

Islamic Ethics and Intrinsic Value of Human Being

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Abstract

One of the most important debates in Islamic ethics is the place of human ethics and its priority or posteriority in relation to the jurisprudence which deals with acts of worship. Given the diverse approaches towards Islam, there are different ideas on this problem. Some Muslims overlook human principles in the name of religion in their approach to Islam. Some others try to interpret Islam in such a way as not to contradict the principles of human ethics. In spite of some Muslim scholars' view on the priority of jurisprudence over the ethics, this article is a try, by appealing to certain Islamic evidence, at showing the priority of ethics over the jurisprudence and insisting on the importance and even the dominance of human ethics and intrinsic value of human being in Islamic ethics. And it will conclude that according to the Islamic teachings, one can either have human dignity and at the same time not be a Muslim, or be a Muslim and at the same time lack human dignity. So, neither superficial Islam necessarily leads to honor nor does not being a Muslim repudiate honor, and what is emphasized in Islam is that human dignity is included in Islam and a real Muslim tries to earn it.

Keywords: Ethics, Religious ethics, Human ethics, Islamic ethics, Religiosity, Irreligious ethics, Human dignity.

Along with any ethico-religious system like Jewish and Christian ethics, Islamic ethics¹ is considered to be one of the ethical systems which defines ethics in terms of sacred and supernatural facts. More or less, in all ethical systems, religious or nonreligious, human ethics² is essential. The main difference between Abrahamic religions and human ethical systems that rely on reason is that the latter considers human reason sufficient for detecting ethical virtues and vices, while the former considers reason as a divine guide which is qualified to detect good and evil deeds and whose origin is God's will.

In Islam³ there is an important discussion about two kinds of prophets, through either of whom, or both, one can attain ethical virtue. First, there is the prophet of inner being, namely reason, which guides man naturally towards good values. Reason in this sense can detect certain good values. For example, some qualities such as loving beauty, quest for perfection, creativity, worship and loving truth are of natural inclinations rooted in man's nature, but there are certain negative inclinations in man which may hamper him from moving ahead. The second prophet is the prophet of outer being, and comprises prophets who try to teach people how to attain happiness by means of their findings in the course of their religious experience.

The norms and assumptions in Islam have been inspired by two seminal sources. One is the message revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammed (d. 632) and recorded in the Quran. The second is the exemplification of that message in the perceived pattern of traditions including the Prophet's deeds, speeches and norms (Singer, 1994, p.106).

1. Islamic Ethics consist of moral commands which can be found in Quran and the speeches and deeds of Prophet Muhammed and his succeeding Imams. It differs from Muslim ethics which may be represented as the story of one remarkable book written in Arabic at the beginning of the eleventh century A.D. by Ibn Maskawaih (d. A.D. 1030), namely *al Tahdhib al-Akhlaq wa Tathir al-A'raq* (The Correction of Dispositions and the Cleaning of Veins). After two hundred years, it was translated into Persian with amplification and adornment by Iranian philosopher Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. A.D. 1274). Again approximately one hundred and fifty years later, this work of Tusi was in turn revised and rewritten, with further literary ornamentation, as *Lawami 'al-Ishraq fi Makarim al-Akhlaq* (The Flashes of Splendour Concerning Excel Lencies of Dispositions). The author was Jalal al-Din al-Dawwani (d. A.D. 1501). This book, commonly known as *Akhlaq-i-Jalali*, was translated into English by W.F. Thompson in 1839 as *The Practical philosophy of Muhammedan People* (Donaldson, 1953, pp. ix-x).
2. By human ethics I mean virtues that are accepted by most of people, regardless of their nationality or religious beliefs, such as the goodness of righteous, trustworthiness and fulfilment of promises and badness of robbery, lying and injustice.
3. Islam is derived from *Silm* and *Salam* which, in its primary sense, means to be tranquil, at rest, to have done one's duty, to have paid up, to be at perfect peace and in its secondary sense, to surrender oneself to Him with whom peace is made. So, the word means more peace, greeting, safety, salvation and striving after righteousness rather than absolute submission to God will (Ameer Ali, 1922, pp. 137f).

