

## On Islam And Ethics

Various questions have been raised about the relationship between religion and ethics, and more specifically, about Islam and ethics, to which this article is a response.<sup>1</sup> These questions arise from the fact that both religion and ethics seem to have ascertain sort of autonomy or independence.

Because religion is established through divine revelation, it seems to some that moral considerations must be excluded from it. If the dictates of religion and moral conscience coincide on various judgments, it would appear to be a happy coincidence, for where there is conflict, religion claims absolute authority.

On the other hand, moral conscience makes its own absolute claims, independent of religion. Where the judgments of moral conscience are clear and firm, if there is conflict with a religious teaching, the moral conscience demands that the religious teaching be rejected. For example, moral conscience demands us to reject any religion that commands cannibalism.

The apparent independence and absolute character of both religious and moral claims poses a difficulty for religious people. Religious people believe that they should be moral, and that this is pleasing to God, while they also must accept the absolute authority of revelation. In what follows a rough attempt is made to chart the interpenetrating currents of religion and ethics.

"Religion" is a notoriously difficult term to define. There is a persistent controversy among scholars about the roots of the Latin word, religion. From ancient times there were differences of opinion about the derivation of the word, and contemporary scholars continue to express contrary opinions.

Nevertheless, it seems that the fundamental meaning in Latin had to do with the turning of one's attention to matters of worship, being observant in the performance of rituals as opposed to being negligent.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, many Latin authors and subsequent writers have understood the word as signifying "binding" in the sense of being bound through religion to the gods or God, and although this etymology is considered dubious by modern scholars, it has had considerable influence on the understanding of the concept of religion in the West.

If we turn to the Arabic word, *din*, we also find that there has been some controversy about its etymology. It was used at the time of the Prophet's (s) mission to signify submission to a law and a leader, and was contrasted with *jahl*, indicating lack of discipline and savagery. Sometimes the term *din* was used in contrast with *dunya*, where the latter signified a life of safety and comfort, so that *din* came to be associated with the courageous struggle under difficult conditions for the lofty aims of the Prophet (s)<sup>3</sup>.

The Arabic word *akhlaq* is the plural of *khulq* and signifies the character traits of a person. It is related to *khalq* in the sense that the character traits of a person result from the way that the person has been formed or molded.

In contemporary usage, the word *akhlaq* is used to translate the English ethics. The English word ethics is ambiguous, since it is used both for that branch of philosophy that studies values, principles and virtues and for these values, principles and virtues themselves. Here, we shall be primarily concerned with ethics in the sense of morals or *akhlaq*.

Among medieval Muslim scholars, the subject called 'ilm al-akhlaq consisted mainly of classifications and discussions of the virtues and vices in a manner influenced by Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics, but containing much original reflection in the light of the Qur'an and ahadith.

Our concern is somewhat broader, for it is concerned with moral principles, rules, values and aims, in addition to virtues, and the contemporary Persian use of the word *akhlaq* often includes discussions of these topics, although the Persian word continues to be used in some contexts in the more restricted sense pertaining to traits.

By reviewing, even this briefly, the etymologies of ethics and religion, several points of contact stand out. The submission to law and leader and the courage to engage in jihad consequent to this submission require noble character traits.

Religion demands ethics, and the ethical values of pre-Islamic society were such as to admit to the ethical value of the acceptance of religion, although the moral demands of Islam go far beyond the ethical norms of the *jahiliyyah*.

These considerations provide a good introduction to the complexities of the relation between religion and ethics. On the one hand, all religions seem to have some moral teachings. They inform their followers about what is right and wrong, hold up paragons of virtue, and declare what is to be valued and what is to be held as vain. On the other hand, religious ethical teachings do not fill a moral vacuum.

Instead, they appeal to the moral conscience of those to whom they are addressed. Thus, religions both partially confirm and rectify morals. Numerous examples of these two features can be found in the prescriptions of the Qur'an. The Qur'an prescribes "enjoining the good" (*amr bil-ma'ruf*), which appeals to what is generally known to be good.

It also informs us that some things are to be avoided, such as the use of intoxicants, about which moral conscience does not offer a clear universal judgment.

This relation of partial confirmation and reform is characteristic of the relation between religion and many other areas. A similar dialectical relationship may be found between religion and politics, economics, history, anthropology and other fields. Reason itself stands in a similar dialectical relation to religion. It is both partially confirmed and rectified. Religion appeals to our rational and moral sensibilities at the same time that it seeks to correct them.

Because of the dual aspect of the relationship between religion and ethics, a dynamic process is generated in the believer. The believer is invited by religion to reflect critically on his moral attitudes.

In large part, our understanding of whom we are and our relations to others in community shapes our moral attitudes. So, the way in which religion comes to influence our ethics operates on several dimensions, for in addition to its direct appeal to and correction of our moral ideas, religion confirms and rectifies our understanding of our selves and of our societies.

Religion assumes that to some extent we know who we are, that we are aware of our needs and aspirations. Religion deepens and rectifies this understanding by teaching that man is party to a primordial covenant with God:

وَإِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَأَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلَىٰ  
أَنفُسِهِمْ أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ

﴿٤﴾

قَالُوا بَلَىٰ

﴿٥﴾

شَهِدْنَا

﴿٦﴾

“And when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their backs, their descendants, and made them bear witness against their own souls: Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes! we bear witness.”  
(7:172)

Furthermore, religion presents man with an ideal model or paragon of human existence in the perfect man, as exemplified in the lives of the prophets and imams (as). So, through the utilization of the two precious things (*thaqalayn*) left to us by the Prophet(s), namely, the Glorious Qur'an and his inerrant household (as), we may aspire to the anthropological knowledge that serves as one of the sources of the moral perspective of Islam.

