

Ethical cultures and traditions

A very short guide to the world's main ethical traditions

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Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Ethical cultures and traditions.....	3
3. Western ethics and the Judaeo-Christian tradition	5
4. Islamic ethics.....	8
5. Confucian ethics.....	11
6. Indian ethics	13
7. Buddhist ethics	16
8. The traditions compared.....	17

1. Introduction

Around the world, hundreds of thousands of people take courses every year in business or professional ethics. A great many of them study in international multicultural classes and all study problems that cut across national cultures. All of them are accustomed to taking as their starting points for ethical reflection the cultures and tradition in which they grew up, or to which they have become acclimatized. Yet most courses and most textbooks hardly touch on these cultures or traditions. Treated either through the applications of philosophical ethics or through some less rigorous version of ‘reasoned analysis’, the topics covered are effectively divorced from people’s past moral experience. Not surprisingly, ‘business ethics’, ‘accounting ethics’, ‘healthcare ethics’ and so on often become subjects of merely academic interest (or, even worse, subjects that just have to be ‘passed’ to get the degree), quite disconnected from ethics as a lived experience. So while lessons may be learnt, they are rarely internalised.

I myself teach business ethics (and the ethics of finance and accounting) primarily through applied moral philosophy. The ethical traditions are not always up to the task of tackling the complex problems that arise in international business, and even when they do give answers these need to be critically reviewed. An important part of any university education is to help people think clearly and rigorously about important issues. Ethical issues are extremely important, and far too important to be left to loose and sloppy thinking. Whatever its limitations, philosophical ethics provides a valuable basis for the kind of clear and rigorous analysis that is needed here. But it has to be connected back to ethics as people experience and understand it, and I always start by exploring and making explicit how people normally think about ethical problems – the ethical problems of everyday personal and social life. And this is largely through the cultural norms in which they’ve been instructed (ethics is in the first place, for children, about doing what you’re told) and to which they’ve been exposed.

Since all my classes are multicultural, this making explicit of the students’ own values, and of the grounds of these values (in family, school, religion etc.) serves also to introduce them to each other’s cultures and traditions, of which they may know very, very little. This not only prepares to them to see and understand where other people are coming from when they encounter ethical issues in multicultural or cross-cultural settings. It also provides a basis on which they can interact with and learn from each other. Through discussing the morals of everyday life, they find points of recognition and shared human sympathy, as well as of difference and divergence.

You cannot capture a culture in a couple of pages, and the sketches given here do not pretend to do so. Indeed you probably have to live in it, and for quite a long time and with determinedly open ears, eyes and mind, to understand a culture properly. I am a product of my own culture and I don’t even have an expert academic’s knowledge of other cultures, let alone a deep experiential knowledge. All I have tried to do, therefore, is give enough pointers to enable people reading this to begin a conversation. And if, in beginning that conversation, you can keep your ears open, your eyes open and your minds open, it is amazing how far you can get.

2. Ethical cultures and traditions

Cultures and traditions are inherently rich and complex, and resist simple descriptions. To properly understand a culture you need to live in it, even to grow up in it, absorbing its practices, its habits of thought, its structures, its stories and myths. From this point of view it would be quite impossible to communicate an understanding of the world's major ethical traditions in a series of books, let alone a series of very short essays – even supposing that I had such understanding in the first place, which, of course, I haven't. My aim here is much more modest. All I have tried to do is to set out some of the key features of the different traditions as they appear to a sympathetic outsider, focusing on those features that seem to me to be core to the very first, very tentative, stages of understanding. With apologies to Zoroastrians, the Bahai and others, I shall only cover the five most dominant traditions in terms of both population numbers and geographical reach, namely the Western tradition, which is rooted mainly in Christianity; the Islamic tradition; the Confucian tradition, which dominates in China and throughout Asia-Pacific; the Indian, predominantly Hindu, tradition; and its radical progeny, Buddhism. I hope, obviously, that the essays aren't in any serious way misleading. The presentations have been tested out with students, friends and colleagues from the cultures concerned. But they are not intended to be in any way definitive. They are simply a starting point for dialogue between people brought up in the different traditions.

Before progressing to short reviews of each of the major ethical traditions, it may be helpful to say a few words about their origins, beginning with the ethics of the primitive societies from which civilizations have evolved. Since the primitive societies of millennia past left no written records, we have to rely here on anthropological studies of more contemporary primitive tribes, but these give us some interesting insights.

The first and most striking feature of primitive ethics as we know them is the apparently universal presence of norms of reciprocity. In every primitive society we have observed, one good, whether in the form of a gift or favour, deserves another. Any harm or wrong, similarly, has to be avenged in some way. The particular rules and practices of gift exchange and revenge differ considerably from society to society, but some such practices are always present.

This idea of ethical reciprocity remains a common feature of contemporary societies. Some Eastern societies still have quite elaborate rules of gift-exchange. In England we say more casually 'one good turn deserves another'. The desire for revenge also surfaces from time to time, but in civilised societies this is no longer – or not always – considered ethical, and this change of perspective can be seen taking shape in the formative stages of many of the great ethical traditions. Revenge reciprocity is still evident in the Jewish law of the Torah ('eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe'), but the later books of the Old Testament begin to explore the problems with this and the New Testament rejects it. Revenge is a prominent feature of ancient Greek myth, but one that is forcefully challenged in fifth century Athens, both by the philosopher Socrates and by the playwright Euripides. The rights and wrongs of revenge are a constant theme of the classical writings of both India and China.

Ethical cultures and traditions

The questioning of the revenge motive was just one part of a more general questioning of received wisdom that marks the foundations – and the founders – of several of the main ethical traditions, and it is striking how the same ideas, and the same approach to conventional wisdom, can be found at roughly the same time in different parts of the world. Two of the great critical thinkers of antiquity, Confucius (551-479 BCE) in China and the Buddha (563-483 BCE) in India were almost exact contemporaries. A third, the Greek Socrates (470-399 BCE), was just a few generations younger. Moreover, though they looked backwards rather than forwards, other key ethical texts, such as the Jewish Torah and the Hindu Bhagavad-Gita, were also assembled at just this time. While the Chinese, Egyptian and other civilizations had already been flourishing, in a material and technological sense, for a couple of thousand years, they seem to have reached a crucial stage in their moral development about two and a half thousand years ago, and the ideas worked out and written down then are fundamental to the traditions that have dominated our moral lives since.