Almost all Muslims belong to two groups: Sunnis and Shi'ites.⁴ The vast majority of Muslims, that is, about 86 to 87 percent, are Sunnis and about 13 to 14 percent are Shi'ites. The reason for separation between these two groups was the problem of succession of the Prophet when he died.⁵ In the Shi'ite school of thought the succeeding twelve Imam's deeds, speeches and norms have been included in the Prophet's tradition, whereas in Sunni tradition only those of the succeeding four caliphs are included. The Imam Ali is the only one the two strands have in common.

In Islam there is a divine law (*Shari'ah*) which concerns man's actions which all Muslims must follow. There is also emphasis upon the fear of God and an eschatology which is related to God's judgment of human action on earth (Nasr, 1975, p.57). The *Shari'ah* is a concrete positive law which contains a set of values and a framework for the religious life of Muslims. The books of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) contain the specific laws of the *Shari'ah*, but *Shari'ah* itself also includes ethical and spiritual teachings that are not of a legal nature, although the law and the ethics in Islam are not separated. The whole ethics of Islam is related to the individual and social plan of the *Shari'ah* (Nasr, 2002, 155)

One of the main problems in Islamic thought is the relation between jurisprudence and ethics and the priority of the one over the other. Some thinkers define jurisprudence so widely that it even covers ethics. But, some others consider them as parallel to each other. If the latter was accepted, another question would arise: Which one is more important than and prior to the other? Though the history of Islam mostly indicates the dominance of jurisprudence over ethics, some Muslim scholars, like Ghazali in *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihyâ' ulûm al-dîn)* complained against this dominance and tried to revive ethics in the Islamic world. As far as the religious texts in Islam are concerned, it seems that ethics takes precedence over jurisprudence. As the Quran says: 'Be constant in prayer, for, behold, prayer restrains [man] from loathsome deeds and from all that runs counter to reason' (Al-'Ankabut, 45).

However, regular prayer does not, in and of itself, lead to ethical perfection. For there are certain people who apparently perform their daily prayer without avoiding evil acts. So, first, one should observe ethical principles, and then daily prayer can prevent him from involvement in evil acts.

4. Sunni is a term that comes from *ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jama'ah*, 'followers of the sunnah of the Prophet and the majority, while Shi'ite is a word that derives from *shi'at 'Ali*, 'the partisans of 'Ali ('Ali ibn Abi Talib)' (Nasr, 2003, p.10).

5. At that time, the majority of the Muslim community chose Abu-Bakr, the venerable friend of the Prophet and his father in law, as the first caliph, and after him three caliphs, 'Omar, 'Othman and 'Ali, respectively, by different ways were chosen as caliph. The problem between these two schools, however, was the person who was to succeed the Prophet and his function. The Sunnis believed that the choice of four caliphs was right while the Shi'ites believed that 'Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, should have become his succession (Nasr, 2003, pp. 9-11).

Take another example. According to the prophet Mohammed, he was sent to effect the culmination of ethical virtues. This indicates that the chief objective behind his prophecy was to lead people towards ethical perfection. Yet, in order to attain it they needed the prophet's guidance. According to a verse of Quran, the prophet purifies the faithful hearts and teaches them knowledge and wisdom to sanctify them, and to instruct them in scripture and wisdom: 'He it is who has sent unto the unlettered people an apostle from among themselves, to convey unto them His messages, and to cause them to grow in purity, and to import unto them the divine writ as well as wisdom—whereas before that they were, indeed, most obviously lost in error' (Al-Jumu'ah, 2). In Islam it is insisted that God had created man with moral responsibility, and that therefore there must of necessity be a day of judgment for mankind, with rewards and punishments (Donaldson, 1953, p. 21).