Religion also assumes that to some extent we know how to organize ourselves into societies. Once

again, the Glorious Qur'an and the inerrant Ahl al-Bayt of the Prophet(s) partly confirm and partly rectify our social understanding.

Our communities are not to be based solely on the need for the material advantages of social life; rather we are to build an ummah whose members are connected by the fraternal ties of faith to win the pleasure of God.

In order to understand something of the mutual influences of ethics and religion, it is important to see that in both cases, that of religious anthropology and religious sociology, a spiraling process of interactive moral and religious understanding is set up with the establishment of religion. In the case of sociology, our moral concepts are largely influenced, though not completely determined, by the nature of our societies.

As religion prescribes a certain reform and reorganization of our societies to conform to the divine law, the religiously informed social arrangements can be expected to give rise to an alteration in the moral concepts of those who are raised in them. These reformed moral concepts will then be employed in the attempt to bring society into closer agreement with the moral demands of religion, society will be changed again, and moral concepts will be further refined.

The same sort of thing should happen with regard to anthropological understanding. When we understand ourselves as parties to a divine covenant, our moral concepts are altered. Through the process of the perfection of our moral concepts, we come to a better appreciation of the requirements of the divine covenant. The process is one that endlessly leads us on through further refinements.

Many people who read the Qur'an daily have noticed that no matter how many years they study it, they always find surprises. Perhaps the secret of this phenomenon is to be discovered in the changes the Qur'an produces in us. Since we are changed by our acquaintance with revelation, when we read it again, we find things that did not occur to us before. On the first reading, we did not yet have the capacity provided by its completion.

The same can be said for the other forms of worship and religious study. If we worship properly, it should change us. The change should affect our understanding of what worship is? The new understanding will affect our attitudes toward worship, and this will result in the ability of worship to produce different changes in us, not least among them, moral changes.

Changes in moral concepts are produced through the practice of religion because religion directs us toward God. As a result of this orientation, the believer finds that all the noble character traits belong truly to God, and only metaphorically to anything else. God's most beautiful names often describe these noble traits of character.<sup>4</sup> The acquisition of virtue then comes to be seen as the assumption (*takhalluq*) of the character traits of God.

The explanation sketched above of the mutual influences of moral understanding and religious

understanding enable us to answer the ancient objection to the prophet(s) attributed to the Brahmins and discussed by Muslim philosophers:<sup>5</sup> if the moral teachings of the prophets are in agreement with reason, reason has no need of them; but if their teachings conflict with reason, they should be rejected.

The answer is to be found in understanding how reason may be in need of teachings that are in agreement with it. In all learning of rational matters, instruction is needed for the perfection of reason and for the appreciation of what accords with it. The moral instruction of religion takes the form of the successive stages of partial confirmation and reform outlined above.

The complex character of the mutual influences of religious and moral thought brings out a further ambiguity in the use of the word ethics (*akhlaq*). We must be careful to be aware of when we are using the term for the values, principles and virtues that should ultimately result from the interactive encounter with religion, or an ideal ethics associated with the perfected man (*insan kamil*), and when we are using the term for the various values, principles and virtues and opinions about them that happen to be instantiated in a given individual or culture, or mores.

The fact that a moral rule exists in a given society does not imply that the rule has any absolute authority.

From the point of view of ideal ethics, such a rule may even be perverse.

The distinction between ideal ethics and mores may be of assistance in understanding the nature of secular ethics. When we ask whether secular ethics is possible, if what is meant is ethics in the sense of mores, then the answer is obvious.

At least on the social level, we cannot find a single instance of a community throughout human history that did not distinguish in some way between what its members considered to be virtue and vice, good and bad, right and wrong.

When we speak of secular ethics, we mean the ideals, values, moral principles and concepts of the virtues dominant in the secular societies of Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand as well as the former and currently communist nations. While no one can deny that ethics is to be found in all of these societies, in the secular liberal societies of the West, ethics has become weakened.

The weakness of secular ethics results from the fact that secular society is divided into personal and organizational realms. In the former values are arbitrary; in the latter they are given by the nature of the organization. In neither case are they open to rational dispute. The society is also divided politically between the proponents of limitless individual liberty and the proponents of collectivism, the champions of the personal and the organizational realms of social life.

When values are taken to be a matter of personal taste, there can be no rational argument about what values are correct. When values are a product of the structure of organizations whose aims (described in

terms of profit and efficiency) cannot be questioned, again rational investigation and moral inquiry are stifled.

So, the dynamic process of partial confirmation and reform set up in religious ethics (described earlier) does not take place in secular societies, or takes place in very limited circumstances. Likewise, when values are limited to being either personal or organizational, the motivation for spiritual wayfaring is weakened.

It has no place in the organization, so it must be considered a leisure time activity (*sargarmi*). There is no intellectual groundwork in secular society to support the idea that virtue and moral insight are to be won only through the hard work of the purification of the soul.

While it may be logically possible for an individual or society to stumble upon the ideal ethics through its own good sense, moral conscience and rational abilities, for the reasons mentioned above, this is highly unlikely.