A second observation of the ethics of primitive societies, and one that offers a useful counterpoint to the first, is that their ethical principles seem to vary quite significantly, in a way that reflects their social and economic circumstances. Observing a variety of primitive African tribes in the 1960s, anthropologist Mary Douglas distinguished between three types of culture each with its own characteristic ethic. Where survival had depended above all on holding together, on solidarity, she found an ethic of egalitarianism. What mattered most was being part of the tribe. The greatest sin of all was to leave: the egalitarianism didn't extend to outsiders. But so long as people remained in the tribe the moral norms that bound them were norms of equality. Where survival had depended above all on a division of labour, she found a hierarchical social order and an ethic of obligation. What mattered was doing one's particular duty, putting the interests of the whole community first. Where survival had depended above all on trading, she found an ethic of self-interest. 'Big men' competed against each other in the market place, while those who could not compete hung on as best they could, subservient out of necessity to one of the market leaders.

In civilised societies, with their greater social complexity, we find all three of these ethical elements. Since civilization depends, first and foremost, on a division of labour, it is not surprising that hierarchical politics and an ethic of obligation are central to all the major ethical traditions. Since it also depends on trade, self-interest is also omnipresent, though generally under tight restrictions. In most historical cultures the trading community has operated according to its own distinct market ethic, but under license, so to speak, and separated off in all sorts of ways from the main community, where the ethic of obligation has been carefully maintained. The ethic of equality has historically characterised isolated sects within a dominant hierarchical society, but as some of these sects have gained influence (and indeed become hierarchical) it has also infiltrated the mainstream. Critical thinkers have also introduced another type of egalitarianism, urging the equality of all humans rather than just of those within a particular group. Definitions of humans have taken time to evolve: women, young children and slaves were long excluded, even from the most enlightened thinking, and the status of other groups (the unborn, the mentally ill) remains controversial. But the general idea has grown steadily in influence over the centuries.

Each of these ethical ideas finds expression in different traditions in different measure and in different ways, and one source of tension between traditions is their

Ethical cultures and traditions

different emphasis on one aspect or another of what it means to be ethical. In order to explore these tensions, I shall finish with a short comparative essay. In fact, the traditions only rarely conflict directly with each other, and when they do it is typically on very specific issues. Their different cultural and historical contexts do, however, give them very different emphases. They pull in different directions, and when they come into contact this can cause tensions that are easily misunderstood. To help overcome this misunderstanding I have tried to sketch out in very simple form the most obvious of these tensions. As with the other sections my account is not meant to be definitive – indeed it might be considered idiosyncratic – but to provide a starting point for constructive dialogue. In the same spirit I have also highlighted in this section some of the ideals that the traditions share, a focus on which helps us to reach beyond and overcome their differences.

3. Western ethics and the Judaeo-Christian tradition

Although Western society is now predominantly secular, its ethics remain rooted in the Christian tradition. They also retain strong connections to the pre-Christian Jewish ethics of the Old Testament.

Developing on the fringes of Egyptian civilisation, the Jewish people inherited aspects of both the Egyptian and the earlier Mesopotamian cultures, and the ethics of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) reflect this. They also show several distinctive features, however. In a world of multiple deities, the Jews recognized just one God, and identified themselves as His chosen people, created in His image and living according to His commandments. Foremost among these commandments was, simply, to obey the commandments: to walk in the ways of God. Faith and ethics were inseparable. To be good was to follow the laws set out in the Torah, as interpreted and elaborated by the teachers or Rabbis.

These laws have both positive and negative elements. On the positive side, a range of virtues (charity, justice, honesty, etc.) reflect the idea that man as God's creation should somehow imitate his creator. For some teachers the crux of Jewish ethics is found in the God-like virtue of lovingkindness, or in the commandment to love your neighbours (meaning in this case other Jews). This is required both because God is loving and because your neighbours are, like you, created in God's image. On the negative side are literally hundreds of constraints: don't murder, don't steal, don't lie, don't commit adultery, etc., but also don't work on the Sabbath, don't eat forbidden foods and so on. Though they have a strong moral dimension, the commandments are intensely practical. The morality is practical, the religious ritual is practical, and both are bound up inseparably with the purely practical requirement of prudence.

In Christianity, the more general moral commandments of Judaism, such as those contained in the Ten Commandments, are largely retained, but the religious context switches from a commanding God (albeit one who is also loving) to a loving God. In Jesus Christ, moreover, Christians found a human incarnation of the divine, allowing the

Ethical cultures and traditions

idea of the imitation of God to be based on following example (through the imitation of Christ) rather than following the law. Much of Jewish law, including the detailed dietary laws, the requirement of circumcision, and the whole legalistic apparatus of Jewish society was dispensed with. Whereas in Judaism the focus is upon the right actions, those that are prescribed by law, in Christianity it is upon the right motives, those that are inspired by love. Whereas the Torah is extremely specific in its ethical commandments, the Gospels are rather vague. Jesus sets examples, and preaches love, but doesn't specify rules.

Love, in early Christianity, is everything. It is not a love commanded, but a love freely given, in joyful response to a loving God. It is also a radical response, unlimited and unconditional. In a sharp break with the norms of reciprocity, Jesus taught Christians to forgive all injuries, however severe, and to show love to others beyond anything they may show in return. Christian love is also extended to non-Christians, not just to fellow Christians, and it is the basis of all other ethical judgements. In choosing between two duties, for example, or apportioning goods between two people, a Christian should act out of unlimited love to all concerned.

