SEXING COMPARATIVE ETHICS

Bringing Forth Feminist and Gendered Perspectives

Elizabeth M. Bucar, Grace Y. Kao, and Irene Oh

ABSTRACT

This collaborative companion piece, written as a postscript to the three preceding essays, highlights four themes in comparative religious ethics that emerge through our focus on sex and gender: language, embodiment, justice, and critique.

KEY WORDS: *feminist*, *gender*, *sex*, *language*, *embodiment*, *justice*, *comparative ethics*

THE THREE PRECEDING PAPERS apply the categories of sex and gender both to broaden and to interrogate recent work in the field of comparative religious ethics. While each of these essays has a different conceptual, theoretical, and constructive concern, they collectively share the assumption that ethical inquiries are incomplete unless they account for the influences of sex and gender. This co-authored companion piece discusses how, when read together as a group, these essays highlight four themes in comparative religious ethics that emerge from our focus on sex and gender: language, embodiment, justice, and critique.

1. Limitations of Language

Sensitivity to language in the comparative enterprise springs from the effort to identify appropriate bases or terms for comparison. The essays in this collection, while not novel in raising concerns over appropriate terminology,[1] challenge assumptions about the possibility

[1] The early work of David Little and Sumner B. Twiss, for example, attempts to identify universal categories on which to base comparison across religious traditions (Little and Twiss 1978). Martha Nussbaum's approach to comparison uses both capabilities and human rights as foundations for comparative work across societies and cultures (Nussbaum 2000, 2006). Even when comparison begins with an examination of specific figures, such as in Lee Yearley's study of Mencius and Aquinas, the virtue of courage emerges as the appropriate term for cross-cultural comparison (Yearley 1990).

JRE 38.4:654–659. © 2010 Journal of Religious Ethics, Inc.

of neutrality with regard to the categories of sex and gender in comparative ethics. Notably, all three authors spend a substantial amount of time accounting for the inadequacies of inherited concepts such as “mother,” “ecofeminism,” or “sex” for comparative analysis.

“Mother” often connotes biological mother, but Irene Oh is interested in expanding her discussion of mothers to include any moral agent who is responsible for childcare. Grace Kao points out how cultural–symbolic claims of the “women–nature” affinity so central to ecofeminism may not be appropriate in all contexts. And Elizabeth Bucar makes clear that a plurality of conceptual meanings of “sex” and “gender” requires an artificial—and imminently contestable—construction of terms by the scholar to serve as points for comparison, especially since modern and postmodern definitions of sex and gender are in tension with each other. Read together, these three essays demonstrate that there is constant movement between language and context. When applied to the enterprise of comparative ethics more broadly, this phenomenon calls for not only careful use of language but also careful exploration of its varied historical, theological, and cultural meanings.

2. Bodies that Matter

A second theme that cuts across all three essays is the importance of attending to issues of embodiment. Recent studies in comparative religious ethics have focused on the moral formation of subjects in different religious communities throughout history (Lewis et al. 2005). All three essays build upon this scholarship when discussing the ways in which the common bifurcation of human bodies into “female” or “male,” based on how they look or function, makes a difference in ethical inquiry. This insight holds even if what counts as embodiment differs within different contexts.

Kao raises the issue of embodiment by questioning not only the universality of the idea that nature is identified everywhere as female or feminine (for example, earth as “goddess” or “mother”) but also ecomaternalist assumptions that women have a greater capacity to live in a non-exploitative relationship with the earth in part because of their biology. Oh focuses on moral transformation through the physical practices of mothering—the holding and soothing, feeding and food preparation, and bathing and cleaning of an infant or child—that are performed by caregivers. Bucar’s work considers how advanced medical technology, which can change one’s sexual characteristics, has increased the complexities of the moral life of the sexual subject. While the specific bodies of analysis differ, all three essays suggest the importance of further work in religious ethics focusing on the body as a point of entry into social, political, and religious worlds.

3. The Politics of Sex and Gender

A third theme that weaves throughout these essays concerns notions of social justice and empowerment in the public sphere. Although comparative religious ethics need not necessarily engage in such matters, a strong sense of justice is reflected in these essays through their authors' commitment to the ubiquitously marginalized status of mothers, women, transsexuals, and the environment.

Each of the essays also engages in political discourse, but to different degrees. Oh's piece explicitly argues for a political ethic that develops out of maternal practice; Kao describes and endorses successful cases of ecofeminist activism; and Bucar's contribution has political implications through her discussion of the moral status of "disorderly" transsexuals, as well as the rights and duties of post-operative transsexuals.

Utilizing sex and gender as means to gain political justice raises some additional concerns for comparative projects. For example, although the assignment of certain characteristics to women by virtue of their sex can be politically expedient, Oh and Kao also address some liabilities of doing so. Still, Oh regards the practices of mothering as being similar enough across cultures to warrant universal norms of political justice, and Kao acknowledges that essentializing ecomaternalist discourses continue to be of use in some contexts. But Bucar questions the very validity of such discourse given the different ways in which sex and gender are construed by different religious traditions.

Interestingly, the comparative project subverts any political assumptions related to a particular subject matter. When viewed through Oh's comparative lens, motherhood becomes the basis for political action, even though motherhood in many quarters traditionally conjures up images of politically removed domesticity. Activists who identify as "ecofeminists" will by definition work for the betterment of women and the environment, but as the wide scope of political activity that Kao's essay indicates, the specific form of that activity will vary tremendously according to context. Bucar's surprising finding that the Iranian government subsidizes sex change operations reveals some unexpected political repercussions that emerge from a religious view of sex and gender that differs markedly from the Catholic one more familiar to many readers. The comparative views found in these essays thus connect religion and politics in unanticipated ways.