Where ancient civilizations appear to have approximated to an understanding of ideal ethics despite the fact that they were unfamiliar with prophetic teachings, as in ancient Greece and ancient China, there was at least the idea that the right thing to do in a given set of circumstances was determined by the natural end of man and the law determined by reason, social harmony, or harmony with nature or the Tao, none of which has any place in secular modern thought.

Indeed, it is not very farfetched to suppose that some form of divine guidance was operative in these traditional cultures, even if not known as such. As we shall see below, Mulla Muhsin Fayd Kashani goes so far as to refer to the moral conscience as an interior prophet.

The existence of different mores in different cultures has given rise to the idea that ethics are relative to culture and that where there is a plurality of cultures or subcultures; we should also expect and accept a plurality of moral visions.

Yet religion seems to make absolute claims binding on all people, regardless of their nationality or culture. Religion seems to teach that there is only one ideal ethics, and that there can be no compromise with ethical relativism and ethical pluralism?

In order to understand these issues, we need to get a clear understanding of what is meant by moral relativism and moral pluralism. Different writers define these terms in different ways. It would not be difficult to define them in ways that are not compatible with religious teachings. It is much more interesting to investigate what forms of moral relativism and moral pluralism may be compatible with religious teachings.

Moral relativisms are often divided into three kinds: descriptive, epistemological and normative.<sup>6</sup> Descriptive relativism is merely the claim that in different societies different moral codes are followed,

different conceptions of the virtues are found, and different ideals are valued.

There is not much controversy about this, except for the question of the extent of the differences. Could there be two different societies for which there were no common elements of ethics at all? Does human nature or the nature of human social life necessitate some basic features of morality? Perhaps an argument could be made on the basis of the universal moral appeal of religion that there must be some common features of moral conscience.

Normative relativism is the claim that it is wrong to pass judgment about the morals of others. Normative relativism in its most extreme form is the claim that one should never pass judgment on the moral worth of anyone's actions, beliefs, character or values.

Although this extreme form of normative relativism is quite implausible, and very contemporary philosophers would be prepared to defend it, something like it seems to be fairly popular among many young people in the West, who often seem to make the mistake of thinking that it follows from descriptive moral relativity.

This normative relativism is a dangerous tendency, because it is easily turned into an excuse for neglecting the duty to oppose wrongdoing and injustice. The view is logically self-defeating, because those who accept it consider it wrong for people to pass judgment on others, while considering something to be wrong is a form of passing judgment, and therefore, to be consistent, they should consider themselves wrong.

The most extreme form of a denial of normative relativism would hold that it is always proper to pass moral judgment on any group or individual's actions, beliefs, ideals or character. Religion appears to condemn this extreme position, because it holds that there are aspects of a person's moral life known only to himself and God upon which moral worth depends.

If both extreme positions about normative relativism are rejected, the correct position must lie somewhere between them. In other words, the correct position seems to be that it is appropriate to pass judgment on others in some circumstances but not in others. Exactly what criterion is to be used, if such a criterion can be formulated at all, is an issue that requires more discussion and reflection than it can be given here.

Epistemological forms of moral relativism hold that moral truths are relative to the epistemic states of agents, that is, that moral truths are relative to the ways people think, what they believe, and what they know. Sometimes this is confused with moral subjectivism.

According to moral subjectivism, there is no objective moral reality that underlies claims to moral truth. This subjectivism may be individual or social. The subjectivist holds that what is right or good or virtuous is whatever the moral agent or society believes to be so.

While many epistemological relativists are subjectivists, one may reject subjectivism while affirming epistemological relativism. One may hold, for example, that good and bad are like right and left. What is to the right depends upon one's position, but given one's position it is an objective fact that an object is to one's right. Whether the object is to the right or left is in no way dependent upon whether one believes the object to be to the right or left.

Likewise, the religious believer may hold that there are differences in the moral laws taught by different prophets (as) to their communities, so that what is right or wrong is relative to one's being under the command of a particular Prophet(s), and being under such command, in turn, may be taken to depend upon one's epistemic state.

However, this does not mean that for anyone who believes that they should follow the law of Abraham (as), it is correct for them to do so. When the law brought by one prophet is superseded by the law brought by the next prophet of God (as), it becomes obligatory to follow the superseding law. So, here is an interesting type of epistemological moral relativism that seems to be more than compatible with religious belief.

A neat logical proof demonstrates another respect in which religious belief is compatible with a form of epistemological relativism that pertains to the importance of intention, *niyyah*. The intention of an agent is an epistemic state. Whether an action is right or wrong for an agent to perform depends upon the agent's intention, according to religious principles.

Hence, according to religious principles, whether an action is right or wrong for an agent to perform depends upon his epistemic state, and this is the definition of epistemic relativism. What is interesting about this aspect of moral relativism is that it is also compatible with a form of moral absolutism, for one might hold that variance in intention in a given situation can only be sufficient to change the judgment applied to an action if the variance is due to relevant mistaken beliefs or other moral failures. In that case, an action could be considered absolutely right or wrong under the assumption that the agent who performed it held no mistaken beliefs relative to the action.

There are many other varieties of epistemological moral relativism and related positions about which interesting questions may be raised with regard to their compatibility with religious teachings, but it would take several pages to discuss them.

The important thing is to be aware of the differences. There are too many writers who confuse issues by making views associated with Protagoras the measure of all relativisms.<sup>7</sup> While there are many philosophers who defend some version of epistemological moral relativism, I do not know of any philosopher today who would claim that the proposition that x is good is equivalent to the proposition x is believed to be good.

