worth noting that the sense of "normative commitment" in use here is very broad, covering any and all norms for any and all human practices, including scholarly ones. Moreover, while our many norms are surely related to each other, making the inferential connections between them

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8 For fuller discussion, see Brandom 1994 and Stout 2004.
explicit and reducing the dissonance between them to a minimum has been seen for a long time (since Socrates, at least) as a lifelong project of considerable difficulty. The diversity of norms in question matters, because it seems quite plausible, at least initially, for someone to insist that in their scholarly projects they are following norms of good historical scholarship, and that although they might be studying the normative social claims of others, the purposes for which they study them are distant from any current normative controversies, and possess at most only a very tenuous connection to contemporary normative reflection on the issues of the day.

To address this possibility, let us consider the general logical structure of scholarly comparisons, and then reflect on an example of a comparison motivated by historical rather than explicitly normative goals. As J. Z. Smith has argued, in relation to any sort of comparison of religious data, “There is nothing ‘given’ or ‘natural’ in those elements selected for comparison. Similarities and differences, understood as aspects or relations, rather than as ‘things,’ are the result of mental operations undertaken by scholars in the interest of their intellectual goals” (2000, 239). Put another way, comparisons are always intellectual maneuvers undertaken for some human purpose, not just for the sake of pure knowledge. However, the range of reasonable scholarly purposes is quite large.

Consider the following example: J. Albert Harrill has written a study of the Second Letter of Peter in the New Testament that examines its use of Stoic imagery of cosmic dissolution via an engulfing cataclysmic fire (Harrill n.d.). He argues, contra some previous scholarship, that the author of Second Peter—aiming to convince his audience that divine providence is real and recommending an attitude of expectant hope for the second coming of Christ—does indeed draw on this Stoic motif in his vigorous critique of his opponents as “ignorant and unstable.” What is at issue here is how to understand a particular text making a strong normative recommendation in favor of some religious attitudes and behaviors, while condemning others. To substantiate his thesis, Harrill compares several cases from across the ancient Roman world of non-Stoic uses of the aforementioned Stoic imagery. The

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9 One might well object that Smith overstates this point, in the sense that he completely severs the connection between interpretive judgments about what is worth attending to and comparing and the actual data being interpreted. Surely the objects studied by comparativists must offer some suggestive clues regarding which avenues of comparison might be fruitful, and which dry and pointless. This objection seems right, but it does not undercut Smith's main point, which is that comparison does not perform itself, but is rather an operation initiated and pursued by scholars whose intellectual goals are essential to shaping the premises of any comparison. I thank John Kelsay for pushing me on these issues.
immediate purpose of these comparisons is to show the various ways a commonly known set of ideas may be borrowed and reworked. He thereby reveals the typicality of the example from Second Peter, even though it is not exact in its use of Stoic terminology or ideas when judged against the most explicit extant examples of Stoic philosophical texts. Thus, we have an example of comparison, done in order to understand a particular ancient ethical debate, which is nevertheless motivated by scholarly purposes that are hardly related to contemporary ethical reflection. Instead, Harrill is most concerned about (1) providing more evidence that ancient Christianity is best interpreted as fully at home in its ancient Roman context, rather than as the religion of a distinctive and quite different social group and (2) examining how elements of various ideologies were mobilized and used to argue for particular social ends in various intra- and inter-group conflicts in the ancient world. Thus, the purposes of his comparison are very much historical—to better interpret and understand the actions of past actors. The norms governing the presentation are standard scholarly norms of evidence, citation, and logical argument. The examples chosen and the classes they are thought to exemplify are driven by the classificatory and theoretical purposes of the inquiry, in other words, purposes (1) and (2) above.

