

# Quadruple principles of ethics in view of the Ancients

- Studying and criticism
- Scale for evaluation of good and bad morality
- Effect of seclusion and unsociability in morality
- Arguments of advocators of seclusion and association
- Exceptional cases in which seclusion is permitted
- Vigilance and self-examination or studying incentives and consequences. First, we shall review a prospect of the principles of ethics in view of pioneers of this technique, and study exactly the course of their discussion in brief.

Ethics scholars have summarized principles of moral virtues in four articles:

1- Wisdom

2- Chastity

3- Bravery

4- Justice

They believe that each of these four principles has a norm, between two extremes of sensual powers and instincts, and so moral vices are on two sides of them, and there are two vicious attributes for each virtue.

1- Wisdom means moderation in recognition and understanding of realities as they are, and the opposite

side in its high extreme is "slyness and astuteness", which refers to hyperactivity of perception faculty and relying on the probabilities and doubtful matters and non-stability on correct theories and in its low extreme is "stupidity and dullness".

2- Chastity refers to moderation in using lusts and appropriate utilization from desires and instincts, and the opposite side in its high extreme is "greed and self-indulgence" and in its low extreme is "numbness".

3- Bravery is moderation in anger faculty and fearing of what should be feared and not fearing of what should not, and the opposite side in its high extreme is "rashness" and temerity, and in its low extreme is "cowardice" and horror.

4- Justice refers to listening of desire and anger powers to intellect power and their appropriate control for correction and prosperity, and the opposite side in its high extreme is "being oppressed and tolerance of oppression" and in low extreme is "injustice".

They assume moral vices infinite in one aspect, while moral virtues, as the normal limit and moderate point, have only one stage, and thus they have resembled it to the centre of a circle, which is only one point, and the vices to infinite points existing within the circle.

It is narrated from Mohaghegh Tousi, Khajeh Nasireddin and some other scholars that "the path" described in the traditions as:

«أَدَقُّ مِنَ الشَّعْرِ وَ أَحَدٌ مِنَ السَّيْفِ».

"is thinner than hair and sharper than sword", is the same moral moderation. [1](#)

Now, we shall see from where these quadruple principles have originated?

Ethics scholars say in reply: man's soul has three powers:

1- Power of perception and distinction

2- Power of acquiring benefit or "attraction" and in the other word "desire" (in its general sense)

3- Power of loss repulsion or "repulsion" and in the other word "anger"

Moderation in each of these powers forms one of the moral virtues, which are respectively, called wisdom, chastity and bravery.

And when two powers of desire and anger are under control of distinction and perception power, justice is achieved.

In other words, balance in each of the above triple powers is considered as a virtue, but their

combination with each other, that is desire and anger being controlled by perception power, will be another virtue.

It often happens that a man is brave and for example, is not afraid unduly in the battle field, but this bravery may be utilized in a wrong way, like fighting for little and worthless objectives, and this is bravery but not justice. But if this bravery is applied for a high and intellectual objective and mixed with wisdom, justice is achieved.

## Studying and criticism

The principles mentioned by previous scholars for morality (good and bad) and described in the foregoing discussion are not perfect, although they may seem interesting:

1- There are some good moral habits that placing them in one of the above quadruple principles seems difficult. For instance, philanthropy, self-sacrifice and self-devotion, can hardly be included in "chastity", because it is possible that an individual's desires are moderate, while he lacks self-sacrifice, self-devotion and philanthropy. That is to say he neither aggresses to the rights of others, nor desires their loss, but at the meantime does not have any self-sacrifice and self-devotion.

Moreover, optimism could not be included in "wisdom", because "optimism" differs with "correct distinction".

Perhaps insisting on this quadruple division is caused by the ideology of the ancients who assumed most of world's issues based on the number four, and considered four things as the main elements, and divided body's components and temperaments into four. They considered four diseases as the principles of physical diseases, and assumed one of four temperaments for all medicines. While today it is certain for us that none of these quadruple divisions are correct. The same is true for division of principles of good ethics into four.

2- Including wisdom among principles of moral virtues, and its opposite point among the vices is not appropriate, because moral habits are along the perception system and deal with desires, affections and instincts, not with perceptions, and so interpreting braininess as "good morality" does not seem appropriate.