One of the most common fallacies that occur in discussions of relativism is the confusion of the different types of relativism. The mistake occurs on the part of both those who attack and those who defend some

sort of relativism. Conclusions reached on the basis of arguments pertaining to one form of relativism are illegitimately applied to others.

Aside from the differences among the positions mentioned, relativisms may be divided according to the parties to which the thesis of moral relativity is applied. The truth of moral claims may be held to depend upon the beliefs and attitudes of groups or individuals, or the beliefs and attitudes of groups fulfilling various conditions or certain classes of individuals.

For example, it is sometimes held that moral truths are dependent upon moral standards realized in moral language by those who use the language. According to this sort of opinion, the epistemic states of individuals are not sufficient to determine moral truth until those individuals organize themselves into a linguistic community.

It is not uncommon to find religious people who hold some version of moral relativism restricted to a specific individual or group of individuals. For example, some hold that what is right is whatever is pleasing to mawla (as).

This need not be a form of relativism, for it only states that what is right is to be measured by what is pleasing to mawla; but a form of relativism takes shape when it is held that rightness is dependent on being pleasing to mawla.

Many mistakes in philosophy occur because of confusion between the way of knowing that something is so and what it is that makes something so. This example also indicates that much depends upon the relation between the relevant epistemic states and the moral evaluation in question. One might hold a form of relativism in which epistemic states do not completely determine what is right and wrong, but in which they have significant influence in the matter.

Another variable according to which types of relativism may be distinguished pertains to the types of moral truth claimed to be relative to epistemic states. For example, the Ash'arites is notorious for their divine subjectivism in ethics according to which moral judgments are entirely dependent on the will of God.

Such views are called divine command theories of ethics. Robert M. Adams holds a divine command theory of a more restrictive sort. He claims that moral statements about what ought to be done depend on the divine will, but that moral judgments about what is good and just are not dependent on the divine will.

The force of the moral ought, according to Adams, stems from the fact that it indicates the command of a good and just God.<sup>8</sup> The importance of this sort of view as a form of relativism is brought out by considering the fact that while a good and just God would not command just anything, there may be some latitude with regard to what He could command.

Maybe the independent moral facts of the matter are not sufficient to determine everything needed for a moral code, so God fills in the gaps needed for an effective morality through divine fiat. Since God is just, He could not have commanded lying, but maybe He could have commanded the use of the toothbrush, or forbidden marriage to the child of one's uncle or aunt.

The points and examples indicated above indicate the extent to which there can be a wide variety of types of epistemological moral relativism, which may or may not be related to a more general position of epistemological relativism in areas other than ethics.

One may hold that some moral truths are absolute and others relative to the epistemic states of creatures or to the divine will. The nature of the dependence of moral truths to epistemic states may vary from complete determination to some weaker form of influence. Some moral truths may be relative in different ways to the epistemic states of different individuals or groups. It may well be that moral truth turns out to be a quite complex matter.

Before leaving the topic of moral relativism, it is worth discussing a very popular argument for relativism. It is often pointed out that there is no neutral standpoint from which to evaluate competing claims to moral truth.

Often this claim is made about all truths, whether moral or not. From the alleged fact that all methods of evaluation are subjectively biased, it is fallaciously inferred that there is no objective truth about morality and that all moral propositions depend for their truth on the epistemic states of those who evaluate them.

This sort of argument is invalid because it does not follow from the fact that reality can only be viewed from a subjective perspective that reality lacks objectivity. The ineliminability of subjectivity does not imply that all subjectivities are equally reliable.

Likewise, no claim about length can be evaluated without measurement. This does not imply that length depends on measurement, nor does it imply that all methods of measurement are equally accurate.<sup>9</sup>

As for pluralism in ethics, this is a topic that has received considerable attention in recent years. As in the case of relativism, there are a large variety of ethical pluralisms. Pluralism in ethics must not be confused with the metaphysical pluralism defended by William James or the religious pluralism advocated by John Hick.

In ethics, pluralism is usually associated with the claim that there is a diversity of ideals one may legitimately pursue and that these ideals cannot be reconciled, that is, it is only possible to pursue one at the expense of others.

Sometimes this pluralism of values is stated in terms of a conflict between moral and non-moral values, while others assert a plurality of irreconcilable moral values. Sometimes moral pluralism is defined as the view that there are different domains to which different moral principles apply, or in which moral

considerations have different rankings.

Islam clearly affirms a limited ethical pluralism on the basis of gender. Courage and modesty are virtues that should be developed by both men and women, but for women modesty has priority over courage, and for men, courage has priority over modesty.

Most contemporary defenders of ethical pluralism, however, advocate a form of pluralism that goes beyond anything to be found in Islam. They claim that there are radically different moral ideals none of which are superior to the others.

The most notorious such view was defended by Susan Wolf in her article "Moral Saints" in which she argues that the non-moral ideal of being an expert wine connoisseur may justifiably require the neglect of moral pursuits! [10](#)

So, attempts to prove that moral relativism and pluralism are absolutely true or false are based on confusion and lack of precision. Rather than address such broad issues in a general and vague manner, it would be much more profitable to examine the claims of specific authors in specific texts.

There are forms of relativism and pluralism that Islam appears to require, and there are other forms that it strenuously must deny. The study of philosophical ethics may be of assistance in distinguishing them.