Although examples like this might seem to exhibit a purely descriptive, resolutely non-normative approach to materials in religious ethics, they in fact imply unstated normative judgments. However, we need a new argument to establish this conclusion and sustain Stout’s point about the necessity of normative reflection when studying ethics, because the existence of primarily non-ethical purposes for comparison shows that one may study religious materials with obvious ethical content without engaging in “ethical inquiry” in Stout’s sense. I think we should come at this problem via hermeneutics. In brief, moral judgment is intrinsic to any effort at interpretive understanding of others’ theories and practices. This is especially clear when those theories and practices concern normative proposals for ordering human life.10 No matter what the purposes of our scholarship are, if we purport to study some culturally or historically distant practice or normative vision, but cannot formulate an assessment of it, then we

10 I intend “moral” here and throughout this essay to be synonymous with “ethical,” and to have a wide scope of applicability, contra the distinction between these terms introduced by Williams 1985, wherein “morality” is thought to name a peculiar and limited modern Western way of reflecting about duty alone as charting the permissible boundaries of human life, and also contra the perhaps more familiar distinction between these terms that sees “ethics” as second-order reflection upon “morality,” which consists of first-order action-guides of various sorts.
cannot pretend to understand it deeply, or even adequately, by any reasonable historical standard.

Why is this true? To adequately grasp what some culturally or historically distant agent is advocating, an interpreter will need to be able to relate that advocacy to the social, cultural, and historical context in which the advocacy is or was occurring and thereby has or had meaning. This will be necessary to even grasp correctly what is being advocated, and in what manner that advocacy relates to the range of possibilities present at that historical moment. This process requires the interpreter to be able to give a believable account of why the agent might be advocating whatever he is advocating, and why the supposed proposal is comprehensible, in context, as a not utterly foolish or inhuman proposal; otherwise, the interpreter ought to suspect herself of misapprehending what is happening. An ethic, in other words, is an attempt to recommend a certain form of life, and this recommendation is always made by someone to some others, and needs to be interpreted accordingly to be properly understood.

The “why” explanation may reference cosmological or other presuppositions shared widely in the agent’s context, that is, the context to which the agent appeals in his normative advocacy. This sort of interpretive explanation makes recourse to premises such as: the agent and his audience all viewed Stoic cosmology as the most up-to-date and rationally defensible cosmology available at that time and place, and therefore appeals to Stoic ideas were likely to carry significant weight in the community's deliberations. Judgments of epistemic adequacy and entitlement are built into such interpretive premises, meaning that the interpreter judges that it is reasonable and highly likely that her subjects think as depicted. Such judgments imply the following hypothetical proposition: if one were justified in believing Stoic cosmology and physicalist virtue theory to be true, then it would be reasonable to argue as the author of Second Peter does. These interpretive hypotheticals are essential to a historical understanding of normative advocacy. If one can decide whether an advocate was justified in believing X to be good and admirable, then one knows enough about the advocate and his context to have a sufficient basis for ethical judgment, whether articulated explicitly or not.

Alternatively, an explanation of someone’s social advocacy could include economic or political interests that the normative proposal

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11 This argument is logically parallel to Donald Davidson’s famous argument for charity in the interpretation of linguistic utterances. See, for example, Davidson 1982, 302–3.
12 Bird 1981 argues for a similar conception of ethics as a type of persuasion, but for rather different purposes than the current essay.
serves, regardless of the explicit rationale the agent gives for it. However, if the interpreter wants to make recourse to such an explanation of interests, she needs to have a sufficiently fine historical grasp of the economic and political conflicts in question so that she can formulate an ethical evaluation of them. This might at times be difficult or perplexing because of conflicting evidence and the need to reflect on hypothetical alternatives to the social structures the sources appear to reveal, but to the extent that one loses one’s grip on the factors necessary for an ethical evaluation of ancient practices, one loses one’s interpretive grip on those practices themselves. Here, the interpreter develops hypotheses like the following: whether or not the author of this ancient text believed what he was saying, the appeal to divine rulership to justify traditional, coercive household relationships obscured and thereby served the economic and political interests of the masters of those households. I am arguing that the same factors that allow one to make such interpretive historical judgments provide sufficient grounds for an equally well-supported ethical evaluation of whatever distant practices are at issue, and that the process of interpretation itself requires us to utilize our ongoing evaluations of what we think is occurring as a check against descriptive error.

Talking of hypothetical imperatives premised on ancient cosmological and biological views, as well as speculations about possible economic and political alternatives in a given place and time, hints at the complexities of ethical evaluations cast across chasms of temporal or cultural distance. To try to untangle some of these complexities, let us look at two interrelated factors that are particularly relevant to the kinds of normative judgments comparative ethicists can, do, and should make—standards for judgment and purposes for judging.

