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Doctoral Thesis

REASSEMBLING ETHICS: A GLOBAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY INQUIRY INTO THE
EVOLUTION, FRAGMENTATION, AND FUTURE OF MORAL THOUGHT THROUGH HISTORY,
POLITICS, GOVERNANCE AND DATA

SUMMARY

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1. Introduction & Motivation

This thesis explores the evolution of ethical schools of thought from antiquity to the present, arguing that ethics functions as a dynamic and reactive response to socio-political and economic systems. The work combines a global historical analysis with a bibliometric investigation to identify emerging, declining, and underrepresented areas in ethical thought. It ultimately proposes complexity theory as a unifying framework capable of addressing ethical discourse's fragmentation and contextual diversity, with direct implications for policy, governance, and future research.

The work is grounded in recognizing that ethics has historically been fragmented, Eurocentric, and shaped by reactive, rather than proactive, developments. A growing disconnect between ethical theory and its practical application in politics, governance, and business has necessitated a broader, more inclusive, systemic model. The thesis is motivated by earlier research in business ethics and institutional trust and asks how ethical systems evolve and whether complexity theory can enable a more pluralistic, adaptive framework.

2. Methodology

The research follows a two-part methodology. The qualitative section comprises a desk-based literature review of global ethical schools, grouped by era and region, covering Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas. It also examines the socio-political contexts that shaped these traditions. The quantitative section conducts a bibliometric analysis (1974–2024) using data from Web of Science, employing tools like VOSviewer and Connected Papers. Techniques included co-citation, co-occurrence, bibliographic coupling, and temporal overlay mapping.

3. Historical Evolution of Ethical Thought (Ancient to Modern Era)

The historical development of ethical schools of thought reveals a deeply contextual, reactive, and dynamic field that evolves in tandem with societal structures, belief systems, and material conditions. This section traces the trajectory of moral philosophy and ethical thinking from ancient civilisations to the modern era, highlighting the emergence, maturation, and fragmentation of key traditions across time and geography.

3.1. Ethics in the Classical Era (ca. 2500 BCE – 476 CE)

Ethical reflection in the Classical Era was intimately bound to cosmology, myth, religion, and political structures, in early Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, and Greco-Roman cultures, ethics developed as an integral response to ordering social life and pursuing cosmic or social balance. Ma'at represented truth, balance, and justice in Egypt, guiding divine order and human conduct. Similarly, early Indian ethics, derived from the Vedas and Upanishads, centred on dharma—moral duty based on social role, cosmic law, and self-realisation.

In China, Confucian ethics institutionalised a relational and virtue-based morality prioritising harmony, hierarchy, and filial piety. Daoist traditions, in contrast, challenged prescriptive norms, emphasising spontaneity and natural alignment. Meanwhile, Zoroastrian ethics in ancient Persia introduced a dualistic moral framework opposing good (truth, order) and evil (chaos, falsehood), influencing Abrahamic moral imaginaries.

The emergence of Greek ethical thought from the 6th century BCE onwards marked a key turning point: it offered the first major philosophical attempts to secularise and rationalise ethics. From the pre-Socratic focus on cosmic order and mathematical harmony, to Socratic ethics grounded in self-examination and reason, Greek philosophy increasingly separated ethics from religion. Plato's notion of ideal forms and Aristotle's virtue ethics—focusing on human flourishing (eudaimonia)—established foundational normative categories still referenced today.

Roman thinkers such as Cicero and Stoic philosophers further developed these ideas into a cosmopolitan ethics of duty, nature, and rational order, profoundly influencing later Christian and Enlightenment moral systems. Throughout the Classical period, ethics served as both a tool for personal cultivation and a method of legitimising political authority.

3.2. Ethics in the Middle Ages (ca. 476 – 1450 CE)

The collapse of the Western Roman Empire gave rise to a period of theological consolidation and metaphysical synthesis. In Europe, Christian ethics—rooted in Augustinian theology and later Thomist philosophy—sought to merge classical virtue ethics with divine command and natural law. Ethics became intertwined with salvation, divine will, and ecclesiastical authority. Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* provided a systematic framework reconciling Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology, promoting a hierarchical moral universe ordered by reason and grace.