3- Insisting that all good moral habits are moderation between two extremes is baseless, because although this is true in some cases, it is untrue in others.

For example, considering tolerance of oppression as the high extreme for justice is not suitable, because high extreme is not applicable to justice. If tolerance of oppression means indolence and numbness, it will be the opposite side of chastity, and if it means fearing of adjudication, it will be low extreme of anger power, and anyway high extreme in justice is meaningless, especially when justice is considered as anger and desire powers being controlled by intellect. It is a certainty that high extreme in this control is

senseless.

It is concluded that although moderation of good moral habits is true in the cases like bravery and chastity, but it is not a generalization and is untrue in the case of justice and wisdom.

It is also inferred from above discussions that dividing principles of good and bad attributes into four principles has no clear reason, and is even objectionable in different aspects.

Therefore, it is better not to restrict principles of moral virtues to four. Rather, we have good and bad moral attributes as many as different instincts, desires and affections entrusted in man, and training and balancing each of these instincts and desires for being useful and effective for individuals' and society's perfection is a virtue, and deviation of each of them causing degeneration of individual or society is considered as a vice.

On this account, there are vicious and virtuous attributes as many as man's instincts and desires, just as there are physical diseases as many as different systems of body and its components.

The figure mentioned in traditions and narrations of the Prophet's Household (A.S.) for moral virtues is much more than four. For example, in a well-known tradition at the beginning of *Osoul Kafi*, it is narrated from Imam As-Sadiq (A.S.) in respect to "hosts of intellect and ignorance", the number of intellect and ignorance hosts is counted to be 75, most part of which are among moral virtues or vices.

## **Scale for evaluation of good and bad morality**

Not all of moral concepts are clear and obvious. Of course, some concepts such as bravery, generosity and self-sacrifice are so clear that nobody doubts in their virtue, and their opposite side (fear, stinginess and selfishness) are obviously among the vices.

But some others may be discussed and doubted in view of being a virtue or a vice. Thus, we cannot pursue moral discussions without having a clear evaluation scale.

For instance, nowadays some of materialist scientists like Bertrand Russell suggest: if performing an action, whatsoever it may be, does not cause a loss for the others, we do not have any reason for condemning it, and we cannot condemn an action only for being tabooed (something which religion or custom regards as forbidden with no reason) and called obscene by an old religion. We shall only consider profit and loss of the action. [2](#)

Following this belief, he prescribes a lot of obscene moralities and actions of not being harmful for the others (including adultery and homosexuality if both parties agree).

Some other materialists like communists believe that most of ancient moral principles have been caused by capitalism economy, and since it is abolished, these principles are eliminated, and so they restrict

ethic to the affairs which help in creation or continuation of proletarian revolution (proletariat)

Thus, we shall see what the evaluation scale in these cases is and how we can recognize that an action has a moral and virtuous aspect or is immoral and a vice.

If we want to discuss this with a religious view, our duty is exactly clear, because after recognizing Islam's legitimacy and rightfulness for definite reasons, we shall refer to definite evidences in Qur'an and practices of the Prophet (S) for evaluation of principles of moral virtues and vices.

And in intellectual view, we shall consider this principle that any moral factor supporting man's perfection is a virtue, and any factor degenerating him, is a vice.

But it is noteworthy that a man should not be studied only in view of material aspect and primary requirements in this life. Rather, the spiritual and immaterial aspects in which most of man's honours are summarized and the material life to which is a means of attainment to it, should be exactly noticed.

Therefore, an evil and undesirable action may not cause any difficulty for others, but may result in degeneration of the doer in humanistic and spiritual aspects. Certainly, such action will be a vice.

Those who consider only material aspects, have actually known half of man's existence (the lesser and smaller half), while the ethical principles should be studied based on knowing man's overall existence (including body and soul).

And even worse is communistic ethics, which not only has ignored man's spiritual aspects, but also has focused merely on one part (economic part) in material aspects and has studied man in this respect.

It goes without saying that since such moral doctrines are not accompanied with correct realism and anthropology they cannot cause correct effects, and surely they will involve in great mistakes in distinction of moral virtues and vices.