In the centuries after Jesus, Christianity became the established religion of the Roman Empire. It also took hold beyond the Empire, on the fringes of Western Europe, so that even though the Empire itself collapsed Europe as a whole was, by the early middle ages, a Christian civilization. Over this period, the relatively simple framework of early Christian ethics was filled in with ideas drawn from the Greek philosophical tradition. Specific ethical rules were imported from the Greek, and a set of virtues combining Judaic and Greek elements was developed. As Christianity moved from being a small sect waiting expectedly for the end of the earth to being a large church taking a central role in the administration of the state, it also lost some of its radical idealism. A spirit of egalitarianism gave way to a hierarchical and authoritarian church in which all were supposedly equal before God but ordinary people were in practice kept firmly in their places. For the great majority of practising Christians the radical concept of unlimited love became at best a remote ideal, a characteristic of saints. Ethics became instead a question of following the teachings of a powerful church, of doing what they were told.

In this authoritarian context, ethics also became motivated by fear as much as hope. All the religions of the Bible make life on earth an activity in which the stakes are enormously high. There is no second chance through reincarnation, and no great variety of possible outcomes. You go to heaven or you go to hell. Early Christians hoped for salvation, and where the Christian church flourishes today, in the cities of Africa and South America, this is still its driving force. When things in this life seem hopeless, it offers people the hope of heavenly redemption. In its mature forms, however, Christianity also operates through fear, and sometimes primarily through fear. The reason given for behaving ethically, i.e. for doing what the church and its priests or ministers tell you, is because if you don't you will go to hell.

To this day the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, the direct descendants of the church of the Roman Empire, remain strongly hierarchical and their associated ethics remain ethics of duty and obligation. The discussion of ethical issues is a matter for the elite and for the elite only. The duty of church members is to follow the teachings that ensue. In the main protestant churches, however, and in a profusion of smaller protestant sects, egalitarian ideals predominate. And while many protestant sects are built on strict

Ethical cultures and traditions

rules of behaviour, the concept of unlimited love is also often explicit and, as in Jesus's own teaching, the starting point for any definition of the ethical.

In this context, contemporary Western ethics present different facets in different societies, but with common elements. The common elements are mainly derived from the Bible, especially the 'don'ts' of the Ten Commandments, and the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of St Matthew. These include a repetition of the commandment to 'love thy neighbour as thyself', but with the term 'neighbour' encompassing all men, and indeed women; an injunction to follow the law of the land ('render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's'); a positive statement of the Golden Rule ('all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them'); and many of the most familiar examples of unlimited love in action ('whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also', 'whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain', 'go and sell what thou hast, and give to the poor', 'love thy enemy', and so on). They also include many assertions of God's love, such as those of the Beatitudes ('blessed are the poor in spirit ... , they that mourn ... , the meek... , the merciful ... , the pure in heart ... ') and many familiar warnings of the dangers of worldly wealth and other distractions.

In a society in which the great majority of people are no longer brought up as Christians, these teachings will no doubt lose some of their force over time, but they are still very powerful today, even among non-Christians. Moreover, many of the teachings recorded in St Matthew, and to a lesser extent the other gospels, have been so fully absorbed into the languages of Europe and America that they are now a part of common Western wisdom, irrespective of religious belief. To some extent Christian attitudes remain distinctively Christian: protestant Christians especially are more likely than non-Christians to invoke love as a foundational ethical concept rather than just as a generally good thing. Christians are more likely than non-Christians to see forgiveness as lying at the heart of an ethical life rather than just as a commendable virtue. To a large extent, however, contemporary Western moral culture is simply traditional Christian moral culture without the religious bits.

Among the differences of emphasis within Western ethics, two in particular stand out. The first is most obviously a difference between North America and Europe. American culture is historically rooted in Protestantism and retains a strong egalitarian ethic, and distrust of hierarchical authority. But it is also historically a pioneering culture, marked by a strong individualism, and by a strong market ethic of self-interest. Together these have resulted in a distinctly American ethic of self-reliance. America is, in theory at least, a land of equal opportunities, but also one of equal responsibilities. A great value is attributed to taking responsibility for oneself, and not calling on the help of others. In Europe, where self-interest is viewed with suspicion and even the protestant churches are integrated into the social hierarchy, a greater emphasis is placed on looking after the needy and a lesser emphasis on criticising them for being unable to look after themselves. Equality tends to refer to equality of treatment rather than equality of opportunity, and the American insistence on self-reliance tends to be seen as a way of avoiding ethical obligations.

The second difference in emphasis is most obviously a difference between Southern and Northern Europe. From a Northern perspective, Southern Europe appears to have rather lax morals, especially in matters of sexual behaviour, gender relations more generally, and business and political dealings. From a Southern perspective, Northerners

appear unduly puritanical. The origins of this difference are not entirely clear. Though the South is predominantly Catholic and the North predominantly protestant, and though protestant America tends to follow the North, the difference is not just one of Christian teachings, or indeed of geographical latitude. Catholic, Mediterranean Spain is in some ways Northern on this particular divide. A further confusion is that some of the areas in which the Catholic countries seem to exhibit moral laxity are precisely those in which Catholic dogma is most rigid. What is clear, though, is that the differences are more a question of the domain of ethics than of conflicting ethical norms, with the Northerners including in the moral domain some areas that Southerners, or at least male Southerners, see more as a matter of custom – mores, as opposed to morals, or etiquette as opposed to ethics.

4. Islamic ethics

The Islamic faith emerged in the seventh century CE among the Arab tribes of what is now Saudi Arabia, warriors who, when not fighting each other, sold their services as mercenaries to the competing Roman and Persian empires, whose battle front lay along their Northern borders. The cultural centres of the region were predominantly Christian, and many of these tribes had earlier converted to Christianity, but the Jewish tradition was also strong and Islam, like Christianity, is effectively an outgrowth of Judaism. The key figure is the Prophet Muhammad (570-632 CE), who is for Muslims one of a series of messengers from God going back through Jesus to the Old Testament prophets. The key text, and the foundation of Islamic teaching, is the Quran or Koran, which records God's teachings as revealed to Muhammad, and which is interpreted and illustrated through examples drawn from His life.

In some ways both the religion of Islam and its characteristic ethics remain much closer to early Judaism than to their Christian equivalents. In particular, Islam carries over from Judaism the concept of a commanding God together with a legalistic formulation of God's commandments in which religious, moral and legal elements are inseparable. Indeed many of the commandments of the Torah, on dietary and social practices as well as on ethics, were carried over into Islam. Whereas the Jewish tradition is relentlessly practical, however, even in its religion, the Islamic tradition is relentlessly religious, even in its practicalities. Whereas the Jewish God seems always to be in the background, the Islamic God (who is of course the same God) is always in the foreground, always present, always watching, and all-powerful.