Islamic ethical thought blossomed during the same period through scholars like Al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Al-Ghazali, who fused Qur’anic principles with Greek philosophical reasoning. Concepts such as justice (*adl*), compassion (*rahma*), and moral intention (*niyyah*) became central. Jewish ethics, particularly Maimonides, followed a similar path, contributing to an Abrahamic moral tradition profoundly shaped by law, metaphysics, and divine obligation.

Meanwhile, oral traditions preserved complex ethical systems based on reciprocity, community, and cosmic responsibility in African, Middle Eastern, and Indigenous American cultures. Despite their systematic and enduring moral reasoning, colonial epistemologies often dismissed these systems as “cultural” rather than philosophical.

3.3. Ethics in the Early Modern Era (ca. 1450 – 1750)

The Renaissance and Reformation disrupted theological certainties, reopening philosophical space for secular ethics and individual reason. Humanism re-centred moral authority on human rationality, dignity, and experience. Thinkers like Erasmus and Montaigne challenged scholastic rigidity, arguing for moral introspection and tolerance.

The Protestant Reformation introduced new ethical challenges: Calvinist and Lutheran thought reframed moral life regarding personal faith, vocation, and divine sovereignty. This fragmented the universal ethical order previously upheld by Catholic doctrine, allowing national and individual moral codes to emerge.

This period also witnessed the rise of early modern political ethics, with Machiavelli offering a pragmatic, power-centric approach to virtue and governance. Simultaneously, the development of natural rights theory laid the groundwork for later liberal moral philosophies, asserting the moral equality of persons and the legitimacy of resistance to tyranny.

Non-European ethics persisted and evolved during this time but were increasingly suppressed or reinterpreted under colonial frameworks. Confucianism was systematised as state orthodoxy in East Asia, while African and Indigenous ethics were marginalised under the rising dominance of European imperial thought.

3.4. Ethics in the Modern Era (ca. 1750 – 1980)

The Enlightenment marked the peak of rationalist moral theory in Europe, with figures like Kant, Rousseau, and Bentham proposing universal, reason-based systems of ethics. Kant's deontological ethics grounded morality in the categorical imperative—acting only on maxims one could will to become universal laws. Bentham and later Mill developed utilitarian ethics, valuing actions based on outcomes and aggregate happiness.

This era also saw the emergence of moral sentimentalism (Hume, Smith), existentialist ethics (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche), and contractarianism (Locke, Hobbes, Rawls). Each proposed competing answers to the question of moral justification, often in direct response to the violence, inequality, and contradictions of Enlightenment liberalism, capitalism, and colonialism.

Simultaneously, non-Western ethics were re-evaluated through the lens of postcolonial critique. African socialism, Gandhian ethics, and Latin American liberation theology began to reclaim local moral traditions while resisting imperial hegemony. These

developments signalled a shift towards global ethical pluralism, although Western theories continued to dominate academic discourse.

This historical analysis demonstrates that ethical thought has never been static. Instead, it evolves in response to deep social transformations, crises, and cultural shifts. Far from being a singular tradition, ethics is a polyphonic, cross-cultural, and adaptive discourse that has repeatedly responded to the tensions of power, identity, community, and justice. By tracing these traditions across time and space, the thesis reclaims a pluralist vision of ethics as a dynamic system rather than a fixed doctrine.

4. Geopolitical, Economic, and Social Influences on the Evolution of Ethics

The thesis investigates the evolution of ethics as a philosophical discipline and a reflection and response to major geopolitical, economic, and social forces. Through this lens, the work highlights the historical dynamics that shaped moral reasoning across civilisations, showing that ethics was never developed in isolation but emerged in tandem with institutional, material, and cultural transformations.