Therefore, as it was already told, the correct intellectual and logical basis in studying moral principles is man's perfection in all aspects, and recognizing whatsoever helps it, and studying the virtues and vices accordingly.

## **Effect of seclusion and dissociability in morality**

Is purification of carnal soul and acquiring moral virtues better possible in the society or in seclusion and dissociability? This is a question that a lot of people ask themselves.

Some believe that more seclusion for man means healthier morality for him, because a lot of deviations and moral vices and or most of them appear when facing others. Envy, pride, lies, slander, calumny, hypocrisy, grudge and such like are all caused by association with others. The one who does not associate with people, neither slander nor hears it, neither envies nor is envied, neither dissimulates nor

is involved in lie, grudge and suspicion.

## **Arguments of advocators of seclusion and association**

Advocators of seclusion and dissociability, among which there are some of ethic scholars and a number of famous pious men and votaries, have other reasons for preference of this action and its effect on improvement of morality in addition to above reasons.

They say: when a man secludes, he can better worship God, and pray Him heartily, can better mediate and reflect on the mysteries of creation and different fields of science and distinguish the realities. In seclusion, there is less love and hatred as well as debate and disputation hindering comprehension of facts and realities, and on this account most of great thinkers live in seclusion and dissociation.

Moreover, when associating and communicating with people, a man often faces the events which create heavy duties for him and it happens that a man neglects in performing his duties and consequently is deviated. For example, in association and living in the society, we often encounter unlawful things and sins and breach of duties that the obligation of bid to good and forbiddance of wrong necessitates to oppose, while we are not sure of performing always our duty in this part. So it is better to select seclusion and escape the responsibilities.

In addition, there are some verses and traditions encouraging seclusion and dissociation. For example, pay attention to the following verses and traditions:

فَلَمَّا اعْتَزَلْتَهُمْ وَمَا يَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَهَبْنَا لَهُ إِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ ﴿٩﴾ وَكُلًّا جَعَلْنَا نَبِيًّا

***So, when he had withdrawn from them and that which they were worshipping beside Allah, We gave him Isaac and Jacob. Each of them We made a prophet. (19:49)***

This verse indicates that the bounty of children, as a prophet, was granted to Abraham when he chose seclusion and dissociation.

وَإِذِ اعْتَزَلْتُمُوهُمْ وَمَا يَعْبُدُونَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ فَأْوُوا إِلَى الْكَهْفِ يَنْشُرْ لَكُمْ رَبُّكُمْ مِنْ رَحْمَتِهِ

***And when ye withdraw from them and that which they worship except Allah, then seek refuge in the Cave; your Lord will spread for you of His mercy. (18: 16)***

This verse shows that People of Cave became liable to divine favour after seclusion and dissociation.

قِيلَ لِرَسُولِ اللَّهِ (صلى الله عليه وآله): أَيُّ النَّاسِ أَفْضَلُ؟ قَالَ: مُؤْمِنٌ مُجَاهِدٌ بِنَفْسِهِ وَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ تَعَالَى. قِيلَ: ثُمَّ؟  
«مَنْ؟ قَالَ: رَجُلٌ مُعْتَزِلٌ فِي شِعْبٍ مِنَ الشَّعَابِ يَعْبُدُ رَبَّهُ وَ يَدْعُ النَّاسَ فِي شَرِّهِ».

3- They asked the Prophet (S): who is superior to all people? He said: the believer who struggles in the way of God. It was asked: Then who is even superior to him? He said: one, in a valley, who has dissociated from people, worships God and people are secure of his evil.<sup>3</sup>

This tradition too has put the position of seclusion and dissociation after holy struggle and has commended it.

4- In Mesbahol Sharia, it is narrated from Imam As-Sadiq (A.S.):

«صَاحِبُ الْعُزْلَةِ مُتَحَصِّنٌ بِحِصْنِ اللَّهِ وَ مُحْتَرِسٌ بِحِرَاسَتِهِ فَيَأْتُوهُ لِمَنْ تَفَرَّدَ بِهِ سِرًّا وَ عَلَانِيَةً».