The major theories of contemporary Western ethics are often divided into these three major types: deontological, teleological and virtue oriented. Aristotelian ethics are virtue oriented, Kantian ethics are deontological, and there are various forms of teleological ethics, or consequentialist ethics, of which utilitarianism has had the most influence in the West since the nineteenth century.

During the first two thirds of the twentieth century, Western ethics was largely dominated by the debate between utilitarian's and Kantians, while in the last thirty years; there has been a revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics.

Each camp has had proponents who have claimed that the moral life can be completely described in terms of its own theory, but they have been more successful in showing the deficiencies of their rivals than in establishing their own claims.

Kantian and utilitarian theories are unsuccessful attempts to justify the morality inherited from Christianity after the rules of morality had been deprived of their teleological character through the rejection of Aristotelian philosophies, and after they had been deprived of their categorical character as expressions of divine law through the rise of secular Protestantism.

In 1958, the English philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe initiated the contemporary revival of virtue ethics as an attempt to provide an ethics for societies in which religious belief had ceased to provide orientation.

Her insight was that with the eclipse of religious belief, the moral force of duty and obligation could not be sustained, whether by Kantian claims on behalf of reason, or by utilitarian attempts to ground morality in the psychological states that result from the satisfaction of desires. She failed to see that the motivation to acquire virtue would be no less weakened when removed from the context of religious thought in which it had been nurtured in Christian Europe.

One is left with the impression that no system of ethics can be complete unless it pays adequate attention to all three elements of ethics: the moral law, the end of man, and virtue. Moreover, an ideal system of ethics should not only pay heed to these three elements separately; it should also integrate them.

This task seems so overwhelming that a number of recent moralists have advanced the view that there can be no correct theory of ethics, sometimes called "the no-theory theory".

(No doubt, there will be some controversy as to whether the ethical guidance provided by religion should be considered a theory, and we will return to this point after discussing whether religious ethics is more appropriately considered deontological, teleological or virtue oriented.)

Regardless of whether it is a theory or not, we fortunately do not need to construct a theory of ethics in order to find integrated guidance from religion in the three areas of ethics mentioned: precepts, aims and virtues. God has revealed a moral law for man; He has described the proper end of man; and He has shown us virtue in the lives of His prophets and imams (as).

So, what we find in the ethics of Islam is a mixed view of the moral life in which law, ends and virtue are integrated harmoniously, grounded in conceptions of divine providence and the essence and end of man, and motivated through a complex religious psychology of *taqwa* and love.

Of course, this does not mean that there is no work to be done in religious ethics. To follow God's guidance and to understand how these various elements are to be determined and related to one another requires a thorough knowledge of various Islamic sciences. It is by means of *fiqh* and *usul* that the law is known. An Islamic anthropology is needed to understand the end of man, which, no less than *fiqh* and *usul*, must rely upon the sciences of *tafsir* and *hadith*.

Finally, the virtues have been the particular subject of study by the *'urafa* of Islam who have been especially concerned with the practical course of *sayr va suluk* through which the virtues are acquired, which has led to an entire genre of Islamic literature, an excellent example of which is the book *Misbah al-Shariah*, which some attribute to the sixth Imam, peace be with him.

As for the issue of theory, mentioned earlier, one may wonder whether a system of ethics can be derived from the sacred texts of religion. Here we should ask what is meant by a system. Sometimes what is meant by a system of ethics is a philosophical theory of ethics.

The two, however, should not be confused. There are many systems that are by no means philosophical, such as organic systems, economic systems, digestive systems, mnemonic systems and galactic systems. Philosophy can be used to develop theories of such systems, but the existence of such systems does not imply that there are theories of them.

A number of recent Western moral philosophers have advanced the position that no philosophical theory can adequately explain and systematically relate all the aspects of the moral life. Perhaps the most important discussion of this topic is to be found in Bernard Williams' book, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, but there are several other very interesting books and articles on the subject. [11](#)

Anti-theorists argue that while some aspects of morality can be codified into a set of rules and principles, there will always be a residue that escapes codification. For example, we should be courageous. On the basis of this, the rule may be formulated that we should not flee from the enemy in battle, unless to regroup or for some other strategic purpose. But no set of rules can adequately capture courage to such an extent that anyone who followed them could be said to display courage. Different situations require different sorts of responses from the courageous person in ways that cannot be foreseen.

Secondly, it is argued that many ethical norms and values are inherently vague, and that because of this vagueness they cannot be completely formulated in the form of a theory.

Another reason given for the impossibility of a comprehensive ethical theory is the existence of moral dilemmas. It sometimes seems that moral rules pull us in opposite directions. We ought not to offend others and we ought not to lie, but sometimes it seems that there is no way to avoid offense but by lying.

Here we need to evaluate which is more important. If the lie is insignificant and the offense would be serious, morality will permit the lie; but if the offense is not so serious or if the lie is sufficiently important, morality will permit the offense.

There is no way to state an exact rule for measuring and comparing the importance of various moral demands in specific situations. Thus, there is an aspect of ethics that resists formulation into a theory.

If we restrict our attention to the topics of philosophical ethics around which various theories have been constructed, we will find many that are not discussed in the religious sources. Take, for example, the issue of moral realism. Moral realists assert that a complete description of reality must include moral facts.

Theories of religious ethics derived from the Qur'an and ahadith may be formulated which accept any of various versions of moral realism, and other theories derived from the same sources may be developed along non-realist lines.