4.1. Classical Era (600 BCE – 476 CE)

The formation of early empires, state institutions, and organised religions marks the Classical Era. In Ancient Greece, democratic experiments and city-state rivalries triggered philosophical reflections on justice, virtue, and law. Ethics became central to public life due to rapid urbanisation and political instability. In the Roman Empire, law and order dominated moral thinking, embedding ethics within legal and civic structures. Simultaneously, Confucian ethics arose in Asia in response to prolonged feudal conflict, offering a vision of hierarchical harmony. In India, political fragmentation and caste dynamics shaped the moral visions of dharma and karma, while in Persia, dualistic cosmologies were tied to imperial ideologies of order and cosmic justice.

Ethics during this time reflected governance needs: to promote loyalty, moral discipline, and social cohesion. However, it also served as a tool for resistance and reform,

particularly among dissident philosophical voices like the Cynics or early Buddhists. Despite regional differences, ethical systems commonly responded to legitimacy, governance, and violence crises, aiming to provide a moral blueprint for stability.

4.2. Middle Ages (476–1450 CE)

This period witnessed the collapse of centralised empires and the rise of religious institutions as the dominant ethical authorities. In Europe, the fall of Rome gave rise to Christian theological ethics, where morality was deeply entwined with ecclesiastical structures. Ethics shifted from civic life to spiritual obedience and metaphysical salvation. Simultaneously, Islamic empires flourished in the Middle East and North Africa, with legalistic moral frameworks like Sharia and philosophical synthesis in thinkers like Al-Farabi and Avicenna—blending governance, theology, and ethics.

Feudal structures, scholastic traditions, and religious wars significantly influenced moral development, with ethics often serving political power to justify it or challenge it. In Asia, the consolidation of imperial states in China and Japan redefined Confucian and Buddhist ethics around obedience, order, and collective harmony. In Africa and the Americas, indigenous systems of ethics remained embedded in cosmologies and oral traditions, often marginalised in global ethical discourse despite their emphasis on communal values and ecological stewardship.

4.3. Early Modern Era (1450–1750 CE)

The Early Modern Era introduced revolutionary shifts through colonialism, global trade, the printing press, and the Reformation. European ethical thought increasingly reflected concerns with sovereignty, property, and natural law, rooted in the needs of expanding empires. The conquest of the Americas, the transatlantic slave trade, and early capitalist structures challenged existing moral doctrines, while ethical justifications of colonisation coexisted with emerging critiques, such as those by Bartolomé de las Casas.

This period saw a split between religious ethics and secular philosophical inquiry, laying the foundation for Enlightenment thought. Geopolitically, as Europe expanded globally, it also universalised its moral frameworks, often dismissing or suppressing indigenous

ethical systems. Nonetheless, ethical ideas also travelled: Confucianism influenced Jesuit missions, and Islamic legal-moral traditions remained robust in Asia and Africa despite colonial pressure.

4.4. Modern Era (1750–1980 CE)

This era brought unprecedented transformations: the Enlightenment, industrial capitalism, nationalism, socialism, world wars, and decolonisation. European thought developed universalist ethical frameworks (e.g., Kantianism, Utilitarianism) aimed at rationalising politics, law, and economics. Yet these models were often Eurocentric, exported globally through imperial domination.

In response, ethical resistance grew. African, Asian, and Latin American thinkers developed liberation ethics rooted in anti-colonial struggles, communal values, and cultural renewal. The rise of feminist, environmental, and existential ethics also reflected socio-political disillusionment and a call for new moral vocabularies beyond individualism and liberalism. Global institutions (e.g., the UN, human rights charters) began formalising ethical principles in governance, but inequalities persisted—highlighting the limits of universalist models in a divided world.

The thesis underscores that the evolution of ethics must be read in tandem with the socio-political forces that shaped the world: empire, capitalism, religion, war, and liberation. Ethics has always been shaped by and shaping power—serving as an instrument of control, a form of resistance, and a mirror to society’s most profound contradictions.