In his *Ethical Theories in Islam*, Majid Fakhry divides his discussion on Islamic ethics into four parts: scriptural morality, theological ethics, philosophical ethics and religious ethics. He defines the ethical theory as 'a reasoned account of the nature and grounds of right actions and decisions and the principles underlying the claim that they are morally commendable or reprehensible' (Fakhry, 1994, p.1). He agrees with some philosophers, including I. Kant, G. E. Moore and L. Wittgenstein, that the realm of value as the subject of ethics is distinct from the realm of fact (*Ibid*).

Islamic ethics is grounded in the Quran and the traditions. Religious writers, especially during the earliest period, insisted on Quranic concepts like faith, piety and obedience, and they often quoted the Quran and the traditions in support of their moral and religious ideas (*Ibid*, p.151). It is too difficult to draw a sharp line of demarcation between religious and theological ethics. The former is based on the scripture and traditions, while the latter is grounded in the ideas of theologians who dealt with ethical questions in a dialectical spirit and either supported ethical ideas of Greek philosophers or questioned them. Moreover, 'many of the questions with which they were concerned were largely methodological; they were anxious to determine the logical status of ethical propositions rather than to develop a substantive theory of morality' (*Ibid*).

Fakhry refers to two major currents in theological ethics: first, the rationalist current, initiated by the Qadari and Mutazilite theologians of the eighth and ninth centuries, and second, the semi-rationalist and voluntarist one, initiated by the Asharite theologians. The former tends to refer more to the canons of rational proof than to the authority of scripture and the latter does the opposite. He adds a third current: the anti-rationalist current championed in the eleventh century by the Zahiri author Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) and in the thirteenth by Ibn Taymiyeh (d. 1328). In this current, the validity of dialectical and theological reasoning was repudiated, and scripture was regarded, literally interpreted, as the ultimate source of religious Truth (*Ibid*, pp.3-4).

I think, however, that all these currents are Sunni theological ethics and the Shi'ite theological ethics is neglected in Fakhry's division of Islamic theological ethics. So, it should be added to them as the fourth current. It is the moderate rationalist

current initiated by Imam 'Ali in his speeches, which were compiled in *Nahj al-Balaghah*⁶ and developed by Shi'ite theologians like Nassir al-Din Tusi⁷ (d. 1274), Mulla Muhsin Fayd Kashani (d. 1712) and Mulla Mahdi Naraqi (d. 1830). The Shi'ite current attributes legitimate authority after the prophet Mohammed's death to his cousin and son-in-law Imam Ali and subsequently to his designated descendants, known as Imams (Leaders) who are twelve in number, of whom it is believed that the twelfth one is alive. Shi'ite tradition affirmed the use of rational and intellectual discourse and was committed to a synthesis and further development of appropriate elements present in other religions and intellectual traditions outside Islam (Singer, 1994, p. 115).

There are various ethical systems in different human societies. Moreover, there are also certain similarities and differences between them. For instance, an act that is considered good in one society may be regarded as evil in another. The ethics in these societies are divided into two parts: virtues and rituals. By virtues are meant values which are, almost, common among all people, i.e. everyone should believe in them regardless of their religion and group. Certain acts such as truthfulness, faithfulness, and helping others are accepted virtues in every society, while the acts such as lying, robbery, injustice are considered to be vice in every society. People of different societies may differ from each other so far as the referents of these concepts are concerned, but they are in agreement with each other on their universalities. For instance, no society disapproves of faithfulness and approves of theft. The difference is that sometimes in a given society an act may be interpreted as theft but in another it may not be so.

These common ethical principles can be named human ethics and everyone in any society with any faith and culture is obliged to respect them. When such ethics constitute the framework of international relations, it can be accepted by all nations to be followed by all. For example, to do justice and to avoid injustice are among the ethical principles that should be observed by all nations in their relations with each other. This part of ethics which pertains to international relations can be named global ethics or universal ethics. Hence, it can be said that human ethics deals with individual ethics which everyone is obliged to follow in one's personal conduct, while global ethics pertains to nations and communities and should be observed at international level. Global ethics governs the cultural, economic, and political relations of different countries, emerged in the form of international human rights. The United Nations Charter which has been ratified in the United Nations Organization is based on human ethics.