Rational reflection and evaluation may lead us to the conclusion that one of these theories is more

harmonious with religious claims than the others, but this is not a matter of simple derivation from the religious sources. Furthermore, religious theories of ethics may be developed which do not address this topic at all.

On the other hand, even if it is not possible to formulate a complete and comprehensive philosophical theory of religious ethics, this does not imply that philosophical discussions of religious ethics are of no benefit. Interesting questions are raised in the philosophical discussions, and by attempting to answer them we can deepen our understanding and insight.

Problems of philosophical ethics as developed in the West often have analogues in various Islamic sciences. This demonstrates the relevance of Western philosophical ethics to religious understanding, and it provides fertile ground for comparative studies.

While Muslim scholars are beginning to engage in this sort of comparative study, there are other traditions of philosophical reflection on the problems of ethics to which Muslims have not yet begun to turn their attention, such as the Chinese tradition, whose riches continue to be ignored by Muslim scholars, despite the often quoted hadith:

اطلبوا العلم ولو بالصين

*"Seek knowledge, even unto China."*<sup>12</sup>

The distinction between ideal ethics and mores, and our discussion of secular ethics, relativism and pluralism must not lead us to imagine that no correct ethical understanding is possible except by the special friends of God.

Moral intuition or conscience seems to be present in all human beings, even if it may be misinterpreted or neglected due to the influence of deviant mores. Moral conscience calls the individual from within to abstain from shameful acts and to seek nobility, and for this reason Mulla Muhsin Fayd Kashani often speaks of it as an interior prophet.

The intellect ('aql) is reported to be an interior prophet in a well-known hadith, and an important component of the intellect is the moral conscience.<sup>13</sup>

In opposition to the view of Fayd, the objection may be raised that there is a fundamental difference between the function of the prophets and that of the moral conscience. Kant is famous for his claim that when one behaves morally, one must do what is right for its own sake, and not because of any expected benefit.

The prophet(s), on the other hand, promise divine rewards for good works and chastisement for evil. So, it may seem that religious motivation for action actually precludes the possibility of real morality.

This is not a very difficult puzzle to solve. Imam 'Ali has explained it very clearly in his saying that there are different grades of worshippers.

وقال عليه السلام : إِنَّ قَوْمًا عَبَدُوا اللَّهَ رَغْبَةً فَتِلْكَ عِبَادَةُ التُّجَّارِ، وَإِنَّ قَوْمًا عَبَدُوا اللَّهَ رَهْبَةً فَتِلْكَ عِبَادَةُ الْعَبِيدِ، وَإِنَّ قَوْمًا عَبَدُوا اللَّهَ شُكْرًا فَتِلْكَ عِبَادَةُ الْأَحْرَارِ.

And [Imam 'Ali], peace be with him, said: ".And there are people who worship Allah out of desire; that is the worship of traders. And there are people who worship Allah out of fear; that is the worship of slaves. And there are people who worship Allah out of gratitude; that is the worship of the free. [14](#)

When children are taught right and wrong they are scolded and praised. So they first learn to be moral out of fear of being scolded and desire for praise. But if they are properly taught, they develop a moral conscience that governs them more effectively than threats or promises.

Likewise, believers at the elementary stages obey God out of fear and hope, while the mature believer obeys out of love for God. This is why Rabi'ah 'Adawiyyah, May Allah be pleased with her, is said to have carried a torch to burn heaven and a pail of water to put out the flames of hell.

What she was really doing was encouraging believers to obey God out of love for Him rather than because of threats and promises. She is reported to have said:

*Your magnificence is such that I do not worship You from fear of Your fire, nor from desire for Your paradise. Nay! But for the munificence of Your most munificent face and the love in You. [15](#)*

The mature believer never abandons certainty about divine rewards and punishments, but he acts in accord with a higher motivation.

قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ

﴿٤﴾

وَاللَّهُ

غَفُورٌ

رَحِيمٌ

**“Say: If you love Allah, then follow me, Allah will love you and forgive you your faults, and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful” (3:31)**

Love of God calls forth obedience to Him and His Apostle(s). It is in the context of this love that religious ethics is best understood. Just as the promises and threats of the parents in the training of the child are expressions of the love of the parents for the child, so too, divine promises and threats are expressions of divine love. What the parents command is for the benefit of the child, and what God commands is really for the benefit of His servants. [16](#)

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ لِلنَّاسِ بِالْحَقِّ

﴿

فَمَنْ اهْتَدَىٰ  
فَلِنَفْسِهِ

﴿

وَمَنْ ضَلَّ فَانَّمَا يَضِلُّ عَلَيْهَا

﴿

وَمَا أَنْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ بِوَكِيلٍ

**“Surely We have revealed to you the Book with the truth for the sake of men; so whoever follows the right way, it is for his own soul and whoever errs, he errs only to its detriment; and you are not a custodian over them.” (39:41)**

The believer sees that what God has commanded is for his benefit, and seeing this he comes to love God. The lover of God then obeys out of love for Him, even in matters in which he does not understand how the command can benefit him, but trusting in the divine love. If he seeks that which is for his own benefit, it is because he knows that this is what God wants for him. Where the command is clear, no attention is paid to any benefit in this world or the next but nearness to the Beloved. As Hafiz says:

*My heart is the canopy of His love.*

*My eye holds the reflection of His face.*

*My pride would stoop to naught here or above, yet*

*My neck bends to bear the weight of His grace.*

One of the problems I have noticed in religious societies stems from the fact that it is mistakenly imagined that the sort of practical work needed for a moral life is the exclusive business of the great *'urafa* and scholars who have written fat books testifying to their great learning, while in fact the process of purifying the soul ought to be considered the business of all believers.