The isolated people are in the divine castle and under God's protection; good for those who are with God publicly and in privacy.<sup>4</sup>

## Disadvantages of seclusion and dissociation

Besides the above mentioned advantages and profits for seclusion and dissociation, there are several disadvantages for seclusion and numerous advantages for association which can be accounted for the reasons of excellence and preference of association:

1- The first point clarifying importance and value of association is that acquiring most of virtuous moral habits is only possible in the society and not in solitude, because most of these habits are concerned with the way of relations with each other. Courtesy, modesty, kindness, self-devotion, forgiveness, remission, bravery, patience, suppression of anger, affection, pity and soul appropriation, appear in the relations and associations of men and we surely have to live in the heart of society to acquire these virtues.

On the other hand, being secure from moral vices including envy, pride, lies, slander, through seclusion and dissociation is not actually a virtue and honour, rather it is a kind of "waive by waiver of subject", and it is just like a person who excludes himself from sexuality by any means for being saved from taint to adultery.

Although such person is protected from this stain, but this chastity is not a virtue, rather it is only a safety. The virtue is when a man lives in the society and goes ahead to the edge of crag in the critical moments like Joseph, and preserves his mastery on his soul and returns (of course not creating such events deliberately and on purpose).

Thus for acquiring virtuous habits which are considered as the scale of humanistic values, there is no alternative save living in the society and associating with people.

And in the other words, such typical attributes are achieved through challenge with desires and vicious

factors, as resistance and strength of forest wood is due to growing in the hard storms of events, and if they are grown in seclusion and in a closed and restricted environment they lose their resistance, similarly, secluded and dissociable individuals will also gradually lose their spiritual and moral powers. The following tradition may refer to this reality:

At the time of Prophet (S) one of the Muslims went to the mountain for worship and secluded himself. He was brought to Prophet (S) The Prophet said him:

«لَا تَفْعَلْ أَنْتَ وَلَا أَحَدٌ مِنْكُمْ، لَصَبْرٌ أَحَدِكُمْ فِي بَعْضِ مَوَاطِنِ الْإِسْلَامِ خَيْرٌ مِنْ عِبَادَةِ أَحَدِكُمْ أَرْبَعِينَ عَاماً».

Neither you, nor none of the Muslims do this, because patience and resistance of one of you in the Islamic environments is better than forty years of worship. [5](#)

This phrase is a reply to the first reasoning of advocators of seclusion.

2- Solitude and seclusion is the source of several mental deviations as well as taste of distortion, because even if a man is brainy, virtuous and tasteful, he still has some mistakes, which are only revealed when encountering others. In association, man finds his mistakes very soon, but in seclusion, since there is not any way of correcting them, he continues his deviated courses, and like the one who is going astray, the more he proceeds, farther he becomes from the main road, and sometimes he finds other deductions based on that deviated thought and gradually a mass of mistakes will occupy his brain, devaluating his thoughts in general.

Meanwhile, this is another reply to the advocators of seclusion who say meditation in seclusion is better possible, as the danger of deviation is much more in seclusion.

3- The other big fault, in which man is involved in seclusion, is vanity and selfishness. Based on self-love instinct, man is usually very interested in himself and his works, and "self-love" instinct is in fact like a magnifier which through its magnification power, shows man's thoughts and actions greater than what they actually are. On other hand, it shows man's faults smaller than what they actually are, and the sum of these two aspects is "vanity and selfishness".

Seclusion and dissociation is a very favourite environment for culture of this vicious attribute. But man knows himself as he actually is, through association with others, he is informed of the real degree of his perfection and virtues, and becomes aware of his faults, and also faces individuals who are more prominent and perfect than himself, and consequently finds his fault, and this cuts the root of vanity in him and or minimizes it. And on this account, it is widely seen that secluded and dissociable persons have made big and sometimes odd claims all showing their deep vanity and selfishness.

Moreover, another great advantage of association with people is clarified herein, that is recognizing one's own faults. People, particularly those who do not have friendly relations with us or are our

enemies, are a good mirror for our faults, and if they were not, a lot of our faults may remain unknown to us forever. If we live in seclusion, we have broken this mirror and our mental appearance will be like the discordant appearance of those who never look at the mirror!