5. Qualitative analysis

The quantitative component of this research complements the historical and theoretical exploration of ethics by empirically examining the structure, trends, and maturity of ethics as a research field from 1974 to 2024. Using bibliometric analysis based on data extracted from the Web of Science Core Collection, the study investigates over 50,000

academic publications where “ethics” is mentioned in titles, abstracts, or keywords. This wide-ranging dataset enables a deep dive into the field's conceptual, geographic, and institutional contours.

The analysis employed a suite of techniques including co-citation, co-occurrence (keyword mapping), bibliographic coupling, and citation analysis, facilitated through VOSviewer and supplemented by Connected Papers for deeper network exploration. The methodological framework was inspired by established bibliometric literature, including the maturity assessment indicators developed by Keathley et al. (2013, 2016) and Morris & Van Leeuwen (2022), which were adapted to evaluate thematic convergence, author collaboration, methodological diversity, and temporal evolution within the ethics literature.

Findings revealed a highly fragmented and asymmetrical field. While specific ethical topics—such as biomedical ethics, environmental ethics, and artificial intelligence—exhibited high citation density and institutional maturity, other areas remained underrepresented. Notably, decolonial ethics, Indigenous and non-Western traditions, and ethics from the Global South were marginalised in volume and influence, despite their growing relevance in contemporary policy discourse. Temporal overlays revealed uneven development, with a few dominant paradigms exerting disproportionate influence over time, shaped mainly by European institutions, the United States, and China. Co-citation maps exposed the continued dominance of Western philosophical traditions—Kantian, utilitarian, and virtue ethics—while co-word clustering illuminated the rise of applied ethics fields such as climate ethics, digital ethics, and public health ethics, though often disconnected from foundational or interdisciplinary debates.

The bibliographic coupling analysis further highlighted active research fronts and nascent collaborations around emergent ethical themes—such as algorithmic justice, sustainability ethics, and posthumanism—but revealed that much of the research remains siloed by discipline and region. Citation maps by country and institution suggested a stark imbalance in the global production of ethical knowledge, with limited

cross-regional intellectual exchange. Countries with strong philosophical and Indigenous traditions often lack a presence in global ethics literature. This gap mirrors broader geopolitical inequalities in research funding, language access, and academic visibility.

In terms of governance and public policy, the quantitative analysis underscores a growing mismatch between the ethical challenges facing global societies and the institutional capacity of ethics as a field to respond. Ethics is often relegated to a compliance mechanism or post-facto rationalisation within public and corporate governance structures. The limited inclusion of ethical traditions outside Western paradigms also restricts the normative resources available to address culturally diverse and pluralistic societies. The analysis highlights the need for an ethics research infrastructure that is not only interdisciplinary and historically grounded, but also globally inclusive and forward-looking.

This empirical mapping of the ethics landscape confirms many of the qualitative insights developed earlier in the thesis and reinforces the argument for a systemic, complexity-based model of ethics. Such a model would support cross-sectoral dialogue, adaptive governance, and more equitable frameworks for public policy—especially as ethical challenges become increasingly interlinked with technological, ecological, and socio-political systems on a planetary scale.

6. Discussions and Conclusions

The research reveals an urgent need to reintegrate ethics into core institutional and policy frameworks. The fragmentation and thematic silos of modern ethics weaken its potential to guide adaptive governance. Ethical frameworks that ignore power, culture, and nonlinearity are increasingly insufficient in our interdependent world. The thesis argues that ethics should function as a core institutional lens, shaping foresight, innovation, and accountability across sectors.

Complexity theory, emphasising feedback loops, emergence, and nonlinearity, provides a fitting model for ethics. It acknowledges the adaptive, pluralistic, and systemic nature of moral reasoning across societies and periods. Ethical thought is a complex adaptive system, shaped by co-evolution with social, political, and technological factors. This approach supports an inclusive, future-ready model of ethical inquiry.

This thesis repositions ethics as a dynamic, systemic, and pluralistic field essential to governance, policy, and global justice. The work identifies complexity theory as a transformative model for ethical integration by tracing its historical roots and mapping its current fragmentation. It calls for reclaiming ethics as a foundational, future-oriented domain that guides sustainable and inclusive systems across domains.