6. *Nahj al-Balaghah* (The Open Road of Eloquence) is esteemed by Shi'ites as second only to the Quran and it comprises not only the several hundred short sayings of 'Ali, but also numerous examples of his letters and speeches. It was compiled fully three hundred and forty years after the death of 'Ali by Sayyid Razi (d. 1025). See: Donaldson, 1953, p. 94.

7. Albeit Fakhry refers to Nasir al-Din Tusi's views as a philosophical approach to ethics.

The second part of ethics consists in rituals, including lifestyles which are totally dependent on conditions of life. For instance, in different societies there are different rituals for marriage, or different relations between parents and children in urban and rural areas. Different clothes are used in different ceremonies, which have nothing to do with ethics but with rituals. Parent-children relations or teacher-student relations are related to different rituals. Thus, rituals are relative in nature and depend totally on public acceptance. Whatever is generally accepted by people as their conduct should be honored by others in a society.

All principles of Islamic ethics⁸ are based on the Quran, in which good and evil are determined by God and by the *Hadith*.⁹ The question arises here as whether the goodness or ugliness of acts depends on God's determination, or is rational and independent. In other words, are goodness and ugliness essential qualities of acts and can reason comprehend them, or are they religious because God has attributed such qualities to such acts? Over the centuries, there has been an important debate between various schools of theology on the role of intelligence in distinguishing between good and evil. Some, including Mutazilites and Shi'ite, believe that God who is the source of all goodness has given human beings intellect, with which good can be discerned from evil.¹⁰ But, some others, notably the Asharites, have asserted that

8. In Islamic ethics, the main principles, good or evil, can be divided into parts parts:

A) Duty to God: moderation, forgiveness, retaliation, limited liability, oaths, and rewards;

B) Exhortations to particular virtues: humility, honesty, giving to the poor, kindness, and trustworthiness;

C) Virtues in good and praiseworthy dispositions: generosity, frugality, fulfillment of a promise, keeping a secret, tranquility, love, cheerfulness, good intention, courage, great ambition, continence, self-control, dignity, mercy, truth of speech, aspiration, steadfastness in adversities;

D) Vices in corrupt dispositions: dissoluteness, greediness, shabbiness, levity, awkwardness, excessive love, pitilessness, treachery, perfidy, divulging a secret, sternness, falsehood, deceit, secret hate, avarice, cowardice, envy, impatience in misfortune, injustice, smallness of ambition;

E) Condemned vices: boasting, blasphemy and slander;

F) Regulations for the Muslim Community: orphans, nursing and hijab, reconciliation, divorce proceedings, entering houses, debts and accounts, wives, inheritances, relatives, privacy, interceding for others (Donaldson, 1953, pp. 15f, 119).

9. The word *hadith* means literally a piece of news, a report of the sayings and doings of the Prophet and his successors, as relayed by his companions and the generations of traditionists. In practice, *hadith* was used to justify the regionally divergent practices of diverse schools of law, projecting back their usages into sacred history (Goodman, 2003, p. 89).

10. Goodman in *Islamic Humanism* noted that though the Mu'tazilites were hardly liberals, their *kalam* is, in many ways, a form of humanism. For, it preserves human free will and deems human reason competent to judge justice and injustice, even on God's part (Goodman, 2003, p. 97). With respect to the believing in human free will and relying on the

whatever God has willed as good, is good, and whatever He has willed as evil, is evil, and that the intellect has no power to make such a distinction by itself (Nasr, 2003, p. 99).¹¹

The place of the principles of human ethics in any ethical system based on religion, such as Islamic ethics and Christian ethics, has been the matter of debate among the advocates and opponents of religious ethics. According to Islamic sources, human ethics is one of the foundations and necessary premises of attaining ethical perfection. Hence, human ethics should be considered as the first component of Islamic ethics. Indeed, it is the chief foundation of Islamic ethics, to the extent that if we exclude human ethics from Islamic ethics it will collapse. Usually, Muslim thinkers in the field of ethics reduce human ethics to the intellect, which is a gift from God; that is, they consider human reason as a divine instrument to comprehend ethical principles. So, when it is said that human ethics is the basis of Islamic ethics, this must be understood in the context that Islamic ethics must be preceded by human ethics.