To have states in which one sees everything as a sign of God does not require anything more than faith and attention, but to move beyond this to the point that the effects of spiritual wayfaring become evident in the acquisition of good morals requires participation in the *jihad al-akbar*.

Participation in this warfare is open, even to the illiterate, provided they have Iman, taqwa and tawassul to the divinely appointed guides, as is indicated in our invocation of blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad and his folk:

اللَّهُمَّ صَلِّ عَلَى مُحَمَّدٍ وَآلِ مُحَمَّدٍ

The desired ethical life of religion is displayed in the lives of the prophets and imams (as). The rest of religious ethics, religious ordinances, and spiritual wayfaring (*sayr va suluk*) elaborate practical methods to achieve this sort of desired life.

Of course, we do not expect to reach this pinnacle of moral excellence ourselves, but this is because of our own failings, not because the instructions of religion are deficient. If the instructions given through divine guidance were obeyed, character would most certainly change.

Strength and *himmah* (resolution, aspiration) to submit in total obedience despite the satanic temptations that constantly spring from the base soul in different guises require divine aid. Reading the religious instructions to be found in books, even the Qur'an and ahadith, are not sufficient to bring about real change in character.

At some point we have to put the instructions we have learned from the sacred sources into practice, and on our own we will never be successful in this. We learn from the Ahl al-Bayt (as) that one of the best practical methods for acquiring good morals is association with the virtuous.

*Imam Sajjad, peace be with him, said, ".Sitting with the righteous is an invitation to righteousness."*

In Shi'i teachings, we find that the practical means for the development of morals, both in the individual and in the community, are inextricably linked with the concept of *walayah*. Consider the lack of morals that accompanies the rejection of *walayah* in the characters of Abu Lahab, Mu'awiyah and Yazid, and their followers. The traces of the excellence of character and morals that are the results of *walayah* and its acceptance, on the other hand, are found in the bloodstained field of Karbala.

Another practice recommended for the development of morals is contemplation of death, and there is no better death than that which took place at Karbala.

When we contemplate this death, and we consider the fact that we, too, are all in the process of dying, that is, when we come face to face with the reality of our own impending deaths, and we compare this to the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (as), we see that the worldly pursuits that occupy us are vain, and that what is of ultimate value is to be found by giving up all the things in the world, even life itself, for Him.

When we see death's arms stretched out before us, and we consider how those arms so lovingly embraced Husayn (as), our interests in the charms of money, power and worldly pleasure gradually are extinguished and replaced by the light of the remembrance of Him.

In the life and martyrdom of Imam Husayn we observe how the remembrance and contemplation of *Haqq ta'ala*, the pollution of the lower self is wiped away to disclose the divine love that motivates true moral excellence.

In a famous *hadith qudsi* it is reported that God says: "*Whoever seeks Me, finds Me; whoever finds Me, knows Me; whoever knows Me, loves Me; whoever loves Me, I love him; and whomever I love, I kill; and whomever I kill, I Myself am his compensation (diah).*"

Finally, the objection may be raised that if religion and ethics are as closely intertwined as I have suggested, then how is it that we find examples of genuinely moral people who are philosophical

materialists and people who are apparently religious, yet morally ruthless.

The pre-Christian Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius (99–54 B.C.) propounded a thoroughly materialist philosophy in his *De Rerum Natura*, according to which all that exist are atoms and the void. Yet the way of life he advocated was one in which moral ideals figure prominently.

More recently the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) lived a life of self-sacrifice and altruism, and even wrote an important book on ethics which has been translated into several languages, although he espoused a materialistic philosophy. Moral ideals had an important place in the thought of even those who explicitly rejected morality, such as Nietzsche and Marx.

While it is not difficult to find examples of exceptional individuals who are philosophical materialists yet live according to strict ethical principles, in a religious society where moral principles are bound up with religious teachings, it is natural to view materialism as a rejection of morality because of its denial of religious teachings.

This is why the idea that if there is no God, then everything is permitted assumes such importance for the Russian novelist Dostoevsky (1821–1881). This also explains why the fact that so many Americans proclaim their religious faith while rejecting traditional religious morals is met with such incomprehension by those who live in traditional religious societies.

The source of the erosion of religious morality lies not in philosophical materialism, but in the structure of modern liberal secular society. Modern secular societies, in accord with liberal political theory, have established a complex system of rights designed for the purpose of protecting individual liberties, the result of which has been the expansion of the sphere of anonymity in which its citizens live.

Urbanization and mobility also contribute to this result. Religious social mores are effective when one's actions are seen by others who share one's religious values, so that the violation of religious or moral precepts causes a sense of shame.

In modern urban societies, when one's actions are performed before others who are strangers and about whom no assumptions can be made with regard to moral approbation or condemnation, and who are presumed to have no right to pass any sort of moral judgment because morals are considered private and personal, the agent becomes anonymous.

Recall the story of the ring of Gyges told by Socrates in Book II of Plato's *Republic*. Socrates asks, if one were in possession of a magic ring that would make one invisible at will, who would refrain from sleeping with his neighbor's wife?

Religion teaches that even if we are not seen by men, nothing can be hidden from God. Even where there is no shame before one's fellows, there is guilt before God. Nevertheless, where social anonymity prevails, temptation will often prove too strong to be resisted, even by those who consider themselves to

be religious.

