

Behaviour as Emanating from the Principles of Ethics

The aforementioned principles which were elaborately discussed are deemed existential truths in the language of the existentialists. That is, they are not merely facts about the external affairs. Rather, they are profoundly concerned with, and transform, the life and fate of man. In the view of Imam Khomeinī, in essence all “the sciences are absolutely practical”[317] and their epistemological aspect, or in the parlance of Islamic philosophy, their ‘disclosure’ [*kashfiyyah*] is the prelude to action and no knowledge is absolutely irrelevant to action.

But the principles of ethics go beyond this stage. It is because the essence of ethics is nothing but the process of its continuous creation and recreation. If we remove this aspect, nothing will remain in its stead. Here the objective of the scholar of ethics is not dissemination and presentation of facts and information. Instead he is in pursuit of nurturing individuals and acquainting them with the path to felicity. Hence, in his emphasis on this knowledge, the Imam said:

The science of the states of the heart and that which relates to their health and sickness, reform and corruption, is something which is purely a preliminary step to action and the way of its reform and remedy. Its mere knowledge and understanding is not considered a human perfection. Hence one’s main attention and goal should be the reform and refinement of the heart so that one may attain to ultimate spiritual felicity and to the higher transcendent stations.[318]

Consequently, the difference between ethics and mathematics in this respect is very great. Knowing the mathematical formulas is itself valuable and an indication of perfection. But in the realm of ethics it is not so. Merely knowing the aforesaid principles has no value in itself. These principles become valuable only when they flow in the veins of man as does the blood and penetrate deep into the depths of his existence.

Thus, the principle that “man is indescribable” should not be seen as a philosophical principle and be placed alongside other philosophical principles. Instead, one should elevate it from the stage of ‘knowledge’ to the level of ‘belief’ and live with it. It is then that this principle would transform the life of man. In a bid to state the difference between knowledge and belief, what is usually cited is an old example whose veracity has not yet been invalidated by time. All of us know that a dead person has no power to move and the corpse that has fallen in a corner can do no harm.

Yet, few people are ready to spend the night alone beside a lifeless body or pay a visit to the cemetery at midnight. Similarly, we have heard a lot of adventurers who would bet on going to the cemetery at night but, in doing so, what emotional disturbances did they not experience?! Well, the difference regarding this issue is between ‘knowledge’ and ‘belief’. We *know* that the dead can do no harm but we do not *believe* in it. Since we do not truly and firmly believe in the lifelessness of the dead, we do have doubts about it and suggest to ourselves, “Don’t say he’s going to get up!”

Now if we really believe that the dead has no power to move, we will no longer fear to be with *it*. Gravediggers and those who wash the dead are among those who really believe that the dead are lifeless; thus, they do not fear whether they are beside the dead or spend the night in the cemetery. Imām Khomein[ؑ], in a whole chapter, endeavors to clarify this difference and shows that “knowledge is different from faith.”[319]

While emphasizing that faith is an affair of the heart, he distinguishes it from knowledge and cites the same example of the dead corpse and concludes thus:

You know through your reason that a dead person cannot do any harm and that all the dead in the world do not possess any power of action, even as much power as is possessed by a fly... but since your heart has not accepted it and has not approved of the judgment of the mind, you cannot spend a dark night with a dead body. But if your heart yields to your mind and approves of its judgment, this job will no more be difficult for you. After some effort the heart resigns to the dictates of reason, then no dread of the dead remains in the heart.[320]

The outcome of this distinction is that acceptance of the ethical principles is a form of challenge. Here we are not dealing with the complex principles of philosophy. On the contrary, these principles [of faith] are very simple and straightforward. The difficulty lies in having faith in them, and in the words of the Imām, passing these principles from the stage of reason to the stage of the heart.

It is here that the issue of commitment is raised. It is possible that a mathematician has no faith in any of his mathematical achievements while at the same time he knows and teaches them well. It is possible that a person is a professor of Greek philosophy but he does not believe in any of its schools, and after teaching them, behaves as if he is not acquainted with this philosophy at all. However, this point is not true about ethics. Ethics is a way of living and a way of viewing oneself and others. A scholar of ethics cannot, as with a pair of spectacles, remove or change it anytime he likes.

In the words of Max Weber,[321] “Moralities are not chariots that can be stopped any time we want for getting in or getting off.”[322] Ethics makes man committed to himself and urges him to assess and construct himself according to these principles. It is here that the issues of reminding [*tadhakkur*], purification [*tazkiyyah*], and watchfulness [*murāqibah*] come up. Moral maladies, the form of moral reasoning and expression are peculiar to themselves, and cannot be gauged by the theoretical sciences.