With regard to standards for judgment, one venerable red herring can be dispensed with fairly quickly. Moral relativism, or the doctrine that any culture or community can and should only be judged by that culture or community’s own norms, is a failure on multiple levels. First, it claims a universally binding status that it denies to other norms, and is thus self-referentially incoherent. Second, the idea that there may be forms of “local knowledge” that could be effectively quarantined from moral judgment is a mirage. As anthropologists and historians have taught us all over the last thirty years or so, it is descriptively inadequate to see cultures or traditions as unified, integrated wholes, rather than like the fraught human collectivities we experience every day—where both boundaries and central beliefs and practices are unclear, overlap, and are constantly struggled over, reproduced, and transformed. The norms to which anyone might appeal as belonging to some culture or group do not exist in a vacuum, but are contested and contestable, both from within and without.
Moral relativism’s allure is perennial, however, because it refashions too strongly something that is important and true: social context does matter to moral evaluation, even if it does not insulate or isolate one person from others, or one group from others. Moreover, it is surely quite difficult to attain sufficient insight into some foreign culture or historically distant context to be able to understand it well, and hence be in a position to judge wisely what its inhabitants do and say; thus outsiders ought to be cautious and wary of hasty judgment. Such cautious respect for social context matches well with the process of historical or anthropological interpretation sketched above, which stresses the need for a deep acquaintance with local contextual factors as a necessary basis for both descriptive interpretation and normative assessment. In other words, an interpreter needs to know local debates and conditions well to be in a position to judge between competing interpretations, as well as formulate any sort of normative assessment of the practices or views of participants.

Since judging others by “their own” standards is a mirage (one that surreptitiously sanctifies one outlook among many, often on the basis of unexamined assumptions about, for example, “the true nature of Buddhism” or similar reifications), how should we understand and judge them? I have no oracular pronouncements to make regarding wise standards for normative judgment, other than to suggest that we should not worry about finding an unassailable, foundational standpoint from which to judge any and all religious ethics. Comparative ethicists can only evaluate from wherever we already are, as engaged scholars of religion who live in a particular place and time within a complex, globalized world, drawing on those moral traditions, models, and principles that seem most compelling and insightful to each of us. The articulate sharing of interpretations and reasons for judgment offer the best hope for refinement of these “moral sources” over time, as well as practical reform of human communities and individual lives.

In order to make even very general headway on the question of appropriate standards for comparative moral judgment, however, it is necessary to address again the range of reasonable purposes for comparison, and how these interact with various possible purposes for such comparative judgments. Some of the peculiarities of this whole discussion hinge on this question: even if we must form certain kinds of judgments as we strive to understand past or culturally distant actors, what exactly would be the point of explicitly reporting our normative assessment of their proposals? Part of what makes the

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13 For two trenchant exposés of this sort of move in the Chinese context, see Bokenkamp 2004; Sharf 2002, 1–27.
nineteenth-century “scientists of religion” seem, in hindsight, both
ludicrous and sinister was the thought that they could articulate a
universal scoring system for any and all religions, a system that
would somehow “scientifically” measure a religion’s moral probity and
perhaps even sanctity. This appears to be the sort of scoring system
my used car dealer feared.\textsuperscript{14} I suggested above that such scoring
systems, and the picture of religion on which they were built, were at
the very least vast oversimplifications that depended essentially on
the pervasive reification of entities like “Buddhism,” “Christianity,”
“Judaism,” and “paganism.”\textsuperscript{15}

Given that universal moral scoring systems are misconceived, what
other standards might we employ to serve more-legitimate comparative
ethical purposes? What might such purposes be? When we study
culturally or temporally distant others, should we be excusing under-
standable but regrettable practices, institutions, or theories? Should we
praise good ones and/or critique bad ones? First of all, there seems to be
no qualitative or categorical difference between asking normative ques-
tions of ourselves or others in our own society, and asking such questions
with regard to more distant others (at least insofar as the general shape
of the inquiry goes); the most fundamental difference is simply the much
greater difficulty in attaining sufficient insight and knowledge to have
any basis for judging distant others at all. Second, while “presentism”
has a bad reputation among historians for generating anachronistic
interpretations of past actors and events—and ethnocentrism suffers
even greater scorn from anthropologists for similar reasons—there
seems to be no way of escaping from our own identification of the most
pressing ethical issues and problems, at least insofar as it provides a
starting point for inquiry and a motivating factor when we construct
comparative ethical studies. (Nor would there be any obvious reason for
escaping ourselves in this way, but a desire to seek moral truth provides
sufficient reason to test and refine our own sense of where the problems
lie, and how to conceive of them, and comparative ethics provides one
good way to do this.) Third, this helps to explain when carefully
developing normative evaluations might be worth the effort. To the
extent that the issues in question affect the interpreter’s own reflection
on the human good, they should be addressed honestly and with real
seriousness. To the extent that the moral debates or topics reflect only
“dead options” rather than “live” ones, to use Bernard Williams’s
terminology, then it is unclear what purpose would be served by