A critical key to the understanding of Islamic ethics, for a non-Muslim, is the recognition that every single act of a Muslim, of any kind at all, is conceived of as an act in the sight of God. There is no such thing as a secular realm, separate from the religious one, and no such thing as an act without religious and therefore ethical significance. For a Westerner or Oriental, accustomed to a separation of religion and practical affairs, this can be difficult to grasp, but its significance cannot be over-stated. It is a crucial element

Ethical cultures and traditions

both in the history of Islam, and of its tensions with Christianity, and in contemporary Islam, and its tensions with the secular West.

Before he became revered as a prophet, Muhammad was a trader and warrior, and the rise of Islam the religion came on the back of the rise of the Arab Caliphate. Once the Arabs stopped fighting as mercenaries, and between themselves, and started fighting for themselves, they very quickly conquered the Persians and most of the Eastern Roman Empire, and became the dominant power west of China. Their rule was generally enlightened. Jews and Christians were allowed to keep their religions and scholarship flourished. It is mainly thanks to Islamic scholars, translating first from the Syriac and later from the Greek, that the writings of Greek civilization were preserved and transmitted to mediaeval Western Europe. In a culture in which God's presence was so pervasive, however, there was always a tension between reason and revelation. The Quran characterizes humans as rational beings, and so legitimates rational enquiry, but it also limits its role: reason is a means for understanding revelation, within limits set by revelation. In the early centuries these limits were broadly defined, but in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, by when the Arabic empire was itself coming under military attack from both East and West, there was a heavy clampdown on philosophical enquiry and a reassertion of the priority of divine revelation.

By this time Islam and Christianity were unambiguously at war. Both were proselytizing religions, with ambitions to convert the whole world, and each treated the other as infidels. Culturally, though, they were very different. Christendom was a loose collection of states, often fighting among themselves, which happened to share a religion. In each of these states the Christian church played a powerful role, but there was always a clear separation between the religious and secular realms, each with its own area of jurisdiction. Under the patronage of kings and princes trade and, in due course, learning prospered, whether the church authorities liked it or not. Over the ensuing centuries the secular aspects of society increasingly dominated the religious. In Islam, in contrast, there was no such network of competing states, and no law other than religious law, which regulated behaviour in every aspect of life and in great detail. Both intellectual and economic progress were stifled.

These differences can be seen even more clearly today. Whereas the West is a secular society, with a strong market ethic and business and professional realms unconstrained by religion, Islamic culture remains restrictive. To do business or practice a business profession in an Islamic context is not itself difficult, because everybody is working under more or less the same constraints, but for a Muslim business to compete in the global economy is immensely difficult. There is no counterpart to the market ethic, and no secular ideology, and businesses are bound by the same detailed rules and proscriptions as any other social institutions. Some of these strike at the heart of business. Usury, or lending money at interest, was for centuries considered equally immoral in Islam and Christianity (hence the tradition of Jewish bankers). It was still technically illegal in much of sixteenth century Europe and was still condemned by the Roman Catholic Church in the nineteenth century. But that didn't stop the early development of an international European banking system, catering first to the needs of princes and then to those of traders. It didn't even stop the Vatican developing its own banking system. In Islam, in contrast, usury remains strictly forbidden. In the last few decades Islamic banks have found ways around this, but even now the constraint adds significantly to costs, reduces flexibility, and prevents any integration between Islamic and world financial

Ethical cultures and traditions

systems. On a more day to day level, rules of prayer and ritual, rules governing the interactions between men and women, rules governing the educational process and rules in countless other areas, as well as religious and religiously enforced interpretations of the common good, all constrain the operations of Islamic business, government and professional institutions.

A second key to understanding Islamic ethics, apart from the absence of a secular realm, is the importance of the (local) community. Divine revelation is not always unambiguous and in Islam as in Judaism local teachers have always played an important part in interpreting the scriptures so as to give specific guidelines for their communities. Whereas Judaism has developed a relatively coherent rabbinical tradition, however, Islam has remained much more localised, with different communities developing quite different interpretive traditions. Though the underlying principles are much the same across the Islamic world, detailed ethical norms and the Islamic law imposed by Shari'a courts can vary significantly from one community to another. Issues such as the role and education of women have always been highly contentious.

The importance of community is also apparent in one of the most significant positive features of Islamic ethics, which imposes on men a responsibility for ethical awareness (taqwa), and associated with this a responsibility for the wellbeing and conduct of their community. Just as God is ever watchful, so is a good Muslim, looking out for and helping people in need, and also looking out for and bringing to task those guilty of bad behaviour. This is perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of Islamic ethics, as well-intentioned social responsibility is often misread by outsiders as vigilante oppression.

Ethical awareness, and awareness of the will of God, is the underlying principle of Islamic ethics, much as love is that of Christian ethics. It is an ideal to be aimed for, but it is essentially a private ideal relating to motive and intention and the practical morality of the public realm is governed by more specific rules of observed behaviour. In Islam, all actions are divided into five classes. At one end of the classification are obligatory or compulsory actions, including regular prayer (a Muslim prays five times a day – ensuring that God always present), fasting, and pilgrimage, and also giving to the poor and needy. At the other end are forbidden actions such as lying, stealing, killing, blasphemy and so forth, as well as the consumption of alcohol and forbidden foods. Telling lies is particularly serious in the Islamic context because it is done, like everything else, in the face of God. Between these extremes lie classes of actions that are recommended or discouraged or morally neutral. Here there seems to be general agreement as to what kinds of things are encouraged and make someone a particularly good Muslim – prayer and pilgrimage beyond what is required, acts of particular kindness or altruism – but rather less agreement about what should be discouraged.