4- Suspicion on God's servants: one of the other disadvantages of seclusion and dissociation is suspicion on people, and in fact this is one of the effects of "vanity" which involves such people, because after being affected by "severe conceit" and extremist belief on oneself and not observing an appropriate reaction from people (appreciation and gratitude as much as such people expect), this idea is gradually formed in them that people are engaged in mistake, ill-will, misunderstanding, prejudice, and disregard to values in their judgment and such people being ungrateful, partial, and disregarding to virtues are vicious, astray and deviated and do not deserve any association and communication.

As such, seclusion itself is a factor for intensification of seclusion and support of this mentality and more isolation from people.

5- Peevishness and anger: Dissociable people are peevish and angry, and they are very intolerant of disturbing encounters with people. They may be disturbed by observing a little harshness or hearing a sentence against their desire, and so called lose their temper, and show offensive and rigorous reactions. Although, this is not a generality, it is observed in several cases.

In contrast, associable people are often gentle and good tempered and become angry less often.

The reason is obvious. Patience and tolerance is usually acquired through exercise and by facing unpleasant events and the spirit getting accustomed to them, and since social life is naturally accompanied with disturbing encounters, man gradually becomes patient.

Moreover, dissociable people are often mirthless, rarely laugh, less often fun, have less recreation, and their life is monotonous and boring. This point disturbs their spiritual balance, and causes a sort of uneasiness in them, and if they are afflicted with some complexes, they always live in a sort of anxiety and mental disease because of not having any means for removing them, and this increases their anger and ill-humour.

6- Deprivation from sciences and experiences: There are a lot of sciences and knowledge which should be acquired through listening to the great men and their methods and being inspired by their way of thought. It goes without saying that such sciences could only be acquired through association, and it is not possible to acquire expertness and different experiences in seclusion. Rather, the way of achieving them is, living in the heart of society. We also know that life has no fruit save useful and beneficial experiences.

Taking into account above realities and the advantages and disadvantages mentioned for association and seclusion, the preference of theory and logic of advocates of association is clearly obvious.

## Exceptional cases in which seclusion is permitted

It is noteworthy that although, the foundation of life of each man should be based on association and communication with people, there are some exceptional cases in which there is no alternative other than seclusion and dissociation or at least minimizing association, and that is when a man is exposed to a very poisonous and vicious environment, and therein the result of association is nothing save deviation and stain. Surely, one shall elude such society and environment as we avoid a society tainted with contagious diseases.

Seclusion and dissociation of Abraham (A.S.) or the People of Cave are instances of such cases.

The speech of Imam As-Sadiq (A.S.) to Safian Souri too refers to this reality. When he said:

«فَسَدَ الزَّمَانُ وَتَغَيَّرَ الْإِخْوَانُ فَرَأَيْتُ الْإِنْفِرَادَ أَسْكَنَ لِلْفُؤَادِ».

The world is vicious and friends are altered, so I found seclusion more peaceful.[6](#)

This is a reply to most arguments of advocates of seclusion.

Also when a man is ill-humoured and is not able to avoid it, his seclusion for securing people from his ill-humour is desirable.

The other point which should be mentioned is that while associating with people, a man should spend some hours of day and night in seclusion and solitude so that he can think and study and have opportunity for a favourite worship and attention to God, free from any doubt and hypocrisy. Most of the great men have had such hours in their daily life schedule, and it is possible that a part of seclusion traditions refers to the same concept.

Thus, the basic principle in man's life is association, while seclusion and dissociation are exceptional cases.

## Vigilance and self-examination or studying incentives and consequences

Ethic scholars have emphasized in their books on the necessity of these two principles for acquisition of good moral habits and salvation from vices, and certainly no one can traverse mental and moral perfection stages without these two.

Vigilance is the same full attention to the manner of deeds and actions before performing them, and self-examination is concerned with reviewing the consequences and effects of an action after performing

it.

Sometimes, a little ignorance and self-unawareness in each of these two stages involves man in an unlucky destiny, relieving of which is not easily possible.

The situation of man's spirit in this part is just like his body. A man has to observe different hygienic points for preserving his physical health, and pay attention to the affairs, which may cause different diseases before eating any food and living in any environment. Once he has to be vaccinated for prevention from diseases.