\textsuperscript{14} Analogous attempts live on even with contemporary social scientists as, for
example, in “The Wisdom Scorecard” produced by Monika Ardelt.

\textsuperscript{15} On reification in religious studies, see Campany 2003.
explicitly reporting the normative evaluations arrived at by the interpreter during the process of interpretation.\textsuperscript{16}

The line between “live” and “dead” ethical options can be hard to draw, of course. Even when studying past controversies that are now happily settled, at least as ongoing controversies—such as the moral status of slavery—it can be both intriguing and unsettling to trace the pro and con arguments in various settings and relate them to more-unresolved issues, such as the appropriate boundaries of moral concern, legitimate baselines for human dignity, whether there might exist a right or obligation to work, what the privileged owe to the oppressed or even the less fortunate, what sorts of economic and social hierarchies might be acceptable, and so on. In the end, the creativity and insight of the interpreter in drawing the connections between some distant debate, practice, or theory and contemporary ethical debate provide the only de facto limits on when it might be worth explicitly evaluating the practices of distant others.

In sum, we judge others because we cannot avoid doing so as we strive to understand them. In the process, we cannot help but make recourse both to our developing sense of what was or is justifiable in their context (understood not in a naively romantic way as a unified and harmonious society, but instead as a field of ongoing social action, debate, and laborious reproduction of institutions and traditions), as well as to our own conceptions of the human good and of epistemological and moral justification, which provide indispensable footholds for determining what was justifiable in their context. Regardless of the original purposes of the inquiry, to the extent that our reconstruction and interpretation of some distant normative debate forces us to question our own conceptions of the good and/or the right (or any more specific ethical notions), we generate problems for ourselves that should be resolved through comparative ethical reflection. Insofar as we are able to refine and improve our own moral understanding of real human conflicts and quandaries, we learn and become wiser, which surely must be the ultimate purpose of ethical inquiry.\textsuperscript{17}

If our interpretations and reconstructions of distant debates do not impinge on or call into question any of our moral presuppositions,

\textsuperscript{16} For example, Harrill’s paper cited above does not spend any time reflecting on the continuing normative force of the author of Second Peter’s arguments; I presume this is because Harrill finds the premises and conclusions of these arguments to be ethically uninteresting, or “dead,” and so pursues other ends in his essay.

\textsuperscript{17} Here, I am gesturing in the direction of various interrelated goals: greater self-understanding, including cultural, historical, and anthropological aspects; more nuanced, powerful, and compelling ethical theory to help guide our practices and decisions; and even the cultivation of key virtues (like practical wisdom) and skills (like cross-cultural interpretation).
however, then there is no problem to resolve (at least for us), and there is probably little to be gained by making our implicit normative evaluations explicit as, for example, in Harrill’s analysis of Second Peter and many other historical analyses. It is worth noting, however, that what seems like tact in refraining from dwelling on the errors of past actors, may in fact turn out to shield our presuppositions from scrutiny by leaving them unarticulated. Sometimes, perhaps all too often in an age of international belligerence and ensuing desires for toleration as a substitute for lasting peace, we forfeit chances to reassess our own convictions by leaving our normative assessments of others unarticulated, shadowy, and vague.