5. Confucian ethics

Whereas Western ethics are the secular product of a Christian tradition and Islamic ethics are inseparable from the Islamic Faith, the Confucian ethical tradition is entirely secular. Confucius himself seems to have been a religious believer, but this did not mark his teachings and the ethical system named after him is in practice combined with a variety of religious beliefs, including Buddhism and Shinto, as well as with atheistic and agnostic tendencies. The dominant ethical tradition of China, Japan, Korea, and of the Chinese communities of South-East Asia, Confucianism has its roots in an ancient Chinese ethical tradition, but one that was reworked and revitalised by the critical writings of Confucius and his followers from the late sixth to the late third centuries BCE.

Two central and defining characteristics of Chinese ethics, both before and after Confucius, are that they are social, or relational, and conventional. They are social in the sense that the ethical norms focus on the conduct of relationships rather than the behaviour or attitudes of individuals. Ethics are concerned not so much with how people should behave in general as with how they should behave in specific roles and relationships: how a son should behave towards his father, a father towards his son, a ruler towards his subject and so on. The central relationships are those of the family, but the ethics developed in that context also act as a basis for the ethics appropriate to other, less intimate relationships. Chinese ethics are conventional in the sense that they are learnt by example rather than being imposed by either law or religious authority. Conventions are seen to capture the wisdom of experience, and to behave ethically is to behave in accordance with the well-tried and established conventions relating to the circumstances and relationships concerned.

These conventions are communicated by example, but they are also captured in the language of virtues. The predominant virtues of the tradition inherited by Confucius were those of filial piety (*xiao*) and propriety (*li*), which can be glossed as conformity with the established duties and requirements of a particular social situation. Confucianism balances these against the virtue of human-heartedness (*ren*), and subjects the whole system of virtues to rational critique. Confucian ethics remains conventional, but in a critical sense: the conventional virtues should be weighed against each other and their implications reviewed. Conventions afford indispensable guidelines, and should not be departed from lightly, but they are not binding rules and should not be followed blindly.

The teachings of Confucius and his followers combined a radical critique of conventional ethics, akin in several ways to Socrates's critique of traditional Greek ethics, with an insistent defence of the value of convention. Their initial effect was radical, but their conservative elements allowed them to be pulled back by later conservatively-minded interpreters into the mainstream. For much of the last two thousand years Chinese society has been dominated by quite rigid ethical codes, based on long-established conventions but increasingly codified and bureaucratized. While the radical, questioning aspect of Confucian ethics may have been lost in this process, however, the insights and formulations to which they led have been embedded in Chinese culture.

Over the last 500 years, Confucianism has also been a dominant influence on both Japanese and Korean ethics. In both countries it had to compete for influence with Buddhism. In Japan it also competed with the native Shinto religion and with ideas

Ethical cultures and traditions

imported from European philosophy. In both cultures, however, the end result was a predominantly Confucian secular ethic, with the optional addition of Buddhist ideals and meditative practices.

The central moral quality in Confucianism, playing a similar role to love in Christianity, lovingkindness in Judaism or moral awareness in Islam, is human-heartedness (*ren*). The lack of a religious context results in a different positioning: there is no commandment to be human-hearted. But human-heartedness defines the moral impulse in man, or what it is to be human. It is a kind of innate moral sense, that all human beings possess, and much as in Greek philosophy Confucianism embraces the idea that to be ethical is to be human in the best or most perfect sense in which that is possible. This is also what makes learning, the basis of a conventional ethics, so important, and what underlies the critical aspect of Confucianism. To be truly human is to learn as only humans can from ones predecessors, to subject this learning, as only humans can, to rational critique, and to exercise, as only humans can, one's human-heartedness.

The substance of Confucian ethics has to do with the management of relationships and with the duties attendant on one's particular role in particular relationships. This focus leads, among other things, to an emphasis upon trust and trustworthiness, and to the prioritising of relationships of trust over those in which there is no basis for trust.

Confucius's teachings place an enormous emphasis on trustworthiness. Repeatedly we get stories in which the conventionally virtuous response is criticised in favour of a broader view in which someone, usually a leader, acts so as to build trust in the future. Trustworthiness is, of course, a relational concept: you cannot be trustworthy by yourself, but only in the eyes of other people. It is also a subtle and nuanced quality: you cannot simply try to be trustworthy, as you might try to be pious, or obedient, or loving. You have to think through quite carefully the consequences of your actions and how other people will respond to them. And you have to set the particular issue with which you are concerned – the management of a particular relationship in particular circumstances – in a wider context. What matters in Confucian ethics is that you do the right thing in the situation as a whole, in the broader context. Sometimes this will entail following convention and acting in a traditionally virtuous manner, but other times it may mean breaking with conventional rules, putting human-heartedness above obedience, say, or long-term outcomes above short-term duties.

The relational character of Confucian ethics is also particularly evident in its emphasis upon the family as the core unit of social life and the context within which trusting relationships are first developed. Family relationships are not only especially important in themselves. They also provide models for the conduct of other relationships, to the extent that the term 'family' is often used to signify an extended community of trust and not just a set of kin relationships. This can be taken a long way. The traditions of lifetime employment in large family-owned Korean and Japanese conglomerates are associated with the treatment of all salaried employees as 'family'. In Singapore the entire country is described as a family. More routinely, Confucian societies privilege relationships within (real) families and within more extended networks of relationships in which a familial level of trust and trustworthiness has been established. The connections (*guanxi*) established through these networks have a curious dual aspect. On one hand they represent an extension of the highest levels of trustworthiness and ethical responsibility, those between family members, beyond the family. On the other hand they provide a

Ethical cultures and traditions

perfect basis for the pursuit of private interests, through varieties of nepotism, bribery and corruption.

This dual aspect of *guanxi* is particularly apparent in the world of business, and looking at business is a good way of highlighting other aspects of Confucianism. In principle, there is no room in Confucian ethics for self-interest. There is an equivalent of market ethics, but it has always been associated with people operating outside society, with international merchants in Japanese history and with mafia-like criminal enterprises in the contemporary world. Legitimate business is an integral part of society and subject to the same ethical conventions as other areas of activity. So trusting relationships are much more important than legal contracts, which imply a lack of trust, and which cannot be adapted in response to changing circumstances. If one party in an ethical relationship hits unforeseen difficulties, the other will respond to help him, not insist on sticking by the terms of their original agreement. Business is not something one can rush in to, either. Only when *guanxi* have been established and both parties are ready to trust each other can a business arrangement be initiated. Even a retail or consumer goods business must have the trust of its customers: in China marketing focuses on the merits of the firm and its reputation, not on those of the product.