4. Levels of Critique

A fourth theme that emerges in all three essays is that the lenses of sex and gender are important to criticism, a theme that the authors develop on three distinct levels. First, each author uses gender or sex as a way to gain traction within a sub-field of religious ethics,

specifically care ethics (Oh), environmental ethics (Kao), and sexual ethics (Bucar). In these cases gender/sex is not introduced into the ongoing conversation in an ad hoc fashion, but rather its role in the conversation is redefined so as to be constitutive of the very issue under discussion.

On a second level, investigation into gender and sex can be understood as a critique of some of the prominent approaches within the field of comparative religious ethics. Take, for example, contributions to a 2005 issue of the *Journal of Religious Ethics* devoted to methodology in comparative ethics. Its four authors share a common interest in comparatively examining accounts of "what human beings are and ideals for what human should do and become" (Lewis et al. 2005, 177). By contrast, our essays' discussions of embodiment can be understood as questioning the prior authors' failure to take seriously the sex-based differences between humans as well as the gendered dimensions of the moral life (Berkson 2005; Lewis 2005; Lewis et al. 2005; Stalnaker 2005; but see Schofer 2005, 245–46 for an important exception).[2]

Finally, taken together, our three essays comprise a mutually critical feedback loop toward one another. Despite the common themes that run throughout our essays, our fundamental assumptions about the proper direction of gender and comparative religious ethics do differ. On the issue of universal versus particular conceptions of gender, Oh's essay argues that universal dimensions of mothering foster shared notions of justice. In comparison, Bucar implies a futility in any attempt to use either gender or sex to ground any universal common

[2] For instance, Stalnaker refers to the work of Nussbaum as feminist and rejects the concern that attempts to define human nature must be put to "ultra-vicious or even conservative" ends, but he does not consider the ways in which the thinkers under comparison regard humans as gendered (Stalnaker 2005). Lewis discusses Xunzi's concept of a "gentleman," but does not discuss his concept (or lack thereof) of a "gentlewoman"—even though Lewis is attempting to provide a sketch of Xunzi's anthropology (Lewis 2005, 245–46). Berkson uses a passage from the *Analects* to explain the idea of changes in *qi* over time that is overtly gendered: "There are three things the gentleman should guard against. In youth . . . the attraction of feminine beauty. In the prime of life . . . bellicosity. In old age . . . acquisitiveness" (Berkson 2005, 303). To be clear, we are not blaming Berkson, Lewis, or Stalnaker for the sexism of the thinkers under study, but for neglecting to explain how their accounts can only provide partial understandings of the "subject," "self," "anthropos," or "person." Among these four theorists, only Schofer addresses both the limitations of such scholarship and the gendered dimensions of these writings in two ways: (1) he notes that while the primary text under discussion is not addressed toward a "universal self" but a male elite, there are possibilities for appropriation by women, among others, and (2) he comments upon the ways in which the rabbis gendered themselves as feminine in relation both to Rome and to God (Schofer 2005, 267–68, n.16; 281–82).

morality. Her discussion of sex change operations argues that both sex and gender are historically in flux as well as highly particular within different religious traditions. Kao can be understood as a compromise between the two other authors: acknowledging both the conceptual problems of universalist assumptions and their utility in some cases for mobilizing social action.

Another area of disagreement emerges over the possible and proper scholarly payoff of using gender or sex in comparative religious ethics. For Oh, gendered practices become the ground for a scholarly constructive project that uncovers previously neglected and globally significant resources of moral knowledge. For Kao, consideration of sex and gender allows her to understand not only the religious and cultural roots of environmental problems especially in Western contexts, but also the constructive project within ecofeminism in term of its political successes and theoretical failures. In contrast to a constructive project based on either gender or sex, Bucar argues instead that attention to gender and sex is best directed at exploring a thicker description of ethical systems through comparison. At heart, these disagreements are rooted in a tension over whether gender and sex are best used to ground a common morality or to unsettle it. The strength of reading these three essays together is that one can observe that, given different moral practices, gender-based analysis can do different things.

5. Conclusions

While each essay is written in such a way as to stand on its own, we hope that they will be read together so as to provide a richer account of what comparative religious ethics might look like when the categories of sex and gender are of primary concern. As in the case of collaborative work in general, these essays represent the product of extensive scholarly exchange and debate. This process has also provided the "collateral" benefits of not only stronger professional relationships among ourselves, as pre-tenured female junior faculty who are members of a (still) male-dominated discipline, but also deeper friendships of mutual support as each of us became mothers for the first time at some point during this collaboration.

REFERENCES

Berkson, Mark A.
2005 "Conceptions of Self and No-Self and Modes of Connection: Comparative Soteriological Structures in Classical Chinese Thought." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.2 (June): 293–331.

Lewis, Thomas A.

2005 "Frames of Comparison: Anthropology and Inheriting Traditional Practices." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.2 (June): 225–53.

Lewis, Thomas A., Jonathan Wyn Schofer, Aaron Stalnaker, and Mark A. Berkson

2005 "Anthropos and Ethics: Categories of Inquiry and Procedures of Comparison." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.2 (June): 177–85.

Little, David, and Sumner B. Twiss

1978 *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Nussbaum, Martha

2000 *Women and Human Development*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

2006 *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species-Membership*. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press.

Schofer, Jonathan Wyn

2005 "Self, Subject, and Chosen Subjection: Rabbinic Ethics and Comparative Possibilities." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.2 (June): 255–91.

Stalnaker, Aaron

2005 "Comparative Religious Ethics and the Problem of 'Human Nature.'" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33.2 (June): 187–224.

Yearley, Lee

1990 *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.