It is due to this that the Imam does not express these principles ‘systematically’ and ‘orderly’. Instead he mainly regards them as assumed and expresses their outcomes. The goal in teaching ethics does not lie in learning some principles and appending them to an individual’s body of knowledge. The goal is to let man take a look at himself again, reconstruct his existential palace, and evaluate it.

If our outlook on ethics is of this type, we will no longer be in pursuit of increasing the volume of our information on ethics. Instead, we will strive to increase the volume of challenge and action, and in the parlance of ethics, self-purification. Treading the path of ethics does not require extensive and vast information. It needs high ambition, firm resolution and formidable will:

Dear friend! Try to be a man of strong will power and resolution, so that you may not go from this world as a person without resolution, and hence rise on the Day of Resurrection as a brainless-being, not in the form of human being.[323]

Hence, the topic is not about teaching; it pertains to training, the manner of upbringing and living.

Now let us see what type of person is the one who has come to believe in the principles of ethics and lets them flow in his veins. If we want to present the image of a moral man while taking into account these principles, perhaps we can portray him as follows:

1) Moral man is he who profoundly believes that man is indescribable and so long as he lives in this corporeal world cannot be absolutely regarded as misguided or guided. Consequently, he does not stop even for a moment in ‘creation’ and ‘recreation’ of himself. He is always in pursuit of nurturing and training himself and in transcending himself. He meticulously assesses himself but refrains from judging others. He believes that he should not forget himself and be the judge with respect to the conduct and behaviour of others. Instead, he believes that he is responsible for himself and every individual is responsible. So, he has taken this statement as the epigraph of his life: “Take account of yourself for your own sake because the account of others will be taken by one other than you.”[324]

He knows that he has only a brief opportunity at his disposal to offer whatever he has in the bag. Hence, he neither wastes his time anymore nor spends it in vain in judging other’s conduct and behaviour. He is totally concerned with himself.

2) To be totally concerned with oneself, in his view, does not mean irresponsibility with respect to others. On the contrary, he knows that the diamond of his existence is cut in social activity and in living with others. So, he views being with others as an opportunity for building himself, and acquires benefit from it. Although he is amidst the people, spiritually he is not with them and moves in a higher plane.

He shows others the way (guidance) and the well (misguidance) but never forgets himself. He deems as his prime concern his own salvation for which he is responsible. He is with the people, yet his soul travels. As such, he is often silent. But once he talks, his speech is of another kind and a cure for the pain of his listeners. He sees the faults of others but covers them. It is because he is aware of the nature of mankind and also knows his duty in this context. It does not mean that he does not see the evil in his eyes, but he sees the good in the eyes of others. He closes his eyes to the shortcomings of others and is concerned with his own defects.

3) This kind of person knows that man is a blend of the spirit of God and the putrid clay, and he takes it as a good augury. He never entertains the idea of denying his physical dimension and of overlooking his instincts. Rather, he has a realistic view of the human dimensions of himself and others. He neither talks about uprooting his instincts nor intends to retreat into solitude and seclusion. Instead, he believes that the same instincts are powerful instruments for his advancement and growth, and considers presence in society as a means for the emergence of his creativity.

Thus, his life in this respect is similar to that of the people. He eats, drinks, mingles with others, and he sees the world not as a calamity and plague but as a vast ground of God, and benefits by it with his needs. He equally knows that satisfaction of instincts, material possessions and benefiting from the world are not his ultimate goal; rather, they are prologue to his perfection and meeting with God [*liq Allh*]. So, he enjoys everything moderately and to a sufficient extent. He does not deprive himself of any blessing, but does not also suffocate himself with any of the favours.

4) This kind of person sees evenly the possibility of progress and growth in all, and recognizes all men as creatures of the One God. Therefore, he regards no one as essentially superior to others. Even if he deems himself blessed and favoured by God for having endowed him with the power of discernment and self-building, he never allows this grace to cause him to become proud and boastful, and reckon himself as superior to others.

Arrogance and pride are absent in him and he knows well the satanic temptation in this regard. Such a person does not keep aloof from others on the excuse of knowledge and strength, and never regards himself as being special. He does not cast his attributes in others' teeth through his clothes, language or some of his silent gestures, and knows how strong the temptations of Satan are and in what manner he attempts to make man proud and arrogant but "be certain that all these are guiles of the Devil and wiles of the self."^[325]

For, the Messenger of God (s), with all his spiritual loftiness, was never enticed by such pretences and was always the confidante and companion of the most indigent strata of the society. The great men of religion have been so, too. For instance, Shaykh 'Abdul-Karīm H'ir, the founder of the Islamic theological center in Qum, in spite of his being of high social standing, and an undisputed Sh'ah Religious Reference Authority, " used to sit on the floor and tell strange jokes to the most junior of students.^[326] Such a person never humiliates others because of his being a man of morality; neither

does he consider himself as being superior. Instead, he mingles with all and clamors in the midst of social life. Moral attributes only make him humble; not arrogant.