Sadly, the obvious counter-example to this restriction of explicit judgment to those cases that might deepen “our own” reflection on good living is when others appear to suffer unjustly right now, and we (and others) must deliberate about how to understand their situation, and whether and how to help them. These are very old problems, and they have given birth to the just war tradition, among other moral traditions dedicated to the difficulties engendered by other-regard and humanitarian intervention. Here, the stakes are raised and made more urgent by unfolding events, and there is no escape from the difficulties of normative judgment of sometimes quite distant others.18

3. Judging Well

The Gadamerian hermeneutical imperative to use and rely on our own judgments when striving to understand others—which I have been advocating—ironically serves to guard interpreters from moral hubris by showing how intimately self-criticism and other-criticism intertwine if properly understood.19 To keep this linkage and the intrinsic difficulties of cross-cultural interpretation firmly in mind promotes humility and tact. Perhaps most importantly, it also helps to build solidarity, the lack of which undermines mutual respect, and foments the defensiveness and mutual recrimination that is all too possible when anyone dares to judge someone else’s ethics or customary practices.

In this final section of the essay, I do not provide a global theory of trans-historical or cross-cultural moral judgment, but rather point to a

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18 There are various possible moral premises that could compel responsibility to distant others, from convictions about universal human dignity and a duty to care for those in need when possible, to utilitarian calculations of the greatest good for the greatest number, to Rortian commitments to “our way of life” and what that might entail—among other views. Obviously, sorting out these issues is beyond the scope of this paper.

19 Examining in detail the strengths and weaknesses of various Gadamerian themes such as the “fusion of horizons” is beyond the scope of this paper.
few ideals to be observed as one goes about one’s inevitable practice of judging others. There are many obvious ways that moral judgment may misfire, such as through foolishness, ignorance, incomprehension, misperception, or even misinformation. I want to focus here on some fairly subtle versions of these problems engendered by misconceptions about how to frame the inquiries that aim at wise moral judgments across cultural or historical distance; these misconceptions concern perspective, objectivity, and the proper scope of an interpreter’s focus.

One common way to theorize the difficulties of interpreting and evaluating complex social phenomena like normative advocacy is in terms of perspective. One might think that judgment is perspectival in the sense that it depends on our commitments and even identity. But this way of thinking is misleading for comparative religious ethics, because the metaphor of vision from a single vantage point on a complex landscape oversimplifies the forms of interpretation and evaluation in question. However one’s “perspective” is summarized, whether in terms of a particular tradition, religion, or social identity, or a particular ethical theory like utilitarianism, the metaphor falsely unifies great complexity by suggesting that those who see from any such “perspective” must understand every ethical issue in a single, particular way, with clear and predictable entailments. These details and their proper interrelations are often precisely what is at issue. Such interrelations cannot be assumed; they must be argued for on the basis of painstaking interpretation. To quixotically attempt to evaluate reified wholes such as “Christianity” and “Buddhism,” or “consequentialism” and “deontological moral theory,” is to revert to the same habits of thought that bedeviled the old scientists of comparative religion—and will serve us no better.20

A more helpful way to approach the question of perspectives for judgment is in terms of more-generalizable standpoints that can guide reflection and inquiry without prejudging important substantive issues or trying to index whole traditions or cultures. Examples of these standpoints include “observer” (which could reflect an anthropological or history of religions approach) and “participant” (a theological ethics approach), but neither of these is quite right for the sort of comparative ethics I am advocating here. Instead, the interpreter could imagine himself as a “visitor”—he could join up, and is at least for the time being trying to live on foreign territory, figuring out how (and how far) to accommodate to the local ways and means, and in the process

20 As I have argued elsewhere (Stalnaker 2006, xiii), Alasdair MacIntyre’s analysis of “rival traditions,” despite his laudable efforts to attend to a forest of details, and his occasional insistence that traditions are ongoing debates, is constantly bedeviled by his tendency to presume the necessary shape of certain traditions, most notably modern “liberalism” (see, for example, 1988, 368; 1990).
confronting rather than avoiding the ethical issues raised by possible accommodations. This metaphor at least places agency in the right place, with individual human interpreters and actors, and takes no strong position on the necessary boundaries or structure of what is being studied. It also accurately reflects the open-ended and uncertain relations between the interpreter and his objects of study. Visitation, of course, implies various possible relations of power between “locals” and “visitors.” I am suggesting a fairly unencumbered but still lengthy engagement, similar to what a visiting student or scholar might experience in a foreign country, as an imaginative device for reflecting on certain sorts of moral diversity.