When anonymous sin becomes common, excuses and rationalizations soon abound and the moral sense is gradually eroded. Then a process sets in which are the reverse of that described in my answer to the first question. The outward shell of religion and a false sense of spirituality will be the last things abandoned as hypocrisy comes to rob religion of its moral content. And this is much more harmful than isolated cases of philosophical materialism and moral nihilism.

In order to understand the moral dangers facing modern Muslim societies, it is necessary to become acquainted with the moral psychology of hypocrisy. The greatest danger to the Muslim ummah has always come from hypocrisy. All of the imams achieved martyrdom at the hands of Muslim hypocrites.

The hands of hypocrites also carried out the terror by which so many leaders of the Islamic Revolution of Iran achieved martyrdom. The new form of treachery against the Muslim ummah is the attempt to erode Islamic morals from within Islamic society.

In Western secular societies, the erosion of morals takes place through the expansion of the sphere of anonymity, the ample provision of satanic temptations, and the dominant social perspective that morals are a private matter.

In modern Muslim societies, social anonymity also poses a danger, although it has not reached the levels found in the West. Fortunately, *al-Hamdu li-Allah*, the idea that morals are private has not won wide acceptance in the Muslim world.

Hypocrisy enters the Islamic world with the mistaken perception that it is "advanced" to disregard Islamic morals, especially with regard to *hijab*, the relations between the sexes, and the gathering of wealth by *haram* means.

Likewise, Mu'awiyah thought that to be "advanced" Islamic government had to follow the examples of imperial Rome and Iran. The hypocrites seek to make use of Islam for the purposes of Satan and the base soul, for gaining the things of this world, while the true believers are those who seek to make use of everything they have, even their own lives, for the purposes of Islam.

The danger posed to man by philosophical materialism is not serious, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the rejection of dialectical materialism that prevails in the world today. There are other forms of materialism and related philosophical theories current among philosophers in the West, but it seems unlikely that these would ever gain wide public support.

Much more dangerous to man is the tendency to set one's moral standards according to what are perceived to be the "advanced" ways of life portrayed in Western cinema, which is really merely an instance of the more general failure to engage in the moral orientation offered by religion, and to follow worldly temptations instead.

Complaints about insufficient wealth to purchase desired consumer products are heard too frequently among those who call themselves Muslims. A man will gladly put in an extra twenty hours of work each week to be able to purchase a beautiful automobile. How much time are we willing to spend in the effort to obtain moral excellence? It is fitting to conclude by reflecting on the prayer with which Imam Khomeini ends his *Forty Hadiths*.

*O God, Who has illuminated the hearts of the awliya' with the light of love and cleared the tongues of the lovers of Your beauty from the taints of egoism, and has placed Your majesty beyond the reach of self-seeking wretches! Awaken us from the intoxication of worldly delusion and deliver us from the heavy slumber of nature, and remove with Your gesture the thick curtains and obstructing veils of egotism and self-seeking. Let us into the assembly of the holy ones of Your threshold and into the holy company of the sincere God-seekers. Remove from us these devilish, ugly, and coarse qualities of ours and our pretensions and waywardness. Inform with sincerity and love our movements and pauses, our actions and works, our beginning and end, and our outward and inward being.* [17](#)

1. The questions have been specifically raised by the editorial staff of the theological journal published in Qom, Naqd wa Nazar, in No. 13 of which (1998) the substance of the present article is published (in Persian) in question/answer format.
2. See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 204–205.
3. See M. M. Bravmann, *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 34–36.
4. Cf. William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 40.
5. Cf., Fazlur Rahman, "Barahima" in the New Edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. A version of the argument mentioned is attributed to Ibn Iazm and Shahrastani.
6. See the article "Moral Relativism" by David Wong in *The Encyclopedia of Ethics*.
7. Protagoras was the ancient Greek sophist who is infamous for his assertion, "Man is the measure of all things."
8. Robert Adams: "Must God Create the Best?" *Philosophical Review*, 81, 3 (1972), 317–332, reprinted in Thomas Morris, ed., *The Concept of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 91–106; "A Modified Divine Command Theory of Ethical Wrongness" in *Religion and Morality: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, (New York: Doubleday, 1973); "Divine Command Metaethics Modified Again" *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 7, 1 (1979).
9. Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), in which one finds a thorough refutation of this sort of relativistic argument and others.
10. Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982), 419–430, reprinted in Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts, eds., *The virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1987), 137–152.
11. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985). Also see Edmund L. Pincoffs, *Quandaries and virtues* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986) and a defense of moral theory by Robert B. Louden, *Morality and Moral Theory* (New York: Oxford, 1992).
12. See Fayd Kashani, *Mahajah al-Bayda*, vol. 1 (Qom: Daftar Intisharat Islami, 1415), p 21
13. See Fayd Kashani, *'Ilm al-Yaqin*, vol. 2, (Qom: Bidar), p. 1054.
14. *Nahj al-Baldghah*, hikmah 237.
15. 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, *Nafahat al-Uns min Hadarat al-Quds*, ed. Dr. Mahmud 'Abadi (Tehran: Intisharat Itila'at, 1370/1991), p. 544.
16. Cf. (10: 108), (17: 15).
17. Translated by 'Ali Quli Qara'i in *Al-Tawhid*, vol. 14, No. 3, p. 18.

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