6. Indian ethics

Of the world's major ethical traditions, the Indian is probably the least explicit in its prescriptions. Like the other major traditions its roots are ancient, and without the focusing force of the monotheistic religions, with their defining texts, or the radicalizing force of a Confucius or Socrates (the influence of the Buddha was mainly outside India, to the East), it has largely retained its ancient form. Its key texts recount a variety of myths and legends and act as poetic reflections upon the order of things – the proper structuring of society, the relationships between the gods, and between men and gods, the nature and exercise of virtue, and so on. They are ethical through and through, but rather like the ancient Greek myths or those of any other polytheistic society they are also enigmatic. The central concept, *dharma*, is not a guiding principle such as love or obedience but an elusive end. In a sense, what is right is what is consistent with the (overall, cosmic) order of things, but that order is not uniquely specified. We can know it only when we see it, and recognizing it has as much to do with spiritual advancement and religious speculation as with human observations.

For an outsider, two keys to the understanding of Indian ethics are the highly structured nature of traditional Indian society and the Hindu belief in reincarnation. The traditional Indian world view includes a complex hierarchical ordering of things, both human and divine. At the social level this is manifest in the caste system, with society being organized into four classes, corresponding to a fourfold division of labour, each of which is further divided into castes. This system appears to go back well over 3,000 years, and while it has begun to break down in the last few generations its influence is still strongly felt. In cultural terms it is a classical hierarchical system, in the sense that

Ethical cultures and traditions

while everyone has an appropriate role, all are conceived as contributing to the whole. So the ruling class rules, not because it is in any way superior to, say, the labouring class, but because that is its role, and its duty. In practice, there is inevitably a ranking of the castes, with those at the top enjoying power and privileges denied to those at the bottom. But there is also a certain division of power between the three higher classes responsible for the economic, religious and military / governance functions in society. In a society in which the gods have always been very much present, in an everyday sort of way, the Brahmin class of priests and teachers have historically been the most powerful.

The rigid class divisions of Indian society, which are governed by birth rather than by ability, seem shocking to those from more egalitarian cultures. What gives them their legitimacy, and has sustained them over such a long period, is the religious idea of reincarnation. If, as in most other cultures, life is a one-off, then issues of fairness and equality inevitably come to the fore. If life is a multi-shot affair, however, inequalities in one incarnation can be readily justified by reference to the wider picture. Being good (within the context of your caste and role) is not, as in Christianity say, a route to heaven, but a route to a higher social status next time around. Similarly, to be born in a high status is a mark not of unearned privilege but of previous virtue. In the Hindu cosmology, one's lot in life is ultimately one's own responsibility. The social structure is morally justified, as well as morally authoritative.

The concepts through which these relationships are expressed are those of *dharma* and *karma*. *Karma* has been translated as 'action and effect' and expresses the idea that every human action has repercussions, not only in this life but beyond. These repercussions are not always evident, as even within this life actions can combine to bring about unpredictable effects, and this creates an air of fatalism. If some ill befalls you, it is automatically attributed to your *karma*: it is one sense your own (past) fault rather than anybody else's, and in another sense quite out of your or anybody else's (present) control. But it also gives a reason for being good. Virtue is rewarded.

Dharma is impossible to translate into English, but seems to be best captured by a combination of 'virtue' and 'duty', infused with elements of 'right order'. In practical terms it is the basis of a complex legalistic structure of rules governing the caste system. As in the Jewish and Islamic traditions these rules combine elements of social, religious and moral practice, but in sharp contrast to those systems each social role has its own set of rules. Less legalistically, each role has its characteristic duties and obligations, and a characteristic set of virtues associated with these. It is also an expression of what we might think of as everyday morality as expressed in the popular tale of the *Ramayana*, the epic story of a virtuous prince and his virtuous wife. Familiar to every Indian from childhood, the *Ramayana* is a classic moral tale that extols the virtues of honesty, compassion, fidelity, obedience and so on. It is also the expression of more comprehensive but much more difficult notions of virtue found in some of the key religious / ethical texts of Hinduism, in particular the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

These texts appear to have been compiled around the early sixth century BCE, though many of the *Upanishads* have earlier origins. A collection of poetic myths and stories of spiritual as well as moral significance, they give no ethical prescriptions and are frequently paradoxical, but nevertheless convey some important ethical ideas. A central concern is with the paradoxes of the Self. The central goal of the Hindu religion is to achieve liberation from the self, from the material constraints of the self-in-the-world and from the cycle of self-reincarnation. Virtue in this context is often associated with acting

Ethical cultures and traditions

selflessly or with ascetic self-denial. Against this, however, are the notion of duty as proper or appropriate action, which must inevitably be guided by the self, and the paradoxical notion that one can liberate the self only by attending to it. The very idea of living virtuously would be meaningless without self-awareness and when selflessness becomes intentional it is also in a sense self-interested.

Out of this mix come a variety of ethical ideas as well as some distinctive ethical practices. In the *Upanishads* we find the three virtues of self-restraint, self-sacrifice and compassion, to be pursued both out of long-term self-interest and to free oneself from the self. In the *Gita* we find the notion of disinterested duty, of acting out of duty because it is one's duty, regardless of the consequences (which will anyway be influenced by the *karma* from other actions and so unpredictable) and regardless of one's own interests. The thought here is that even to take responsibility for an action is to be in some way self-ish.

The distinctive ethical practices that emerge have to do with the relationship between the ethical and other aspects of life. While Hinduism has its ascetic movements and tendencies, it is for the most part quite worldly. With no immediate prospect of heaven or hell there is time and space for more material pleasures, as well as a practical need to procreate and provide the physical conditions for future incarnations. The end goal is liberation from the self, and the route to this is through *dharma*, but the pursuit of pleasure and the creation of wealth are also seen as valuable ends in themselves.