Another seductive ideal is that of objectivity, which may be cashed out too easily in terms of neutrality. Even interpreters as fine as Lovin and Reynolds are sufficiently sure of this point that they can refer to “methodological neutrality” as a “requirement” of comparative ethics (1991, 249). Certainly one cannot simply prefer Christianity after the manner of most nineteenth-century European scholars of religion, but this point is obvious—the question is how properly to conceive of this requirement. The idea that one could be neutral and completely uncommitted when analyzing normative claims is, as I have been arguing, not convincing; at most, when engaged in the humanistic study of others’ normative advocacy, one can keep one’s judgments quiet, and leave them only implicit within the explicit analysis. The zeal for neutrality reflects a quasi-scientific conception of religious studies that suffers from insufficient reflection on the nature and limits of social scientific investigation.21

As with contemporary journalism, interpreting objectivity purely in terms of equal time or exposure for alternative points of view frequently makes a mockery of the important issues that politicians and religious advocates address. The correct standard in both cases, albeit much harder to put into practice, is equal justice for all, and this requires doing the difficult work of carefully attending to acts and words, checking facts, and assessing proposals as best one can. To animate the strenuous research such an approach requires, analysts ought to practice both creative sympathy and curious suspicion, holding these in a productive tension, and keeping the balance the same whether at home or abroad—and as much as possible whether focusing on the past or the present.

These themes converge when we consider the proper scope of evaluative concern. As I have argued repeatedly here, instead of global judgments of superiority or inferiority applied to vast, reified wholes,

21 For an excellent example of such reflection, which informs this essay’s hermeneutical proposals, see Bohman 1991.
comparative ethicists should attend to the specifics of particular normative proposals. We should structure our studies so that we might “caress the details” of ethical themes worthy of serious attention, and bring the resources of multiple sources to bear through rigorous, reflective comparison. This stricture to carefully disentangle and examine complex interrelationships of crucial details applies whether one is directly addressing particular normative controversies—as when Martha Nussbaum (1999, 118–29) grapples with “female genital mutilation” or Stout (2004) attempts to persuade those he calls “new traditionalists” to think differently about modern democracy—or if one instead focuses on fundamental theoretical issues in ethics—such as virtue and dispositions in the work of Lee Yearley (1990) or practices of ethico-religious self-formation in the work of Jon Schofer (2005) and myself (2006).

Focusing on specifics rather than the supposedly rational “vindication” of whole traditions or schools of thought helps to short-circuit the defensiveness that almost inevitably attends global critical judgments from outsiders. It can also allow a more nuanced grappling with issues of relativism, cultural difference, and the scope and character of any possible common human morality. Rather than rehashing familiar philosophical debates about moral relativism, comparative ethics can exemplify what I have elsewhere called “global neighborliness” by descending from the stratosphere of speculation and transcendental argument to articulate and examine contrasting ethical possibilities in a richly contextualized manner. A comparative religious ethics that does not suppress but rather seeks out normative contrasts promises a way to get new purchase on questions of the diversity of possible good lives. Even if the theme of normative range within diversity is one of the central concerns of modern Western political and moral thought, the synthesis of historical, anthropological, and philosophical approaches that the best comparative ethics should strive for can provide a novel approach to these familiar issues. Rather than only policing moral boundaries—at the risk of forgetting everything that goes on within the boundaries—comparative ethicists can address both the appropriate boundaries (for example, universally binding obligations that derive from human dignity per se) and the messy range of

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22 The phrase “caress the details . . . the divine details” comes from Vladimir Nabokov when he was instructing students in the art of fiction writing. The phrase is attributed to him by Wetzsteon (1970, 245). Note also the following from Nabokov directly: “In high art and pure science detail is everything. Only myopia condones the blurry generalizations of ignorance” (1990, 168; see also 1990, 7).

possibilities within such boundaries, by drawing on moral sources both within and far beyond more familiar varieties of Western thought. Furthermore, while leaving our inevitable interpretive evaluations implicit certainly remains a possibility, and at times may be the wisest choice, surely some comparativists ought to be articulating such evaluations explicitly in order to enrich ethics more broadly—to help face the most pressing issues of the day with the unusual resources which we have come to know.  

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I would like to thank Cheryl Cottine, Connie Furey, Bert Harrill, John Kelsay, Nancy Levene, Tal Lewis, Rich Miller, and Jon Schofer, as well as anonymous referees for the Journal of Religious Ethics, for comments on earlier drafts and for conversations on some of the key issues in this essay.
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