5) Such a person is fond of knowledge and seeking knowledge, and believes that his knowledge in relation to the things unknown to him is as a cup to the ocean. So, he ceases not even for a moment in learning, and he knows that the time he spends in learning is actually an investment that he has made and that he will reap much benefit from it.

He believes that the angels of heaven have stretched their wings above the seekers of knowledge and knows that knowledge is the legacy of the prophets (‘a). As such, he is always a seeker of the way of knowledge and a wayfarer in the path of learning. Yet, he equally knows well that knowledge is not the goal and that the goal of man should not be the accumulation of terminologies and filling up of his mind with facts. The purpose of knowledge is psychological and spiritual nurture and training. Hence, knowledge that possesses these attributes is valuable and worth searching for. It should abduct man from himself and in his stead construct another creature.

So, he is not in pursuit of virtueless knowledge; rather, he is in quest of existential truths—truths that outline his fate and raise him from being a creature equal to the animals to the status of the angels and from there to a loftier plane, to being a godly man. Yes, in his opinion such knowledge is becoming of him, and he considers the fact that “they lend their ears to that knowledge which is beneficial to them”[327] to be the mark of the upright people. For this reason, he is fascinated by profitable knowledge and between the different kinds of knowledge; he distinguishes the seeds from the straws and selects the beneficial ones.

6) He keeps a long[328] distance away from vices such as greed and jealousy. He knows that once he gives free rein to his instincts, in no way will they be satiated and ‘the cup of greedy eyes’ [*kāzeh-ye cheshmeh harṣīn*] filled. He, likewise, believes that jealousy toward others is an indication of lack of faith in God, and can only be to his detriment; not to his good. So, these two traits that poison man’s life and pour venom into the cup of his life, are absent in him.

He perceives his beginning and end as good, and as such, he does not entertain greed. He knows that the sustenance of everyone is that which he eats, drinks, wears, and in which he sits. Moreover, it is no longer the sustenance of the individual; rather, it is the sustenance of those who remain. So, why should he trouble himself for the others and provide them with the comforts of life that will cause him hardship and misery?

He has also removed the root of jealousy from himself; he knows that his jealousy will not lead to the disappearance of others’ fortunes. Furthermore, as he believes in the wisdom and justice of God, he sees no reason to be jealous. Rather, he is of the opinion that the possessions of others are the result of being wise, and his lack of fortune is not the grounds of his abjectness.

7) His view on the world is both optimistic and realistic. If we take the world away from man, with what

investment and provisions will he proceed to the hereafter? Thus, he never says anything bad about the world; he regards it as the arena for self-building, prosperity and providing for himself. Even if he sees that some Qur'anic *ayahs* and *hadiths* have reproached the world, he knows that it refers to worldliness and negligence of the final goal and destination; not negation of the reality of the world and its essence.

8) He believes in the rule of action and reaction. He knows that every input has its corresponding output; nothing in the world is futile and vain. So, his actions are measured and he is the observer of his own conduct. But he also knows that one's wrong conduct should not necessarily lead to penalization in this world and that the wrongdoer should definitely be duly punished. From his viewpoint the world is not the place for recompense and retribution; rather, it is a 'test bed'. The other world is the place for reward. Even if a person is punished in this world it is actually a favour God has done on him which has prevented him from persisting in his deviations.

9) Since he thinks of God as just and wise, and has an optimistic outlook on the world, he reckons tribulations and adversities as constructive and derives benefit from them for his growth. So, he never complains against the universe and firmaments of tribulations [*falaq-e kajmad*]. Rather, he believes that behind all these sufferings is a great disguised wisdom in favour of his growth.

10) Finally, such a person is always in the process of self-assessment and, like a strict accountant, takes stock of himself. He systematically opens his record and impartially evaluates himself. He gives positive grades for his good deeds and negative grades for his bad ones. He promises to himself never to repeat such unscrupulous acts. He not only meticulously controls his behaviour, but also supervises his thinking and imagination. He does not permit the butterfly of his imagination to fly wherever it likes and around every flower. Instead, his entire existence is under his command and at the end of the year he rebuilds himself, goes beyond himself, and enters a loftier plane:

عنكبوتان مگس قدید کنند

عارفان هر دمی دو عید کنند

*Every moment the mystics make two celebrations;
But the spider-like men let dry the fly to prey on it.*

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