Reflecting the cosmic ordering of these different ends, there is also the idea of a structured life, or life-cycle, each stage of which is devoted to the ends appropriate to that stage. The virtuous Hindu begins life as a student, gaining both discipline and wisdom. He progresses to a period of worldly engagement, marked by the pursuit of physical and material pleasures, marriage and the bringing up of a family. As the family grow up he begins the process of freeing himself from these worldly concerns, finally entering a life of contemplation.

The enactment of this life-cycle can be seen at its most extreme in the Jain community, whose teachings derive from an ascetic contemporary of the Buddha, Mahavira. Members of this community are noted for their pursuit of business: in the everyday life of youth and middle age they are amongst the most worldly of Indians. In the contemplative stage of the life-cycle, however, they are among the least worldly. Not all Jains opt for the full monastic life, but those that do are rigorously ascetic, fasting extensively and pursuing their vows with unremitting devotion. The guiding rules of Jainism include a prohibition on harming any living beings, intentionally or otherwise, and for the ascetic even to tread accidentally on a fly is to break a vow. Other members of the community follow moderated versions of the same discipline as governs the ascetics. Fasting, for example, is routine, beginning in youth with little fasts, limited in duration or in what is forbidden and gradually building up to longer and longer, and more and more complete, periods of fasting. The prohibition on harming animals means that Jains are vegetarian, and a strict code of sexual morality provides a realistic approximation to monastic chastity. Material possessiveness is also barred, but not material possessions. These can be and are enjoyed, but always in the context of being prepared to give them up.

7. Buddhist ethics

In the context of this text, with its orientation towards business, government and the professions, the Buddhist tradition is perhaps less relevant than those considered so far. Buddhism and business do not sit easily together, and the significance of the Buddhist tradition in contemporary society probably has more to do with its spiritual, contemplative face than with its implications for the practical ethics of the world's major cultures. Buddhist ethics impact upon individuals much more than upon societies. Having said that, Buddhism is undeniably one of the world's great ethical traditions, and is also the state religion of one of the world's important emerging economies, Thailand.

Born in the mid-sixth century BCE, the Buddha was brought up in the Hindu tradition and in many ways his teachings reflect this. We find, for example, the same belief in reincarnation, the same concepts of *dharma* and *karma*, and the same goal of liberation from the self and release from the cycle of earthly reincarnations. The Buddha was a Hindu mystic and his life of wandering, self-imposed austerity and meditation was not unlike those of many other ascetics before and since. His teachings also reflect, however, a radical rejection of the perceived inequities of Hindu society, including the caste system, and of the compromise between the material and the spiritual that characterizes the Hindu tradition.

At the core of Buddhist teaching are the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths are the truths of pain and suffering (*dukkha*) which characterize the earthly human condition; of the craving for pleasure that leads to that pain and suffering; of the cessation of pain through detachment and release from these cravings; and of the way to bring that about, which is the Noble Eightfold Path. According to the Buddha, everything in this world is transitory, impermanent, subject to change, and the notion of the individual or self, which seeks to capture some kind of permanence, is an illusion. It is an illusion which leads us to crave after pleasure but, because it is an illusion, brings only suffering.

The Noble Eightfold Path comprises right understanding or opinions; right thought or intentions; right speech; right action; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; and right concentration. There is a progression here from understanding or wisdom through morality to meditation. In the path to enlightenment, morality represents a relatively early stage, but it is one that is essential for further development. The moral aspects of the path are right speech, right action and right livelihood, with the focus on the five precepts of right action: no killing or harming; no stealing; no wrongful indulgence in sensual pleasure; no lying; and no intoxication through drink or drugs. Right speech entails not just truth-telling, but abstention from slander, gossip, bad language, and any talk that might stir hatred or disharmony. Right livelihood entails the choice of a living that does no harm to other people.

In modern Thai society, moral norms tend to be founded on these prohibitions rather than on the spiritual aims underlying them, with particular weight placed on the injunction not to kill or harm any living being but gradually decreasing concern with some of the others. As in Christian or Islamic cultures, we find one set of norms amongst

Ethical cultures and traditions

the self-consciously religious minority and another amongst the majority of people, for whom religion is more a practical and a social matter than a spiritual one. Having said that, the particular spiritual aims of Buddhism inevitably inform the moral structures of Buddhist societies as well as of individuals.

Although the aim of the path is to purify oneself (or, rather, one's lack of self), being good to others is an essential part of this and a focus on the well-being of others is a necessary part of right speech, right action and right livelihood. This focus can also be seen in the Buddhist accounts of virtues and vices. Many of these are associated directly with the process of enlightenment. The virtues of self-restraint (abstinence, celibacy, patience, self-control etc.) clear and enlighten the mind, while the vices of defilement (greed, anger, malice, spite, envy, covetousness, etc.) bring darkness and confusion. The 'sublime' virtues of benevolence, however, are also focused on the well-being of others. These four virtues are lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. In them a loving concern for others acts to take away concern for the self and so create a healthy state of mind. So the state of sympathetic joy, for example, is indeed a sublime state of mind, and one on which meditation is often focused, but it is a state that can only be attained through a deeply felt moral attitude towards one's fellow beings.

The Buddhist ethic is egalitarian, and not hierarchical. It imposes strong obligations, but these are not imposed by any authority, either divine or secular. Although one country, Thailand, is 'officially' Buddhist, as was Tibet before it was annexed by China, most Buddhists live in cultures with other dominating ethics and live by the laws and ethical norms of those cultures. Buddhists add to these their own disciplines, but these are essentially self-imposed – by people who seek ultimately to escape the self.

8. The traditions compared

What is most remarkable about these different ethical traditions is the extent of their agreement. Despite their origins in very different cultures with very different belief structures they come to very similar conclusions as to what is or is not ethical. This is most apparent when we look at their positive aspects. Each tradition has a very similar list of moral virtues, and while their guiding moral principles are quite differently expressed (through such concepts as love, lovingkindness, benevolence, human heartedness and moral awareness) they are recognisably similar in their import and consequences. People and actions that are considered positively good in one culture will generally be considered good in the others.

There is a lot of agreement too on the negative side. Vices such as greed, sloth, or envy are considered to be vices everywhere. Killing or harming people, stealing from them or telling lies are immoral in all cultures. Most of the classic examples of issues in business and professional ethics, which mainly involve fraud and deceit or causing negligent harm, will produce essentially the same responses from people of different cultures. People the world over have a pretty good idea of what is right and wrong and by and large it is the same idea.