In their ethical discussions, Muslim philosophers were under the influence of Greek thinkers. For instance, in their books there are traces of the Platonic four virtues and the Aristotelian mean states. It has to be pointed out that they are absolutist in ethics, and refer to virtues and vices with reference to religious texts, but in the interpretation of ethical views of Islam they take form and frame from Greek philosophers. For instance, the following books of Muslim philosophers are clear examples of works influenced by Platonian and Aristotelian ideas: *Akhlaq-I Nasiri* (pp. 108-122) by Khajah Nasir al-Din Tusi, and *Jamiah al-saadat* (vol. 1, pp. 105-118) by Mulla Mahdi Naraqhi.¹²

The point is that all human beings, including Muslims, should live an ethical life based on mutual respect, and as the famous Iranian Muslim thinker, Seyyed Hosein Nasr, has said: 'it must be emphasized that whether we are Muslims, Jews, Christians, or even secularists, whether we live in the Islamic world or the West, we are in need of meaning in our lives, of ethical norms to guide our actions, of a vision that would allow us to live in peace with each other and with the rest of God's creations' (Nasr, 2002, p. 314). According to his opinion which is a traditionalist view, the norm in the Islamic world, despite what many in the media and popular literature in the West claim, is neither the religious extremism or 'fundamentalism', nor the secularist

reason, Shi'ite thinks like Mu'tazilite, so it can be regarded as a form of humanism as well, but in a certain sense of the word which is reconciled with the religion. He romanticize Miskawayh as the last best hope of a cosmopolitan humanism in Islam (ibid, 120)

11. Dr Nasr says: 'Islam has avoided the kind of humanistic ethics that claim to know good and evil and to guide human beings to act ethically independently of god'. It seems that Islam does not reject all principles of unreligious ethics but refers to their defects. Because, as it has been shown in this article, the nearly common principles of ethics, which are named human ethics, have been confirmed in Islam.
12. But, in his *Kimiya-yi saadat*, Ghazzali discusses Islamic ethics without referring to Greek philosophers (pp. 427-876).

modernism. The norm is traditional Islam, in relation to which both these two currents are extremes (Nasr, 2003, p. xxiii).

A plethora of Islamic texts includes certain ethical counsels on observing the principles of human ethics. The Quran and religious leaders advise people to be truthful, faithful, and benevolent, and to avoid from theft, injustice and etc. These counsels are so numerous that they cover all human ethics. Moreover, in the history of Islam, there is some evidence that indicate the importance of human ethics and the intrinsic value of human being in Islamic ethics. Let us refer to some of them:

A. Human dignity. Human dignity constitutes the pivot of Islamic ethics. People are asked in Islamic ethics to feel pride in themselves in order to stop themselves from inclining towards evil things. Imam 'Ali, as a religious leader, advises his son to consider himself great when confronted with evil things. Islam asks Muslims, first, to have self-respect, and second, to respect others. Besides respecting himself, man should respect others irrespective of their faith, as the Quran says: 'but do not revile those [beings] whom they invoke instead of God, lest they revile God out of spite, and in their ignorance: for goodly indeed have we made their own doings appear unto every community. In time, [however] unto their sustainer they must return: and then He will make them [truly] understand all that they were doing' (Al-An'am, 108). When Imam 'Ali assigns Malik-e Ashtar as governor to Egypt, he asks him to respect all people, for they are either his brothers in faith or his fellow men (*Nahj al-balaghah*, p. 326).

B. In the early days of Islam, Christians lived alongside Muslims and were respected by them, and this fact indicates that Muslims had not any desire to impose their religion. If there was some quarrel between Muslims and Jewish tribes it was not the result of any difference in religion. The acceptance of Arab Christians within the Muslim community has been regarded as an early precedent for religious pluralism in Islamic communities, and the Islamic concept of *al-fitra*, or underlying human nature, indicates that all humans have a basic moral sense grounded on the dignity with which we are endowed from the creation, as taught in the Qur'an. On this basis, some scholars argued for toleration and intercommunal respect as Islamic norms well grounded on the principles of the *Shari'a* (Goodman, 2003, p. 15).