Sometimes he has to observe special diets in view of food and such like, and occasionally he should go under precise medical examinations by proficient physicians and after affliction with disease and its treatment, he should strengthen his health for compensating convalescence and removing its bad effects. For challenges with moral deviations and acquiring spiritual health, observing all of these affairs is necessary. In general, the man who is interested in acquisition of good moral habits should consider following aspects:

1- He should always watch his condition and know that, before him, God is always observing and watching him. Holy Qur'an says:

﴿ أَفَمَنْ هُوَ قَائِمٌ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ نَفْسٍ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ ﴾

***Is He Who is aware of the deserts of every soul (as he who is aware of nothing)? (13:33)***

It is inferred from this verse that God is watching and looking man like the one always standing over him.

And also it says:

﴿ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا ﴾

***Lo! Allah hath been a watcher over you. (4:1)***

And it is narrated in a tradition from Prophet (S):

«أُعْبُدِ اللَّهَ كَأَنَّكَ تَرَاهُ فَإِنْ لَمْ تَكُنْ تَرَاهُ فَإِنَّهُ يَرَاكَ».

Worship God as you see Him, and if you do not see Him, He sees you.[7](#)

It is interesting that this tradition is mentioned for the interpretation of the word "goodness" in the verse

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَالْإِحْسَانِ

**Lo! Allah enjoineeth justice and kindness. (16:90)**

That is to say the source of all goodness is vigilance.

2- Before starting each speech and action, a man should study precisely its incentive, result and end as it is narrated in the tradition:

«إِنَّهُ يُنَشِّرُ لِلْعَبْدِ فِي كُلِّ حَرَكَةٍ مِنْ حَرَكَاتِهِ وَ إِنْ صَغُرَتْ ثَلَاثَةُ دَوَابِينَ: الْأَوَّلُ لِمَ; الثَّانِي كَيْفَ; الثَّلَاثُ لِمَنْ».

When performing each action, whatever small it may be, three books are opened for registering its specifications: first book for why, and the second for how, and third for whom.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, the incentives of action are registered in the first book, and quality of action in the second, and its purpose and final aim in the third one.

Surely, considering such reality will control man against misdeeds.

3- Everyday, he should precisely examine his deeds after performing the routine work. If he has committed a sin, made a mistake and done a wrong deed, he should wash away its effects from his heart and soul in a bid to prevent it from being rooted and changing into a mental condition through reflecting on the ominous consequences of that deed, and blaming and rebuking himself, and making appropriate decision for more severe vigilance and control in the future, and performing good deeds as much as the bad one for restoring the luminosity and purity of his heart and soul, and he should engage in strengthening his belief, soul and spirituality (repentance is nothing more than these) like the one who has gotten rid of a physical disease.

The issue of "self-examination and compensation of action" is so critical that Prophet (S) says:

«أَنِّي لَأَسْتَغْفِرُ اللَّهَ وَ أَتُوبُ إِلَيْهِ فِي الْيَوْمِ سَبْعِينَ مَرَّةً».

I ask God's forgiveness and I repent to Him seventy times every day.<sup>9</sup>

It goes without saying that repentance of Prophet (S) is not for sin, rather it is for the manner of worships.

<sup>1</sup>. Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, 270/73

<sup>2</sup>. Narrated from the book, "The World which I know", page 68

<sup>3</sup>. Feise Kashani, Mohajjatol Beisae, 9/4, narrator of tradition is Abou Saeid Khodri, and it is mentioned in the marginalia of Ehyaul Oloum that it is a repeatedly stated tradition.

- [4.](#) Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, 110/70
- [5.](#) Feise Kashani, Mohajjatol Beisae, 7/4
- [6.](#) Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, 60/47
- [7.](#) Al-Majlisi, Bihar al-Anwar, 279/72
- [8.](#) Ehyaol Oloum, and Mohajjatol Beisae
- [9.](#) Feise Kashani, Mohajjatol Beisae, 315/2

---

**Source URL:**

<https://www.al-islam.org/life-under-grace-ethics-naser-makarem-shirazi/quadruple-principles-ethics-view-ancients#comment-0>