Ethical cultures and traditions

At a more detailed level, however, the traditions do differ in what they prohibit as immoral. It is not often the case that a practice considered immoral in one culture is considered moral in another, but this can happen. One example here might be the treatment of women, where the Indian and Islamic requirements for proper care and protection can clash with the Western requirement for proper freedom and equality. Another might be the treatment of family members in business or government. Some traditions, such as the Indian and Confucian, treat family favouritism as showing appropriate care and familial duty while others, such as the Western and Buddhist, treat it as discriminating against non-family.

Rather more common are instances where that what is immoral in one tradition is acceptable in another, and not treated as a moral issue there. The consumption of alcohol is considered immoral in Islam, for example, but is quite acceptable in the Western and Confucian traditions, though no-one would call it particularly good. In these traditions, conversely, polygamy is immoral, whereas in Islam it is under certain conditions acceptable. (It is not morally acceptable, however, for a Muslim man to take more wives than he can properly care for, which imposes moral limits on the extent of polygamy.) Falsifying your accounts for a tax return is seen as straightforward lying, and so immoral, in some cultures, but as a prudent negotiating ploy, and nothing to do with lying, in others. Like others discussed above, this example is one where different strands within the Western ethical tradition are themselves at odds: submit false accounts in Italy, by all means, but not in Norway.

More common still are cases where traditions differ over the seriousness of particular kinds of moral error, the priorities of different moral obligations, the interpretations in particular circumstances of equality or virtue, or the appropriate balance in particular setting between obligation and self-interest, or obligation and equality, or specific and general obligations. These cases do not generally reflect fundamental differences in moral beliefs, but they do reflect different cultural contexts. Different histories, different social structures and different religious beliefs inevitably affect the way ethical principles are applied in practice.

Amongst these many differences, a few of the tensions between the different traditions are worth drawing attention to. We have already noticed one particular tension within the Western tradition, between the American concern with self-reliance and the European suspicion that this is a way of avoiding obligations. This tension is manifest in different countries' attitudes towards welfare provision, with the more prosperous European states providing comprehensive welfare systems (and imposing high taxes to pay for them) while America provides much more limited (and cheaper) support, and seeks to distinguish as the Europeans do not between the needy and the indigent. (As on many issues, Britain sits rather uncomfortably in the middle, torn between the two approaches.) Although it is in part a tension within the Western tradition, this particular tension also appears between traditions, for only in America has self-interest acquired a positive moral face. To act out of self-interest is increasingly seen as socially legitimate in many cultures, partly as a result of American influence and partly as a result of the developments reviewed in Chapter 9, but the idea that to deprive needy people of help might be in their own self-interest, which is the basis of the American attitude, is not so prevalent. When it comes to our moral obligations to help people in poverty, whether through family, community or state support, every major tradition outside the West takes

Ethical cultures and traditions

a viewpoint that sees the American stance as essentially selfish. The Americans would say that you sometimes have to be cruel to be kind, but other cultures prefer not to be cruel.

The American moralization of self-interest is also at the heart of another major tension, concerning the priorities of business. Not only in America but to a lesser extent throughout Northern Europe and to some extent throughout the West, the performance of a business is treated as more important than the personal relationships of those employed in it or associated with it. Employees are expected to regulate their private lives so as to properly to do their jobs, and relationships with suppliers and customers are treated primarily as economic relationships, ruled by contract. Elsewhere in the world, however, there is a tendency to put personal relationships above economic ones. The first responsibility of any individual is to his or her family and community, not to the job. Supply relationships are relationships between people and communities, in which the economic aspect is just one part.

One aspect of this difference is the commonly observed tension in East-West business ventures between the Western desire for formal contracts and the Eastern preference, especially in Confucian societies, for informal, trust-based relationships. It is much broader than that, however, and impacts on the whole way people do business in different cultures, as well as on the way they practice as professionals and administer government. In America and Northern Europe, for example, people tend to be appointed and promoted according to how they perform, technically or economically. Elsewhere family relationships, character, social status and domestic circumstances are all seen as equally valid criteria. A reference for an Indian job applicant, for example, will invariably refer to his family background, his domestic responsibilities, and his character as shown on the cricket field. Most businesses throughout the world are not just family-owned businesses (dispersed shareholders are unique to American and Britain), but business families, in which the appointment of an employee may be linked to a social duty or the choice of supplier to a marriage prospect. The egalitarian meritocracy of American business is forever in tension with this kind of approach.

Religion can be the source of particularly strong and often violent tensions. There is a particularly strong tension between the Islamic tradition, in which there is no secular realm, and those traditions that are essentially secular. Thus, while there is a long history of Christian-Muslim hostility, it is probably fair to say that the current tensions between Islam and the West have much more to do with Western secularity than with Christianity. And while Islamic hostility is mainly focused on the West, a very similar tension exists with the Confucian East. Moreover, several Asian countries combine a predominantly Muslim population with an economically dominant non-religious Chinese business class, which inevitably heightens this particular tension. There is also considerable and long-standing religious tension between Islamic and Indian cultures, and while the origins of this tension are complex it has a clear ethical dimension. Islamic ethics is based on a single commanding God and a single life on earth, Indian ethics on a complex cosmic order and multiple reincarnations. The former tends, naturally, to be much stricter and more dogmatic, the latter more flexible and pragmatic.

These illustrations of the underlying tensions between ethical traditions give only a very partial and grossly oversimplified view, but they serve to make the point that apparent ethical disagreement is often based on mutual misunderstanding. As the world's ethical traditions lose some of their vitality and authority, and as we seek to resolve the differences between them within a global community, moral philosophy and its use of

Ethical cultures and traditions

reason are perhaps our most valuable resource. But to the extent that the traditions are still vital, which for many people, and especially those outside the West, is a considerable extent, we also need to build dialogue between them. And in many practical situations, that may be what we need most. In order to begin the dialogue, whether as nations or just as individuals working in the same firm or taking the same course, the first things we need to do is to remove some of our misunderstandings and to learn that the way we see things is not the only way in which they can be seen.