C. The relations between religions and between religious communities are different. Some religions like Judaism are regarded as closed religions, since in them just one group of people is addressed, and in the case of Judaism it is *Bani Israeil* (sons of Israel). Some other religions like Islam and Christianity are regarded as open religions, because they consider all people as their audience. Among all the great religious traditions, Islam is the only one that maintained interactions prior to the modern period with many other important traditions, with Christianity and Judaism in the western and central territories of Islam, with Zoroastrianism and other Iranian religions in Persia proper and in Iraq, with Hinduism in India, with Buddhism in north-western Persia and Afghanistan, and with the Chinese tradition in Singapore. Therefore, in relation to other religions, it is easier for Islam to make a sympathetic study of other religions (Nasr, 1981, pp. 35f).

D. Ethical honour. At the end of Karbala battle,¹³ when the enemy had martyred nearly all the brave men of Imam Hussein's battalion, he lay wounded on the ground and they were attacking the women and children, he turned towards his enemies and while condemning them, asked them to spare the women and children as they were guiltless. He added that if they had no religion and did not believe in the Day of Judgment, at least they could try to be humane and honorable and to observe human dignity. According to these words, one can be humane and observe ethical principles without having any faith. Since Imam Hussein's enemies were formally Muslim, it can be concluded that one may be a Muslim and at the same time be inhumane, that is by violating principles of human ethics. But, since human ethics is part of Islamic ethics, these people were not real Muslims. On the other hand, one might not be Muslim in faith but still be good by observing the principles of human ethics. The conclusion is that for a human being it is necessary to follow human ethics, and in order to be a Muslim one should follow Islamic ethics as well.

Conclusion

Human ethics or values are to be accepted by all men regardless of their faith and they are obliged to observe them in their lives. In Islamic ethics, emphasis is made on human ethics to the extent that it constitutes the basis of Islamic ethics. That is, Islam expects Muslims to first observe ethical principles and then perform religious rituals. So the relation between Islamic ethics and human ethics is absolute-specific; i.e. the former contains not only the later but also something besides it. As a matter of fact, there is a difference among Muslim thinkers regarding the referents of virtues and vices and their limits. Such differences have made less animosity among Muslim scholars than among uneducated Muslims, because they believe in the words of Prophet in which he has said, 'the difference of view among the scholars (*ulama*) of my community is a blessing from God' (Nasr, 2003, p. 9). The bigotry of uneducated Muslims, rooted in their ignorance, sometimes unfortunately terminates in them harming each other. What sometimes intensifies hostility between them is misunderstanding other words of the Prophet, in particular when he anticipated that the Islamic community would be divided after him into seventy-two schools, of which only one would be completely in the right and would possess the complete truth (*Ibid*). It could be concluded that any one of the groups may be right, so they need to respect each other. The Muslim intellectuals and scholars warn all Muslims, especially the uneducated, against involvement in such pointless disputes and to be

13. Karbala battle is one of the tragic events of the Islamic history, in which Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, along with about seventy-two of his followers, were martyred horribly by the army of caliph Yazid. Imam Hussein was lured to Iraq in 680 and slain at Karbala. This martyrdom is commemorated in a period of mourning each year during the festival of the first ten days of the lunar month of Muharram (Smart, 1995, p.288).

unified and to be kind to each other and to respect all people. It is to be acknowledged that though the main target of this article was to present a reading of Islamic ethics which tries to reconcile it with human ethics and also believes in the precedence of ethics over the jurisprudence, of course there are many jurists who believe in the opposite and think that if a good act was not preceded by religious faith it would be regarded as a valueless act and there are some historical evidence on which they emphasize to confirm their idea. The other noteworthy point is that though the discussion of this article was mostly based on some historical evidence, the subject can be assessed in the realm of theology, which was not intended here.¹⁴

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